Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

A COLLECTION OF STUDENT WRITING

Brooklyn College
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Acknowledgments

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COVER ART: Self Portrait as Horse, 2010, Mike Stilkey
Acrylic on discarded books / www.mikestilkey.com
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BROOKLYN COLLEGE STUDENTS OF THE CLASS of 2016 began their college experience through the pre-freshman reading of Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* during the summer before the start of the Fall 2012 semester. Once classes began, students discussed Skloot’s book and then attended various campus events in the fall. Conversations about *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* continued in class during the first weeks of the semester, culminating in students’ writing their own stories. We call this collection of student memoirs *Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives.*
ONE

The Aerial View
WHEN I REALIZED THE IMPORTANCE of the great things that my mother did for her community, it was far too late for me to thank her. In the beginning of this year, I lost my mother, in January to be exact. I’ve always known that she was a determined, selfless woman but what I didn’t realize was that the rest of Philadelphia knew that as well. My parents have always told me that the most important things to know about a person are always the ones you discover after they are no longer in your life. I can say that after finding my mother’s notebooks that they were absolutely correct because finding her things made me want to give back to my community and to never take anything for granted.

My mother was a broadcast journalist for as long as I can remember. When I was little, she worked ‘the morning drive,’ which was the earliest shift on the radio station and she would always let me come on Saturday mornings. I would lie by her feet as she interviewed various writers and musicians and took calls from people who had input on her topic for the day. My favorite times were when she would allow me to sit right beside her in a chair that was four times my size, letting my legs sway four feet above the carpeted floor. She would give me my own interview and say that it was always important to have the world’s view through a child’s eyes. I would mumble my lisp-full words into the gigantic microphone and use vocabulary I mimicked from her that didn’t fit any of my sentences. I remember looking at her for approval and always getting a huge smile, encouraging me to go on. That was her motto. To always give everyone a voice disregarding those who weren’t interested in hearing it—even if it meant a four year old explaining how teachers made her backpack way too heavy. Not only would she interview artists, but she would also invite anyone and everyone that had something to say about what was going on in the world, from political discussions to
people revealing their everyday hardships with new laws, the jail system or welfare. She wanted to give them all a chance to feel appreciated, and listened to. She wanted to make sure that they felt important because to her, they were.

The day I found my mother’s portfolio I fell apart, out of happiness and regret for not realizing how truly amazing she was. It was shortly after her passing, and I was cleaning out her desk trying to find pictures of her that I could include in a scrapbook. I found several notepads filled with her little sayings doodled in purple gel pen and small collages she had made with pictures of my siblings and me as children. I found letters from her listeners that shared the impact that she had on them, one from an inmate that my mom had been writing to for years. His most recent letter stated that he had been released and that he was finally piecing his life back together and that he couldn’t have done it without her.

Then I found a thick binder. The first page was a laminated version of one of her first articles for the daily newspaper; the second was a large collage of pictures. They were ones of her that I had never seen before; the first was of her sitting in the center of a classroom with a tape recorder surrounded by children that looked no older than seven, the one next to it was of her accepting an award, and so were all of the ones after that. By the end of the pile, I had counted over five pictures of her accepting awards from various organizations and community centers. I didn’t recognize any of them.

It was then when it hit me how selfish and immature I was, and I felt almost embarrassed that I didn’t fully know my own mother. I was aware of these things but I didn’t absorb their importance until then. To actually see her life laid out in front of me made me understand everything that she ever preached to me throughout my entire life. “Don’t give up two seconds before the miracle,” and “live your life on purpose” were written on the first and last page of her butterfly planner along with many other sayings that I began to remember as I traced her handwriting.

Her portfolio was more like an unofficial life lesson book or a journal written by someone that had lived for more than a hundred years rather than only fifty-five. All of my life, my mother just wanted to make sure that I knew that I must live humbly, without regret, and to make sure that once my time comes, that the world knows why I was here.

I sprawled myself across her bed and cried until I fell asleep, holding the butterfly planner tightly to my chest. I dreamt about her. She was lying next to me in her bed, smiling and nodding her head yes. I tried to
speak so that I could apologize to her but she placed her index finger on her lips and shook her head no, as if she already knew what I was going to say. I moved closer to her and she kissed me on the forehead, whispered I love you then I woke up.

My mom made me realize that it isn’t just me in this universe and that the most important thing to have is knowledge. Finding her life in a notebook made me want to give back to my community and to never take anything for granted. I want to be remembered, not notoriously or famously, but to be known for my wisdom and elegance. That’s how I remember my mother, a radiant and selfless woman. Even though her life was short, I wouldn’t say that it was short lived. She was able to touch lives and inspire people to keep pushing and to not give up until they succeed. She believed that no matter what, everyone is destined to greatness and that no one should expect anything less of themselves. I hope to make a difference in people’s lives as she did and make known whatever my purpose is to this universe. I want to impact someone’s life and help them find their greatness; my goal is to inspire someone in the way that she inspired me.
My New Perspective
On Life
by CAROLYN ABOUDI

I AM SITTING IN THAT HORRIBLE ROOM, that gas chamber where millions of Jews were murdered by the Nazis. I feel the coldness of the floor through my many layers of clothing. I see my fellow classmates, teachers and Rabbis who have been beside me from my freshman year until this very last year of high school. I look around and see everyone’s eyes, the only body parts showing because of the bitter coldness of Poland. Behind those pairs of eyes I see gray empty walls. My Rabbi tells us to think about all we have seen the past few days, and especially what we see tonight at Auschwitz—the Labor Camp.

We start singing for all those who have passed on. Those Hebrew songs I have been singing in school since I was young had never affected me until now. I listen to the words and try to sing along. My mouth opens, but I am silent. I cannot get the horrors I have just seen out of my head. I see miles and miles of piles of women’s hair and shoes. These things belonged to human beings, my people. I look around the room again and see the hair on my friends’ heads. I feel my body trembling. Now, we all stand up with arms around one another. My legs are not holding my weight; my friends next to me are. I hear their voices singing to G-d with a passion I have never seen before. At this point, I feel tears streaming down from my eyes to my two scarves. My teacher is crying. I feel her hand grab mine; she feels the same pain. We are now walking out of this horrible place. I only see darkness and dirt. My cries do not stop because I can still visualize the Jews who walked through this frigid weather wearing nothing more than a sheet of clothing. I see my peers walking around me with their puffy jackets. I feel like I can see the past. I am here, but I am leaving. I have my freedom.

Minutes later, I am so happy to be
sitting on my heated bus, seeing Auschwitz disappear in the darkness. That moment I write in my journal “I am extremely appreciative of my life, my ability to come on this trip and to be Jewish.”

The next day I arrive in Israel. The minute I stand outside, a smile lights up my face. I smell Israel; it smells fresh, like the early morning dew. I stand at the Western Wall, my hands never letting go. I pray like never before. I think about how the night before I was mourning and how today I am so thankful. I feel the cold rain numbing my fingers. But I do not care. This cold is refreshing. At this moment, I understand life and I do not want it to end.

I believe that this school trip was the best trip a person could go on. This trip changed my life. I learned about the Holocaust many times while sitting in a classroom. This trip, in my senior year of high school, was completely different. Writing words such as gas chamber and crematorium on a paper until the bell rings does not compare to standing at Auschwitz for one moment. It was all about the feeling and hearing stories about the places while experiencing them.

A light example would be an individual who views a video screen displaying him/her on a virtual roller coaster. This does not compare to the feeling of the wind through your hair or the drop in your stomach, which is the actual experience.

I felt the experience in Poland. When I came home, I said I would try and be a better person. Even until this day, my thoughts are different. I think more before I complain about something. What if I were living the way those Jews were? They would not complain about eating leftovers for dinner. They would be happy to have food.

On this trip, I learned not to take opportunities for granted. If I have the chance to do something now, I should do it while I can, because as people we do not know what might happen in the future.

I now take a few seconds every day to think about what I have and what I am able to accomplish. I physically stop what I am doing and look around the room to see everyone else enjoying themselves. I then consciously try to remember these happy moments. Some of them include watching all my little cousins playing together, my grandparents laughing while talking to my mother, and my friends jumping beside me at a concert.

Before this trip, I looked at what I was missing and the things I was unable to do. But now, I have a whole new perspective on life. I see my family, friends and teachers who support me. I see people who I genuinely care about and individuals who would sacrifice themselves for me.
I believe that every person needs to have a similar experience in life to truly live. It is like the old saying, “You don’t know what you have until it’s gone.” You can think of it in that way or you can feel what life is like for people without certain things we take for granted. Afterwards, you can pay attention to the great things in life such as your strong relationships, your education and your freedom.

I can no longer remember my life before this trip. I will always remember what I have seen and especially how I felt. When I do catch myself being busy with everyday things, whether it be schoolwork or a job, I will stop for a second. That second will always be enough for me to remember the important things in life and treasure them.

I will also encourage others to follow in my footsteps and take this trip. If they cannot, I will say, “Read my journal, do not just look at the pictures.” The feeling that comes with the place gives more of an impact. It becomes real to you, just like it did for me. If you listen to my advice, you will feel it too. Others may tell you that they cannot see you acting any differently. I respond that you cannot see this feeling of understanding; you can just live by it.
Growing up without a parent around leaves many questions unanswered in a developing child. When I was younger, I often asked many questions about my mother to her mother. I wanted to know what my mother was like when she was younger, and if my behavior resembled hers. Slowly, and with these acquired bits of information, a bigger picture developed in my mind. I was told stories of my mother as a child, her preferences, and specific things about her personality that set her apart.

One day a question I asked led to a discussion in which one of my mother’s secrets was revealed to me, and that discovery carried a load of baggage with it. I discovered that my mother once had an abortion, before my birth. No one else in the family had known about this besides my grandmother, and now this secret was shared with me. Little did I know that this hidden truth would bear a deep void in my unsatisfied young soul.

My mother’s career as an international lawyer required her frequent absence, so I grew up living with my dad. Because I only got to see her for brief periods throughout the year, I was never really able to bond with her, or really know her in depth as a person. The only way I could gain more information was by asking those closest to her.

When my grandmother told me that my mother once had an abortion, my reaction wasn’t that of shock, anger, or disapproval. I merely absorbed the information about her, judging it as neither bad nor good. Years later, however, this secret gnawed at me whenever I interacted with my mother. She had had more children from her second marriage and with every pregnancy I always wondered why wasn’t this one aborted, why wasn’t I aborted, and why was my brother born? The problem was that I could never approach her on the subject because it was her secret, and the fact that I knew it was a secret as well. My unanswered questions necessitated my need for closure.
In Rebecca Skloot’s book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Deborah Lacks is in constant search for closure about what happened to her mother, Henrietta Lacks. Deborah grew up without her mother, who died from cervical cancer in 1951 when Deborah was a young child. The permanent absence of her mother from Deborah’s life left many unanswered questions, especially when it was discovered that Henrietta Lacks’s cells were still growing and used for research in laboratories all over the world after her death. Such a discovery sparked even more unsettlement in Deborah because, while she never got to know who her mother was and how she died exactly, doctors, scientists, journalists, and other researchers were excavating in the remnants of her mother’s life. “Only time I really relax is when I’m drivin down here,” says Deborah in Skloot’s book (289). “But this time I just be drivin’ along the whole time thinking about what happened to my mother.”

Deborah Lacks suffered from anxiety. She broke out in hives often, had panic attacks, suffered a stroke, and eventually died from all the stress. When she found out that there was a part of her mother still alive somewhere, her mind was put in a state of unrest, and she was consumed by the possibility that there may somehow be a way for her to reach her mother. She always yearned for her mother, and the small part of Henrietta Lacks that was still alive was what Deborah was chasing. All Deborah’s effort really showed was her need for closure. When she died, Deborah was happy (308), possibly because she felt that she could finally be at rest in a place with her mother, which is all she ever wanted.

My closure came when I found out my mother was pregnant with her fourth child. I came to her one day during the time that I got to see her and openly asked her why she chose to keep the children she bore. My mother revealed to me that once she had an abortion because she was young and it was the only option she saw, but the choice she made was not one she could easily live with. The guilt she felt after caused her to make a promise to herself that she would never have another abortion ever again. She added that she kept her promise, and was happy she made it because she never regretted any of her children and that we were all blessings to her. Her answer, and the fact that I no longer had to hide my knowledge of her secret, was what finally gave me closure as well.
THERE COMES A TIME EVERY YEAR when we are momentarily transported back into our childhood. It starts right before the first snow falls, before the gentle ballet of millions of icy little snowflakes spiral down to cover the world. It’s shortly after our bathing suits are folded and put away, leaving a light shadow on our brown sun-kissed skin. It appears slowly and unexpectedly with the changing colors of the giants that surround us. We don’t realize when they stretch their limbs out as far as they can go, as their leaves soak in the warmth of the fading sun to absorb the golds and reds and oranges and then don the colors themselves. We pay no mind to the fall artist who dips his paintbrush in the colors of sunset and spinning, giddy, splashes the colors all around him. But before long, he’ll sit down to weep as all those leaves sigh their goodbyes before gently detaching themselves to touch down on moist earth. As we notice we now tread on wet leaves, we look up and realize the passing of time, and gossamer thin memories are stirred, vague recollections we quickly fill with the translucent rainbows of the smaller details, now altered and made grand with time. Once again, for a brief, transient moment, we remember what it is like to be a child.

Most tangible as cobwebs begin to go up and people welcome ghosts to their windows, Halloween is the not-so-subtle mark on the door welcoming back to our golden-plated youths. The chill in the air tastes melancholic. Weren’t you standing in this very same street corner oh so many years ago when this very same gust of wind pushed your hair in front of your eyes, temporarily blinding you? As you brush your hair behind your ears, tangled and wavy, still not tamed despite the years, you decide that it’s time to do the unpacking. You bring down the old mummy for the corner of your living room that scared your brother the first time it went up, the decorative pumpkin shaped candles whose
pumpkin scent has faded over the years and now only smells of wax, the gooey fake blood stickers that go on the windows and cast red shadows on the floor when the sun hits them just right. You unpack the special vampire goblets you won at a state fair when you were twelve, the fake wolf-skin throw for the couch that has had one glass eye replaced with a blue marble, the realistic stuffed black cat your birds still don’t dare go near. You sift through trinkets so chipped and worn that no longer have any semblance of what they once were, but that you’ve saved not for their intrinsic value, but to the memories tied to each and every crack on their smooth surfaces. The excited rush to welcome this holiday—partly fueled by candy, partly by the shock the air accumulates as more and more people transform themselves into horrors and beasts, and partly by the residue energy of our childhood antics—is evident. It beckons memories and plans never executed of a smaller, younger version of you, a you you didn’t remember until now, a you you can now welcome with open arms bearing wisdoms you know you’d never accept at that age.

But then, a sore wrist from opening the door ninety-eight times and an exhausted doorbell later, that tiny spark is done and gone. For a week, perhaps, the decorations stay up, but then someone will realize that they are accumulating too much dust, and once again, they’ll be taken down, wrapped, and put away. The sugar rush of childhood wears off, and you’re left with an anxious, nagging feeling that teases your gut, makes you toss and turn at night in nervous anticipation, and has you half frowning, half smiling. You’ll find yourself in the frozen aisle of the supermarket, blowing warmth into your hands, visually measuring sizes and prices of the turkeys that seemed to magically appear overnight and take over the world. As the day inches closer and closer, you furrow your eyebrows more and more often as you hop from foot to foot, cleaning everything once, then twice, then a hundred other times and still pray you haven’t missed a spot for when family comes. With them you know you’ll be revisiting the most embarrassing times of your awkward years—memories you’d rather keep buried forever. But family has a way of digging those up, and because they are family, they must be forgiven, and a fake smile must be forced on to show that those memories don’t haunt you anymore. Enduring this sort of slow torture is the price we pay to ensure a good amount of leftovers stay in your possession in order to avoid cooking for the remainder of the week. So you sit at your place at the table, smiling in relief when
everyone’s attention turns away from you, but still frantically raking your own archive of embarrassing stories of family members to find a suitable one to use to get back at your uncle Joe for hogging all the mashed potatoes.

Then, after all the commotion is over, and all the apologetic phone calls have been made and accepted, you begin to notice a joyful step in strangers, smiling faces on the train, and a cheerful sort of eagerness as December fast approaches. With Christmas carols streaming from the radios in just about every store you enter and strings of freshly cut evergreens appearing on street corners, it becomes harder and harder to keep a smile off your face. Family calls more often, dropping hints of expectancies, and you can’t help but mention your own. You linger in front of frosted snow store windows despite the frigid air that stings your lungs, and sometimes you’ll even venture inside. You make a mental list of things you’ll consider buying for friends, and another for things you hope friends will buy you. You stop to examine pines, eventually agreeing for the most handsome one your wallet can afford. You take him home, set him up in a grand way, and proceed to adorn your green visitor. Your house, now warm with artificial heat, attracts more and more memories with the scent of freshly baked gingerbread cookies and the spice of eggnog. Christmas is fast approaching, and despite the stress it brings every year (would your brother appreciate red socks or blue socks more?) it is welcomed. For even those who don’t celebrate, the season is inspiring- a general goodwill is in the air, a habit brought into our adulthood form our early childhood days where we tried to make Santa forget all the pranks we played on unsuspecting teachers by being perfect little angels in the weeks before his big day.

Presents are given and received, some wishes realized though most are not, and then, before no time at all, the champagne is brought out, noise crackers are bought, and you get ready to welcome a new year. The time for childhood reminiscing has come and gone, and the grownups in us resume their place to party. Resolutions we honestly mean to keep are made and soon forgotten. We await the dropping of the ball, counting down the seconds in hope that this year there will be fewer mistakes, better luck, and good health. Without noticing that we are being yanked out of our festivities, we laugh and shout in celebration. Magically, tragically, as morning creeps its way into the sky and the dull gray light of the January sun washes over everything, we begin to realize that it’s time to leave the reveling behind and face the monsters of our own realities.
Too suddenly, too soon, our childhoods are yanked away from us again, and we turn away to keep forging our way into the world.
Once upon a time, there was a happy little girl who knew nothing about the world, society, nor her body—and that little girl was me. I have a mom, dad, older brother, and younger sister in my family. It can be considered a perfect family: a mom, a dad, one boy, three kids. I had a couple of best friends and was never stressed about any event in my life. Life appeared to be perfect, until it turned three hundred sixty degrees when my doctor told me something was abnormal about my spine.

My dad is a pack rat: a person who likes to collect unnecessary, useless junk and then store it all over the house. Because of this, space became very limited. Rooms were jumbled, closets were overstuffed, drawers were packed, and garbage was scattered across the entire apartment. This was the initial cause of the abnormality of my spine.

I lived in a studio, which means there were no actual rooms; it was simply open space. Garbage bags that were black and resembled the size of a bear were placed all around the apartment. Old printers were in one spot and old computers were in another. Clothes lingered out of closets, drawers, and boxes. CD's, cassettes, and floppy disks were scattered around. There was a flower pot here and there. Used tissues were on tables and the floor. Scissors were in the sink. Shoes were in the fridge. Food was in the storage room. Everything was a mess. If a guest entered our house, most likely he or she would trip over something. This was an apartment that represented a dumpster—not a place that anyone would live in.

Considering the situation of our apartment, my mother was unable to place a desk in the apartment for my siblings and me to do our homework. This was unfortunate but little did I realize how much of an effect this would have on me. When I got home from school, I would immediately start completing my homework so that I
would have free time to watch my favorite T.V. shows and play pretend. Every time I completed my homework on the bed because that was the only space I was limited to. I shared a bunk bed with my sister (I slept on the bottom); therefore I was not able to sit up straight. I would sit at the very end of the bed, prop my pillow up in the vertical direction as my back rest with my knees towards my chest, and slouch over to do my homework. This was my daily routine.

When I was in sixth grade, I also started to develop problems similar to arthritis. My knee and arms would hurt internally from time to time, my shoulders hurt almost every day, and my spine was worse than before. The pain that I had, and still have, was not any typical pain that comes from a bruise or a sprain. It is pain that lasts for hours and possibly for days. It is an abnormal, tingly pain that lingers and prevents me from moving flexibly. My mom started to see this as a problem and thus took me to the physician.

The physician told us that I did have a problem and the cause of my problems was me; I was utterly shocked when she had said this aloud. My physician had to perform a full body check on me to see the full effects my awful habits had caused on my body and so she told me to bend over. She placed her finger on the top of my spinal cord and slid her finger down until she reached the end. She performed the same action once more. Then, she created a list of causes to the problems I had: sitting in an improper position while doing homework, playing on the computer, eating while watching T.V on the bed, not exercising, and not absorbing all the nutrients I need to strengthen my body. All these causes were actions I performed on a daily basis and to think that I had to change my daily routine horrified me. My physician was giving me all the sources of my problem, but what was this problem she kept talking about?! With a straight face she told me, “Your spine is a little out of place.” I was startled. What did she mean by little? Did I have scoliosis? Was I going to die?

I had a million negative thoughts roaming around in my head. I pictured myself at the prom with my hair done, nails nicely manicured, and dress ironed out, but as I took a seat at the dinner table, I saw myself with a back like a scared black cat, its spine hunched up vertically. I did not want to look like that. I did not want a crooked spine.

Although my back was never at an extreme stage, and to some people this may not be such an important issue, for me, it was significant turning point in my adolescent years. From the day I found out my back was in an improper position, I was always paranoid and conscious of how people viewed me because I always assumed
that they were staring at my crooked back. This made me feel like I was the center of attention—in the worst way. If I desired to be the one who stood out from everyone, I would not want the reason to be because of my crooked spine. Not only did it make me stand out in front of crowds, but it made me the distinctive one in every picture.

Many of my friends and classmates took pictures of whomever and whatever was in sight, and thus it became difficult to look my best in every photo. *Snap snap snap.* Photos were taken at an instant. Next thing I knew, photos were placed all over MySpace and Facebook. Every picture came out horrific—my crooked spine was conspicuous when contrasted with the other girls around me. I loathed how I looked like in pictures. I loathed how I appeared to be hunchbacked. It made me feel inferior to the girls who had a perfectly straight backs. I was jealous of their beautiful posture that made them stand out in front of others, in a positive way. I wanted that same confidence. This made it hard for me to move on in my junior year, but it was my parents that gave me the most pressure during those times.

In my family, appearances are not everything, but being in the proper position is essential. It is standard to sit up straight, with knees placed together and paper set straight when writing, but many first generation Asian-Americans sit with their backs slouched, legs crossed, and paper slanted towards the right (or left). For my siblings, being in the correct posture was never a problem, but for me it seemed as tough as trying to win the jackpot. My parents nagged me every day about my posture and would tell me all the proper ways that I should be sitting. I felt like I was not as good as my siblings. I felt like my parents loved them more than me. I already felt neglected when I was at school; I did not want to feel neglected when I was at home.

Having a crooked spine is physically unappealing and makes me feel like an outcast, but as time went on, I learned to accept my body. I “earned” this crooked spine through my mistakes and if I want to make the better of my life, I have to change my daily habits. After learning about my crooked spine, there was always a conscious, little voice, in my head that would remind me to sit up straight when I was sitting in the subway train or doing my homework. I always had the tendency to slouch over which gave me that “crooked spine image,” but because I have had this problem for so many years, the fact that I had a crooked spine started to slowly diminish from my memory. Never does it cause a huge negative impact on my life as it had before, but I know it still exists and thus I try to change my habits. Fixing a habit is not something
anyone can do in a day—it takes much time and dedication. I just wish I never had a crooked spine to begin with. This makes me wonder: how many children in this world actually acknowledge their body positions and how many of them can put themselves in my shoes?
GROWING UP AS A BLACK FEMALE, I often found myself in a limbo with my self-image. The desire to meet America's socially accepted standards of beauty blurred my own perception of what beauty truly is. In the midst of my agenda, I was able to find a common ground and come to terms with myself.

The small, red television next to the stove stays on the same channel all day. The weatherman's voice fades in and out repeating the same reports every ten minutes: "We are experiencing heavy snowstorms... Brooklyn is under a blizzard watch... Do not go outside unless it is an emergency." Grandma is melting Hershey's and the sweet smell of hot cocoa fills the kitchen. Before bed, Grandma sends me to ensure that the front door is locked.

I open the door, and a rush of frigid air blows past me; I zip up my sweater and interlock my arms. The light from the bedroom casts shadows of the inanimate objects along the walls, making them dance to life. Then, as the door closes behind me, the black shadow engulfs everything. I bring my hand close to my face to make sure I'm still there. The old oak floors creak with each slow step. At the end of the confined hallway, a dying light bulb flickers on and off —dimmer with each step; it is mantled on top of a huge mirror. "There's no monsters here, it's just you by yourself," I recite over and over. Each step is more frightening than the one before it. I reach the door; stretching on the tips of my toes, I turn the lock.

A blinding light shines from the light bulb; as it refocuses, I look into the mirror and the obscure image of a woman begins to surface. Normally, I would have run down the hall faster than an Olympic gold-medalist, but I was calm and intrigued. Her beauty was intimidating. I stared for a while not knowing who she was.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the prettiest of them all? You are. Who has the nicest hair, the deepest eyes, the narrowest nose, the fullest lips, the brightest smile, the
clearest complexion, the roundest breast, the smallest waist, the fullest buttocks, the thickest thighs, the neatest fingernails and toes? So, I'll ask you again, who is the prettiest of them all? You are not; you lack the desire of every man and the envy of every woman. You are overlooked, and rightfully so. Not because you are less worthy in any way, but you lack the confidence you so desperately need to realize the beauty within you.

During my preteen years, I was overly anxious about my body, more specifically, my breasts. I had spent hours researching about puberty—the physical transformation from innocence into guilty pleasure—and the female body. My Google search history was filled with obsessive questions like, *When will my breasts grow? What can I do to make my breasts grow faster? Why haven't I gone through puberty yet?* At the age of 14, all of my female counterparts were already trading in their training bras for 34B's, 32C's and 34D's. Meanwhile, I was still shopping in Macy's Girls department, begging my grandmother to purchase me a proper bra.

"Why do I need to waste money on a brassiere if you have nothing to put in them?"

Even my grandmother was making a mockery of my slow developing body. “Well, if grandma isn't going to help my cause, I'll take things into my own hands!”

The next day at school everyone seemed to notice my breasts had grown overnight—literally. I had filled my training bra with two small water balloons. I bragged to myself how much more original I was; forget the traditional tissue trick! I was going for the silicone effect. In gym class (my favorite part of the day), we began doing our daily push-ups; my arms gave out and I hit the floor. My chest was soaking wet. The humiliation then was worse than when I was sporting my “mustard seeds.” Not only had my plan failed, but I was the punch line of every joke for months.

What was I to do? All the boys I had a crush on were interested in the females who were filling into their womanly physique. Not only did I not have any breasts, but I was “as skinny as a twig” with “no meat on my bones.” One of my classmates even mustered up the confidence to ask me if I was being fed at home! I was fed up with having to educate people about fast metabolisms, explain that I didn't have anorexia—or any eating disorder—and reiterate that it was normal for my head to be unusually large in comparison to my small frame. Bigger meal portions wouldn't work, so I thought of all the millions of girls who starved themselves to be as skinny as I was.

The only thing that gave me hope
was my pretty face—as long as I wasn't smiling, which I did a lot of. When the fathers of orthodontics first developed braces, they must have had me in mind. I thank them. When I finally reached puberty, pimples began popping up all over my forehead, distracting people from my best features: my eyes. When my particularly observant classmates weren't telling me how tired I looked, they were the source of the few compliments I received.

As I stared into the eyes of this woman in the mirror, I realized it was none other than myself. I soon discovered real self-satisfaction should be formed from peace within, rather than someone else's jealousy and self-loathing; that is a state of false happiness. It is our perpetual responsibility to find a balance between the negative criticism we are bombarded with daily and our perception of ourselves, always upholding our own values, beliefs and spiritual contentment because to know beauty is to know thyself.
Today I Dream,
Tomorrow I Succeed

by PATRICK OWUSU

DREAMS ARE AN IMPORTANT PART of childhood. They give you motivation and inspiration to be someone in life. As a child, I had a dream I wished to fulfill, and that was to be an astronomer. I believed that once I reached the esteemed college years, I would know what I truly wanted to be and would be able to pursue that end. Today, I just feel lost and confused. Growing up, I was in one accelerated learning program after another, amassing copious amounts of knowledge from various subjects: math, history, English, science, numerous core classes that I was required to take. As the years progressed, and I went from one learning institution to another, I felt no closer to my dream.

I was guided not by my convictions, but instead by my parents and family members to enter the science field for the sake of being a doctor: “Everyone needs a doctor so it’s a secure job with great pay,” they said. They told me of their sacrifices as they came to America. They told me how they dreamed of being engineers, artists, psychologists or even archaeologists but had to choose to crush their dreams for the sake of their livelihood and their family. My mind slowly shifted, discarding dreams for reality. More and more, I felt like a puppet; I essentially had no real choice. My choices were predetermined by my school or by my family.

I was just working—not failing, but also not aware of what I was working towards. What I really wanted to know was will my dream lead me to success? What does success actually look like? What I dreaded the most in life was being a “failure.” That concept still conjures a clearer picture: I see a haggard, middle-aged man, sporting tattered and worn clothes, smelling of decay. He rides the trains going from car to car asking for spare change to help buy food and drink. He struggles daily to stay alive. I see young men and women around my neighborhood loitering around
and chatting up a storm, harassing other people and being disruptive instead of being out working. There is one young man in my building, a big fellow who constantly encourages me to stay in school and get my degrees and be somebody. He stands outside my building, or outside the train station, or outside the grocery store; he is always outside.

I never was in a position to decide for myself, which makes sense because I was too young to really understand how to make choices. But because I didn’t know better I just followed my mother’s lead with complete compliance. I was raised under traditional Ghanian culture, which dictates that the child, be it the son or daughter, listen to the parent always and without dissent. They believe in punishing with a hand, belt, or cane—I was molded into a submissive state. There were a few times when I had the opportunity to choose for myself, such as when I chose to be in basketball and later to take fencing classes, all while in elementary school. The first time I felt that I had a voice, a means by which to express individuality and my own opinion, was in about fourth or fifth grade when we shared what our desired future occupations would be. I remember being one of the oddballs. I chose astronomy.

I know it’s weird, a child wanting to be an astronomer over something like a firefighter or a racecar driver but there’s reason for this. When I was attending middle school, some friends and I went on little trips. We visited the Liberty Science center in New Jersey, the New York Hall of Science in Queens and even the many exhibits of the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, but always what amazed me the most was the universe. Space itself holds many mysteries and an unparalleled beauty that called to me. It was the first time I felt as if I could be a part of something amazing that made me feel as though my future resided in this field of work.

But with all the talk my family gave me about careers and my future, at the end of the day, I kept asking myself, “Is astronomy the right occupation for me?” Will this be a wasted effort? I find it hard to live not knowing what important decisions in my future I should make purely due to lack of knowledge. The assignments that I completed were just me regurgitating information that I learned in class. It wasn’t something that I learned, more something that I memorized in order to get a good score and move on to the next grade level. Since what I was taught was not of interest to me, it was hard to retain as knowledge but easy to remember for a short period of time. I was learning how to memorize as opposed to how to build skills that would
help me find out how to decide what I could be in my adult years.

In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, the Lacks family existed in a state of ignorance akin to my own. They knew nothing about the scientific world, which, nevertheless, was constantly intruding on their lives. With education so limited that not even a high school diploma could be attempted due to the cost of living in the south, they never had the chance to learn what a cell was, let alone the simple systems of the human body. The scientists and doctors assumed that Day and the rest of his family knew perfectly well what was being asked; however their beliefs in the Lacks’ intelligence was misguided: “Day... only gone to school for four years of his life, and he’d never studied science... So he did what he’d always done when he didn’t understand something a doctor said: he nodded and said yes” (183). It was from this decision that Day and the rest of his family went to donate their blood to science, hoping that it would lead to a prevention of the same cancer that plagued the late Henrietta, oblivious that the real reasons for the blood test were to study the genetic mappings of the HeLa cells in relation to their offspring.

Of course, the Lacks family didn’t know this until the creation of this book three decades later. After all, they were black, and in the time period when they grew up, black people weren’t deemed important enough to keep informed. When the Lacks found out that they were misinformed about Henrietta, they were disturbed and angered. They began to ignore further advances by scientists and ignored all calls and attempts to be reached. I understand this anger—this desire to rebel against a supposed authority.

There were many days when I felt the need to disregard what I was told to do and to just live my life the way I desired to live it. I played games instead of doing my homework, I did less than my share in projects and let my teammates pick up the slack despite the teamwork protocol, and I ate from the cookie jar when I wasn’t supposed to. Of course, there were consequences for all these things, but I was doing what I wanted to do. These habits continued through middle school, but in the eighth grade, my humanities teacher asked me if I was truly ready to move on to high school. Puzzled, I said I had the necessary grades to move on but she disregarded that. She talked about work ethic, about getting serious about being educated. She asked was I ready to not be another statistic but rather a contributing member to the most important task I have, benefitting my own future. I was still uncertain about putting so much effort
into an institution that would bear no fruit to my dream that was fading more each day. Then she told me words that till this day hit my core. She spoke of the prison system. She spoke of the copious number of minorities that flood the system, the majority being blacks.

My humanities teacher understood and could relate to my struggle as a young individual growing up with uncertainty. She was pushed by her parents to learn to become a successful doctor or lawyer. They never considered teaching since it wasn’t seen as a high paying job. She went through the same difficulties of learning subjects that didn’t interest her but she persevered through the confusion and became somebody she could be proud of. She knew that my future was uncertain, and helped me to become less ignorant about my own options. Did I want to add to the incarceration statistics? Did I want a future filled with poverty and crime? Of course not, I dread such an existence with every fiber of my being. I began to see education not as an institution designed to keep children subconsciously subservient to their nation but as stepping stones, a guide to becoming a competent adult that functions in society. I had the choice to start looking at myself not as a victim, but as a soldier gearing up to fight for the most important thing to myself, my life, my future, my existence.

Since that day, my humanities teacher opened my eyes; I put more effort into my work than I ever had before. I was tired of moping, tired of my self-pity that was only dragging me down. Those words made me realize that what I decide to do now decides whether my dreams die or flourish. With all things said and done, no matter what, I was ready to continue living my life. In my own way, I chose to take a Deborah approach to the events of my life. Like me, she didn’t have the full picture of the events going on in her life. She didn’t know her mother had her cancer cells taken and used for science without consent just because she was black and back then poor blacks had little to no rights.

What is truly remarkable about Deborah is made evident in her relationship with author, Rebecca Skloot. Through their journey to gather information from hospitals and family members so this book could be written and published, she learned her mother helped to cure infectious diseases like polio and furthered the science industry greatly. Deborah was shown all the good her mother’s legacy had accomplished and that gave her something to be proud of. Even though racial bigotry is the reason the Lacks family seldom trusts the scientific world, she decided she would live her life without feeding the cycle of hate that racism forms. Like Deborah, I decided to see
the good in my life instead of blaming others and being angry at my own ignorance. It takes a smart person to realize that they've been wronged and abused, but it takes a truly strong person to not be a victim but to forgive and live your life not ruled by emotions of your past. I have made a new dream for myself since that day. I want to be someone that I can be proud of. I want to look back to that day ten years from now and say that I am someone; I am an independent person, living comfortably, with possibly a family of my own. I am learning, here at Brooklyn College, how to become somebody who is aware of his own options and limitations and who walks confidently down a chosen path.
THIS STORY BEGAN MANY YEARS AGO, long before I came to the United States from Russia at the age of 22. With ambitions, stubbornness and confidence in addition to my small suitcase, I was standing in the middle of Times Square on a sunny summer day of 2008 looking around and thinking that dreams indeed come true. I was enjoying that moment and had no idea that in less than a year I would meet the love of my life, my dear husband who would make me the happiest person in the world. If you asked me then what I thought of marriage and family, I would say: “I am totally fine by myself. I was born to do bigger things than just cleaning the house and cooking for a husband. Family is only an obstacle on the way to getting where you want to be.” Who knew then that everything would change so drastically? However, this story is not about me. This story is about the young woman from my previous life back home whose wise words and attitude towards life helped me overcome all the difficulties I faced during my first year in the United States, reevaluate my priorities in life and realize that nothing is more important than a family.

Even though we come from the same cultural background, at the moment I met Edita for the first time, I thought that no other person in the world could be so different from me and from everything I believed in. She was an 18-year-old young woman who had just married a man she barely knew and who had left her parents behind in a small Armenian village in order to start a new family in southern Russia. Her husband is my distant relative so I got to meet her at one of the extended family celebrations. I was about 12, but already knew that I would never agree to an arranged marriage, that I would graduate from college, that I would build my career and nothing would stand in my way, even my family.

As years passed we went on with our lives: I was busy with my academic and
professional success while Edita was building a strong family network composed of her husband’s relatives she had never known before. Her husband worked for one of his relatives at a wholesale market in a neighboring city and had to be there as early as 5:00 A.M. Edita would wake up earlier than her husband, make breakfast, prepare lunch, iron his clothes and say good bye to him every single day. Later she would join him on his business trips and help him with merchandise purchase and display. When I learned about all that, I said to her: “You are crazy! Why do you need that? You don’t need a husband to be successful! Marriage ruins women’s lives! Husbands use their wives as housekeepers! I will never get married!” She looked at me with her soft eyes, took my hand and said: “My dear friend! I understand your objection to my lifestyle. Probably my high school education is not enough to understand scientific books but I can tell you this: your heart and your soul need to find peace. And believe me, there is nothing more peaceful in the world than the unconditional love of your family. Your success, money, friends and boyfriends come and go, but your family will be there for you no matter what.”

Edita and I would not meet very often, but every time we met she would tell me something wise which at that point I ignored. I was focusing on my school while she was focusing on her family. She was trying to help her husband to support their family doing something she could do very well: knitting, sewing, baking and cooking, but this time for sale. By the time I graduated from college, Edita already had three beautiful daughters who were not only helping her with everything around the house but were A-students as well. Having no higher education herself, Edita somehow managed to foster love of learning and importance of family into her children from a very early age. When Edita was pregnant with her third child, doctors told her that it would be a boy. She was very happy with the news because she really wanted to please her husband by giving birth to another man in the family. After a long preparation for the birth of a boy, to everyone’s surprise Edita delivered a girl. When she came home from the hospital, she was asked if her family was finally complete. She said: “I will have as many girls as it is needed until I give birth to a son for my lovely husband. My daughters are the sunshine that fills every day of our life with joy and happiness. When I have a son, he will grow up a brave, caring and hardworking man and our family will continue in his children.”

Last week, I found out that Edita is pregnant with her fourth child and according to doctors, it is a boy. She applied her life wisdom to every aspect of her
family life. She is a proud mother of a large family where everyone cares for each other; she is a well-known professional food caterer while her husband is an owner of multiple shoe stores. She succeeded as a mother, a wife, and a professional.

Everything I heard and learned from this strong woman turned out to be the best advice I have received so far. When I think about Edita and her family, I realize that if only I had listened to her before, I would have avoided so many mistakes. I would not have rejected my family when they needed me the most; I would not have said “no” to my grandparents when they asked me to help them with their garden. I understand now that I cannot change the past but I can certainly control my present and shape my future. When I met my husband shortly after difficult times in my life, I realized that he was the man I wanted to care for, he was the man I would be willing to wake up at 4:00 A.M. and make breakfast for, he was the man I would be willing to have my children with. But this will be a plot for another story.
IN FAMILIES, DECISIONS TO GUARD or share secrets vary from person to person. Many decide to keep certain things silent, while others choose to open from the start. The person making the decision generally makes it based on her opinion of how it will benefit those the secret encompasses. Some believe that sharing it too soon may cause trauma, while others maintain that honesty from the get go is fairer. My family chose to go the route of waiting until the right age and the right moment to finally divulge the information they thought would be hard for me to swallow. When parents feel that a secret could be hard for a child to hear, they sometimes choose to wait until the time is right. Pity for them, they were beaten to the punch.

When I was around twelve years old, I was preparing for the new school year, going about my life as any child would, when the secret was leaked. All that I knew of how I was born was that my mother had endured a painful Cesarean section and I was the joyous result of four years hard work trying to conceive. I had two younger siblings, but I was the eldest, and generally got the brunt of full responsibility. One day, right before the end of summer and the beginning of school, I received a phone call that changed how I felt toward myself drastically.

The phone rang, and my mother answered, calling me in from across the house, telling me that my best friend was asking for me. I ran into the living room and grabbed the receiver, excited to talk to my friend now that she had returned from summer camp. After no small amount of shrieking and hellos that probably irritated anyone within fifty feet of the phones, we went on to how excited we were for school. Everything after those few moments of ecstasy is now blurry in my mind, and the conversation that followed took much higher precedence.

I can never remember the exact conversation; all I can recall is the
information I received. I received the shock of my life, at least thus far. Now, looking back on it, the information seemed silly, almost inconsequential, but to me on that day, I felt like I barely knew myself. Before my mother was pregnant with me, she had had to take many medications and fertility drugs in order to conceive. The result of this was that I was originally one of four babies in my mother's womb. Over her pregnancy, these fetuses disappeared, much to the sadness of my mother. By the end of her pregnancy, I was the only fetus to survive. And my birth alone was fraught with complications. After a very difficult and surprising labor, I was born over six weeks premature, weighing in at only approximately fifteen or so ounces. The premature information was not new to me, but for the first time I understood what it truly meant, and how lucky I was to be sitting there on the phone that day.

I listened to my friend recount to me the information that she clearly thought I already knew, passed down to her from her mother, and I was so overcome with so many conflicted emotions that I could hardly speak for the lump in my throat, threatening to erupt in tears. When my friend noticed how upset I was, she attempted to calm me down, but I was beyond help. I hung up the phone and sat in my room, wracking sobs hitting my body. When I was finally ready, not finished crying but having convinced myself to get up, I rose from the floor and walked down the hallway to my mother and father's bedroom. They sat on their bed watching television, and at first, did not notice the state I was in as I entered. Not wanting to disturb, I stood quietly, and waited patiently until a commercial to reveal what I knew. Finally, I cleared my throat and my mother looked over; taking in my tearstained face and red eyes, she started to ask what was wrong.

But what was it really that had me so upset? I felt lied to; information of this magnitude should have been shared with me! I felt a loss; I could have been a quadruplet! As the oldest of three children, I never had anyone to confide in, to share my troubles with. My parents were mostly consumed with the younger two, as they had the most behavioral problems and struggled in school, while I never needed much attention. I told them that I knew, and my mother held me while I cried, and I felt a little better, but still hurt. They apologized, and told me that they wanted to wait until I was older to tell me, and I wasn’t sure what would have hurt less.

Do I wish that they had told me earlier? Was my anger directed at the fact that they had not been the ones to tell me? I wasn’t sure. I’m still not sure. All I can say is that I am glad that I know. The fact that
pregnancy can be wrought with this level of sadness gave me clarity, taught me that nothing in life is certain, and that you don’t always know as much as you believe. I now know the truth, and am still impacted today. Being friends with many sets of twins, I am sometimes jarred back to that phone call, wondering what life would be like today if there were three, two or even one more of me. Would I be different as a twin? As a result, I overcompensate; I try to do the jobs of more than one person in my life. I try to be in multiple places at once, be overly helpful and as competent as three people. As unreasonable and impossible as it is, I feel a need to be that way. Today, I am more responsible and caring, due to my desire to be helpful. It has made me more sympathetic and loving, and in a way, I am grateful to my friend for calling me on that fateful day.

Yet on days when I feel a loss for what could have been, I feel that I wish that I had never found out. I look at myself and wonder, if there were two or even three of me, would my life have been even close to the way it is now? I get nervous for pregnancy; considering sometimes that I don’t want children, yet that feeling is always replaced by a need to have them in my life. But no matter how worried I get, nor how sad I feel, I remember that I was the one that lasted, that endured, that survived what the other three did not. And that has made all the difference.
A SKIN-WALKER, ACCORDING TO Native American legend, is a person who has the ability to turn into any animal or being the individual desires, a supernatural ability that would allow one to change how they look quite easily. Oh how the desire to be such a creature floods your thoughts when you stare into the mirror. When you walk around day by day, you stare at people wondering how you must look in their eyes. You think about it often; in your mind you’re hoping they see someone with perfect eyes, flawless skin and hair that flows like a river. Then you go home and look into the mirror—the person you wish to see isn’t there. Instead, they’re replaced by an average being with no special qualities.

First you take a look at your skin. Your skin tells a story few are aware of. That scar resting near the middle of your right forearm is a reminder of a time where you tried to balance playing Halo online while baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies; a recipe you had recently perfected. Looking at the scar reminds you of the incident, trying to close the oven while your other hand was holding a burning hot pan which found its place right on your forearm. The skin on your arm puffed up and separated from the rest of your flesh in awful discoloration; just another flaw to add to the collection. Now time to pay attention to your left forearm. Turned to the lighter side, you find a misshapen scar that’s darker than the rest of your skin. It runs perfectly over your veins. That scar tells the tale of running down a flight of stairs in high school, trying to balance several books, a jacket and an umbrella in hand while chasing a close friend. Of course it was your mistake. The harsh metal tip of your umbrella collided with your arm and ripped the skin clean off; you hadn’t even noticed until later in the day. Countless other blemishes trailing the surface of your arms tell of lost battles between you and your troubled mind.
Then there are your eyes—the eyes that stare into the mirror trying to interpret the image staring back at them. Those same eyes are guarded by a thick lens no one can seem to look past. You lean in closer, trying to decode your own eyes. They’re dark brown, aren’t they? Sometimes they seem to be a lighter shade, the outer lining appears to be grey, but you wonder if your mind is just playing tricks on you. What should be white reminds you of a milky blue color, and then you frantically wonder if you’re okay or if you’re sick. When your mind is done trying to tease you into believing you have an illness you question why they’re such a dark color. Why couldn’t you be one of those children with interesting colored eyes like green or blue? You know all the reasons why, it’s science of course, but you still have to ask yourself those questions.

Those eyes can just be so reckless for you. You remember a time when you had perfect vision, right before the fifth grade started. Your brother had glasses, and immediately you wanted a pair to be just like him, because you admired your brother dearly. You finally managed to ruin your vision enough by wearing his glasses to get your own pair, and then you soon regretted it. As the years went on, your vision only continued to get worse until it finally stopped regressing at 17 years of age. With your vision that finally seemed to stop getting worse, you continued to stare and judge yourself in the mirror behind thick lenses. When you’re done judging the skin of your arms and the look of your eyes, your vision shifts focus to any girl’s worst enemy, your hair.

Oh how you’ve gone through so many difficult times with that hair. Never quite satisfied with how it looked, you had hair down to your back for most of your life. Desiring a change because you thought short hair would attract the opposite sex, you drastically cut your hair to your shoulders and got bangs, but it’s still unsuccessful. In high school, when trying to make an identity for yourself, you tortured your hair by adding a variety of colored extensions, trying to differ yourself from the masses, only to find that being different wasn’t a positive feeling at that age. When that failed, you cut your hair even shorter, a layered, shaggy haircut that made people look at you in a different light; finally you found something you liked. Yet when you approved of your hair your mother didn’t, so you were forced to grow it out. Then you felt like short hair never worked for you, and you once again desired the long luscious locks, but you couldn’t achieve those locks. Every morning you frantically try to style your hair. What would give it body? Will this product make your hair shine? Is there a possibility that for just
once your hair can stay perfectly in place? No, of course there isn't. You settle on the fact that you'll never have that flawless skin, those perfect eyes, or hair that could flow like a river, and attempt to go about your day like any normal individual.

It’s hard to go about the day when just before it started, you looked and prodded at each and every one of your flaws. Those eyes, those evil eyes that make you see the errors of your skin and hair. Those same eyes that hold their own flaws that could keep you distracted for days. Then there’s that skin. That skin that will only proceed to get worse as the years go on and you continue to become a clumsy mess while fighting all those mental battles. That hair won’t be a problem forever; one day you’ll be able to fix it and make it seem perfect. Hopefully before it becomes lifeless and grey, or maybe it’ll be better off that way; maybe when it seems everything is at its worst, it’ll seem like it’s the best. Even so, the desire to be a skin-walker will always cloud your mind, forever making you want to look perfect in someone else’s eyes.
IN DECEMBER I WENT CRAZY, AND SO I MOVED TO BROOKLYN. I HAD BEEN LIVING IN WASHINGTON, DC FOR THE PAST FOUR YEARS, AND THIS ALL HAD BEEN A LONG TIME COMING, BOTH THE INSANITY AND THE MOVE. DESPITE BEING BASED IN THE DISTRICT, I HAD BEEN RUNNING AWAY AND RUNNING AROUND FOR YEARS—THE LAST THREE TO BE EXACT. RUNNING AND FLYING AND BUSING UP AND DOWN THE EAST COAST, OUT TO THE MIDWEST, DOWN TO THE SOUTH. HERE AND THERE AND BACK AGAIN. RUNNING ANYWHERE THAT WOULD HAVE ME, MOST PREFERABLY PLACES THAT DIDN’T KNOW ME, AND THEREFORE COULDN’T JUDGE MY ACTIONS AS RIGHT OR WRONG. I WAS IMPERMANENT, A VISITOR IN MOST PLACES, HAVING NOWHERE TO CLAIM. I PREFERRED CITIES THAT WOULD REGARD ME AS TRANSIENT, IF THEY BOTHERED TO REGARD ME AT ALL. INVISIBILITY WAS THE HOPE. I WAS RENDERED SEMI-BLIND BY A SELF-INDULGENT, SELF-PROCLAIMED, OVERLY-ROMANTICIZED TRAGEDY. IF NO ONE ELSE COULD SEE ME, MAYBE I WOULDN’T HAVE TO FACE MYSELF. AND I DIDN’T WANT TO FACE MYSELF, BECAUSE I HAD DONE SOMETHING THAT SEEMED RIGHT AT FIRST, BUT GREW MORE COMPLICATED AS TIME AND SPACE GAVE ME PERSPECTIVE.

THERE IS NOTHING SO COMPLICATED AS “THE RIGHT THING.” FROM AN EARLY AGE, WE ARE INDOCTRINATED INTO MORALITY. FOR A LONG TIME, WE ASSUME THAT RIGHT AND WRONG EXIST AS POLAR OPPOSITES OF EACH OTHER, AND THAT EVERYTHING WE DO AND EVERY DECISION WE MAKE FALLS INTO ONE OF THOSE CATEGORIES. BUT IT’S NOT THAT SIMPLE. IT’S HARDLY EVER SIMPLE AT ALL. MORALITY BECOMES CONVOLTED WHEN WE BEGIN TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT OUR WANTS, DESIRES, NEEDS, AND MOTIVATIONS. IT BECOMES EVEN MORE COMPLICATED STILL WHEN WE TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE WANTS, DESIRES, NEEDS, AND MOTIVATIONS OF OTHERS. THIS HAPPENS ON EVERY LEVEL, FROM THE INTERPERSONAL TO THE INSTITUTIONAL. MORAL CONSCIENCE CHANGES AND DEVELOPS OVER TIME DUE TO CHANGING VALUES SYSTEMS, CHANGING CONTEXTS, AND PERSPECTIVE THAT CAN BE GAINED ONLY THROUGH DISTANCE. THERE IS DUALITY TO EVERY ISSUE.
In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, journalist Rebecca Skloot traces the path of a group of cells that gave millions of people life. These cells, known as the HeLa cells, belonged originally to a woman named Henrietta Lacks. Lacks was a black woman living in the 1950s who was diagnosed with cervical cancer and who died at the hands of several white doctors who harvested her cancerous cells to promote further research. Hers were the cells that enabled such developments as the polio vaccine, cloning, and gene mapping. Yet her family did not receive any benefits from this progress, as the cells were taken without Henrietta’s knowledge or consent.

Henrietta Lacks was taken advantage of at a time where exploitation and racism were rampant and commonplace, especially within the public health system. The face of the public health practitioner has always been one of an older, white, privileged man—someone who is undeniably systematically advantaged in this society, who has access to education, money, and time. This is true today, and its truth was even more prominent in the 1950s, when racism was both socially acceptable as well as institutionally sanctioned. Skloot describes the state of public health in Henrietta’s time: “The public wards at Hopkins were filled with patients, most of them black and unable to pay their medical bills [...] This was the era of Jim Crow—when black people showed up at white-only hospitals, the staff was likely to send them away, even if it meant they might die in the parking lot” (Skloot 15). Exploitation was also commonplace: “...like most patients in the 1950s, she deferred to anything her doctors said. This was a time when ‘benevolent deception’ was a common practice—doctors often withheld even the most fundamental information from their patients, sometimes not giving them any diagnosis at all. [...] Doctors knew best, and most patients didn’t question that. Especially black patients in public ward” (Skloot 63). Benefitting the health of millions of people for countless generations is right. To be able to do this only through the exploitation of a woman who would never afford such health care is wrong. One could not have existed without the other. How do we reconcile the decisions we make with the people that they hurt?

Morality changes over time, not just within individuals, but also within the public consciousness. Questions of civil rights trickle down to every last individual oppressed by a lack of them, and each story manifests itself in its own way. Institutions construct and enforce what is right or wrong; individuals believe this and act accordingly. When I came out to my parents at age 19, I felt so alienated from the distinction between right and wrong that I
felt cornered into making a decision. Society and my parents and the way that my parents fit into society told me that homosexuality was wrong. I felt that being anything but myself was wrong. I felt restricted by constructions, and it seemed that the only way to rectify that was by physically escaping the place that I felt was restricting me. I couldn’t be who I was here, and so I decided to go somewhere else.

I’ve always been a big proponent of leaving, just because I don’t believe in staying where I’m not wanted, and I especially don’t believe in staying somewhere I don’t want to be. But there are flaws in that. There aren’t just places you leave behind. There are histories, and there are people, and even when you leave, these things remain. They hold you, freeze you in the way you were, even after you’re long gone. People stay. They write their own narratives. They write their own truths, and you write yours. And in this process, we learn about what love means to us, and often we learn it through loss.

Love is supposed to be simple, I think. Or at least it’s supposed to be obvious. It’s supposed to conquer all, or at least it’s supposed to conquer something every once in a while. But often it’s more complicated than that. Sometimes loves can conquer each other, silence each other, clash.

How do you do the right thing when the right thing is so different for so many people, when it’s so much more subjective than we’d ever been raised to believe?

I came out to my parents the winter of my sophomore year...the first time I was in college. And just because no one was surprised, it didn’t mean we weren’t all shocked.

Do the right thing. Do the right thing. Do the right thing. For them, to me: be straight, work hard, come home. Stay. Be our daughter again. For me, to myself: be you at any cost—honesty needs no apology. We all felt unequivocally right, justified, insistent. There could be no middle ground. We had been avoiding the subject for a long time, and even though you’re supposed to cross the bridge when you come to it, we burned it instead.

First there was the fighting. And actually, I guess that’s all there was. There is nothing decorous about fighting, especially not the kind of fighting that takes place in the intimacy of the house you grew up in with the only people you’ve known all your life. The people who feel suddenly betrayed by your insistence on honesty, the people who expected more, not because they hated gay people, but because they loved you.

The immediate issues weren’t about me being gay, supposedly, but it read, it shouted, between every line. It was about
my “activism” and my “friends,” my time and money wasted, and my plummeting grades, which probably did have something to do with me trying to figure out how to navigate the whole gay thing, actually. The fights I could stand, because I knew I would be returning to school soon, but when my parents told me that I would have to transfer schools, that I wouldn’t be returning to DC, and that I would have to live at home indefinitely, I didn’t know what to do.

And so I left.

I left with $100 (given to me by my parents) left to my name, I borrowed an extra hundred from my best friend, and asked another friend to swing by my house while my dad was out picking my brother up from school. I threw my suitcases into her trunk, and we sped off to JFK Airport, me with a one-way ticket to Austin, Texas in hand. I was the crying girl in the airport terminal (there’s always one). I did the right thing, or at least the right thing for me. And sometimes—for a moment—that’s all there is.

I left, and I didn’t realize what I was missing. I didn’t realize how I was missing, or how I was missed. I didn’t know my parents would spend their entire Christmas looking for me, sending out desperate calls to relatives (I still don’t know what they told my aunts and uncles that year) and looking through my phone bills (which they were still paying) to figure out who I’d been calling. I left my 9-year-old brother a note letting him know where I was and that I would be safe. I asked him not to tell my parents. I guess he never did. I didn’t realize every Christmas after that would echo a sort of quiet sadness. I wasn’t thinking about that. I was in Texas, and I was drunk.

I was drunk and free and scared. Each night in my shallow sleep I played out mild nightmares of my prodigal return, and each morning I’d wake up forgetting where I was, and between desperate glasses of water, my eternal headspin made it seem like my makeshift sleeping bag was gliding along the floorboards, floating farther and farther away from where I came.

They never found me; I just came back. Five months without a word, and I wrote them a letter from my dorm room. I was dropping out of school, I told them. They were (still) paying far too much for me to be accomplishing far too little. I couldn’t be that kind of burden anymore. It was the right thing. I had a job, I was renting a house. I would figure it out, that elusive right thing.

Texas, D.C., Northampton, Chicago, New York. There and back again, all our interactions laced with resentment, trepidation, and most complicated of all: love.
My parents and I really fucked it up, this whole family thing. Because when we all act like we’re right, it turns out no one actually is. Not completely, anyway. There’s nothing wrong with leaving, but there’s nothing pretty about it either. There’s nothing romantic about crying in the airport on your last dollar. Nothing poetic about sleeping on piles of blankets on living room floors. But there is something valuable about time and perspective. I realize now that there’s privilege in leaving. It implies the ability to leave; it implies a place to go. Not everyone has options, not everyone has access to help. Privilege and disenfranchisement go hand in hand, and sometimes they exist within the same body, as in my case. Sometimes they exist as different sides of the same institution, as in Henrietta’s. Both are powerful.

There was that time when I was 19 when I was so insistent on being right that I must have known somewhere that I might have been wrong. There’s also this time now when I’m 22, and I feel comfortable saying “I don’t know.” It’s honest. Unlike clothing or tastes or other tangible things, we grow into our stories with time instead of growing out of them. But we still hand them down. We see things for what they were, not what we wanted them to be.

What is it that gives experiences meaning? I don’t know if we’re changed just by virtue of things having happened to us. I think that sometimes the only way to learn is through loss, to know what could have been, to understand what truly is at stake. In that Texas winter and in the months that followed, I found the realest thing I had ever known. My family and I, we could lose each other. I saw that for the first time. The three years that followed were a period of something akin to mourning. Of trying to grasp at and comprehend what I almost gave up in leaving. Something was broken, something had been lost. But that doesn’t render it meaningless. Rather, the magnitude and the weight of that sense of loss is what gives my identity meaning, that makes me want to fight not with my family but for our relationship. Three years later, we are all still trying to make sense of what has happened, we are living in its wake. And just like love doesn’t conquer all things, time doesn’t heal all wounds. The process is much more active than that. But what time does do is give us perspective, gradually and slowly, but surely and with a certain type of kindness. It gives us the tools and the strength to understand our stories, to grow into them, and maybe most importantly, to pass them on.
TWO

Changing Places
The Journey to Freedom

by RAFIA CHAUDHRY

IT WAS AUGUST 14, 1947, AND THE STREETS of India were crowded with people. The official announcement had just been made that India would be separated into two; one part would remain India and the other would become Pakistan, an Islamic state which would allow Muslims to attain basic human rights and freedom. Politicians, neighbors, friends, family, whether Muslim or Hindu, rejoiced at the idea of two separate nations. Meanwhile in the city of Ludhiana, India, there lived a young girl who was about fourteen years old. This girl's name was Fatma. Fatma was at home going about with her chores when she heard a messenger in the street call out that today was the official day India would be separated into two nations, India and Pakistan. Fatma was as enthusiastic as everyone else. She had heard about the idea of separate nations ever since she was born. Little did she know that chaos and destruction were to come with the birth of a new country.

The days passed and summer drifted into autumn. Fatma and her family, which consisted of her father and four brothers, decided to migrate to Lahore, Pakistan. Three of her brothers were older than she and one was younger; Fatma’s mother had passed away when she was a toddler. Most of Fatma’s neighbors had already left for Pakistan; they sent back letters describing their journey, about adversities they had faced and yet they urged Fatma’s family to leave for Pakistan as soon as possible. Times had gotten tough, and every day was filled with more and more hardships for the Muslims. Each new morning was a blessing—no one knew whether they would live to see another day. At night riots and massacres would take place and each night a different village, a different city was attacked by angry men of the opposing party. They would kill men, slaughter children and take women away as prisoners and slaves. Fatma lived with terror and fear, never knowing what to expect. Life
It was late one September night when Fatma awoke to the sound of faint screams and cries. She was a light sleeper and due to the fear in her heart, she was not able to sleep most nights anyway. The sounds were distant, yet they pierced through her ears and shook her soul. She went to the roof top and squinted her eyes as she scanned the area—at a distance she saw flames, yet she didn’t understand what was going on. She ran downstairs to find that her father and brothers had awoken; they too had heard the screams. Fatma’s father cautioned the kids and told them to grab the emergency bags they had packed months earlier. Fatma and her younger brother didn’t know exactly what was going on, but they sensed danger. Her father and her older brothers would whisper to one another from time to time. They tried not to look upset, but Fatma could tell that they were. They left their house quickly and quietly. Fatma’s younger brother constantly asked “Where are we going?” Her oldest brother would say that they were going on a journey. Fatma’s father locked the door of their house, not knowing that this would be the last time he would lock the door.

The family started walking with their bags in the middle of the night. They walked what seemed to be miles and miles. Everyone was completely quiet. Every few streets or so, her youngest brother would say something, and the others would tell him to remain silent. As the family was walking towards the area where they heard the sounds coming from earlier, they realized that there wasn’t any light in that area and the screams had died down. As Fatma grew older, she realized that the screams she had heard that night were from the nearby village where hundreds were massacred and the lights she had seen from the village were flames consuming the entire village.

Fatma’s family had to pass by the village that night so they could reach the train station. As Fatma and her family were walking, their eyes fell on a little boy not older than eight years or so. He was just sitting on the side crying. His clothes were dirty and bloody and his eyes were flooded with tears. Fatma’s father went over to the boy and gave him some water, asking the little boy what was wrong. What had happened? The little boy repeated over and over that his entire family had been killed before his eyes by the rioters, and he had slipped away through the basement door. Fatma’s father helped the boy up and took him along with them.

They all walked together in silence. The night seemed darker and colder than usual. It was morning by now, and after walking all night, the seven of them finally
arrived at the train station. The train station was overcrowded. Men, women, old, and young were clutching their bags with a look of horror on their faces. Fatma had been to this train station many times before; it was the closest one to her house and she used to take the train to her grandmother’s villa in Lahore. Fatma usually bought a ticket and waited for her train, but today everything was different. The train station was chaotic, the ticket booths were closed and no one bought a ticket. Everyone just waited with their eyes anxiously looking toward the end of the platform. Babies were screaming, women and men alike crying, some people sitting, others standing, and everyone’s clothes were dirty and torn. The only similarity everyone shared was the fear within.

It was the middle of the day by now and the sun scorched their heads. They had been sitting on the platform waiting for hours and suddenly, from a distance, a whistle was heard. The train was coming! A look of relief and joy arose on everyone’s face. Everyone ran onto the train; many people had to sit and stand on the roof of the train, and if you were lucky you would be able to find a place within the train. Fatma, her family, and the little boy were fortunate enough to have found space inside the train. They sat in the cattle car huddled up in the corner on the floor; there was hay all around them and the car smelled like animals. The train was crowded and people sat all around. Some people were holding to the outer bars of the train, holding on for their lives. After an hour the train finally started moving, slowly at first and then picking up speed. It was a 125 mile journey from Ludhiana, India to Lahore, Pakistan. It was a journey that Fatma would never forget, a journey that would forever change her destiny. Fatma and her family were very lucky to have arrived in Pakistan safely and alive. After arriving at Lahore, they went to their grandparents’ villa, where to this day many of Fatma’s children and grandchildren still reside.

Two weeks after arriving in Lahore, an announcement was made on the streets that the next train from India would be coming in at the station shortly. When a train from India arrived, everyone went to the station anxiously. Some waited for their relatives and friends while others just wanted to welcome people into the new country. Fatma, her family, and all the neighbors went to the station. As the train slowly came into the station, excitement rose. The train stopped and no one came out; everyone was shocked and got closer to the train to inspect it. A foul stench came from within the train. Suddenly, cries were heard from people on the platform. As
Fatma got closer, she saw the train filled with dead bodies, slain, cut, dismembered, blood everywhere. The people on this train were headed to Lahore just like Fatma and her family, but on the way to Lahore their train had been seized by rioters. It was a haunted train, a ghost train; the image of the lifeless bodies remained in Fatma's head. The experience would forever remain in Fatma's memory, yet life would go on and slowly a nation would be born.

Fatma later told her story to her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, including me. Her story shows the struggle for freedom, the freedom for basic and natural rights, the freedom that we so easily take for granted. August 14, 1947, was a day which would forever change the course of history, a day which would mark independence and celebration for some while for others it would bring haunted memories and loss.
IN APRIL 2008, I BOARDED A PLANE for the first time in my life. I was leaving the United States and going on a trip to Ireland with my aunt, uncle and his mother. For a week, we lived together in a small town right on the Shannon estuary named Labasheeda (in Irish, Leaba Shioda translates to “bed of silk”). As a native New Yorker, I felt that this of part Ireland was the antithesis of everything I knew and loved: it was remote, quiet, and almost 40 minutes away from anything even remotely urban. When I was there, I was miserable. I was always looking for the next exciting thing to do, which was really difficult to find in a town that ran the length of a single mile-long road. Most of my time in Ireland was spent alone, missing the fast paced life I lived back in New York.

But sometimes in New York, my life moved a little too fast for me. Sometimes, it still moves a little too fast for me. Things need to be put back into perspective for me from time to time; I need to be reminded that I am human, and I am not unconquerable. When I was in Ireland, visiting the Cliffs of Moher brought me back to a grounded mindset. There was a strange sense of unity that flooded my body: I was the earth, the earth was me, and our existence was mutual. The massive rocks, almost 400 feet tall, were enveloped in grey volatile skies. At that moment, I was reminded that there are things much bigger, both in size and in general existence, than me. It was a completely humbling experience and to this day I still remember the serenity that surrounded me.
Gaelic Invocations (Cliffs of Moher)

Speak to me, sweet waters!

Soft hums sprout from an unmoving mouth,

(an archaic language; never learned but understood)

A silent conversation with the mistress of the moon.

Sing to me, untamed tempests!

Tongue to tooth, note by note,

Let me know that I am home.

Release your secrets for me!

Omnipotent Earth, move me (unworthy)

And allow yourself to be moved.

An Olympian analog

sits under my shape,

shifting

Us both.

But should I ever

try to push

you (unwilling),

you resist;

a presence unnoted.

(the things that live the most are often not alive)
Heaven on Earth
by MORRIS HEDAYA

THERE ARE CERTAIN EXPERIENCES IN LIFE that, as a matter of course, leave their marks on one’s perspective. These marks can fade quickly, or they can become an indelible component of a person’s character and moral fiber. The marks of one’s experience as a counselor at Camp HASC tend towards the latter. HASC is the Hebrew Academy for Special Children, and Camp HASC is its summer program, the self-proclaimed “Heaven on Earth.” After working at HASC for the past two months, I am able to bear witness to the legitimacy of that statement. When the “Heaven on Earth” tag arises in conversation, many like to focus on how beneficial HASC is for the campers, how each individual camper’s potential is realized, or how each and every one anticipates the arrival of summer with an excitement that steadily grows with each day of fall, winter, and spring. Others reflect on how considerable a relief it must be for the families of the campers, whose duties as the guardians of a special needs child, and all that entails, are put on hold for several weeks. I’d like to remark on how Camp HASC became a “Heaven on Earth” for me.

My first day in heaven began just like everybody else’s—with no idea what to expect. HASC war stories from former counselors put terrible, terrible images in my mind: images of campers whose diapers needed to be changed 15 times a day and who had seizures just as frequently, of bunk floors covered with layers of excrement, and of acts too inappropriate to write about. And that’s pretty much what I got.

Around 20 minutes into that first fateful day, one of my campers had his first seizure of the summer. And I had my first nervous breakdown. Raff, which is what I’ll call my camper, was born with brain cancer and has hydrocephalus, or “water in the brain.” Because of this, Raff drop seizes around twice a day, without any signs or symptoms to alert you, and is mentally disabled. He also wears a helmet all the time to protect his head and has the truly amazing ability of being able to repeat the
same question, over and over and over again, for hours. Raff always asks if he looks nice, takes his meds five times a day and is very attached to his “Woodies,” his three Woody dolls that he cannot sleep without. Yes, he is as adorable as he sounds. But on that day I didn’t know any of this, and so when Raff finished “popping his meds” and then immediately dropped to the floor, twitching slightly, my composure fell apart just as quickly. As I sat next to him on the floor, my face paled, my breath quickened, and I felt about as dizzy as it gets. I’m not proud of this, but I was getting just as much medical attention as my camper. Yet, like everything else that was thrown at me that summer, it became normal for me to see Raff seizures, and I eventually came to set the career saves record, a save being defined as “catching Raff, mid-seizure, before he hits the ground.” Yea, I know, I’m just a natural athlete.

The curveballs just kept coming from that day, campers doing things that no one had ever seen before and acting in ways that test one’s patience to its limits. But no matter what happened I couldn’t possibly get angry; nothing my campers did could ever be viewed as their fault. How could it be if they had no control over what they did? And so working with these special needs campers refined my personality to a point I didn’t think was possible. Not only did I become a calmer and more patient person, but my sense of responsibility and accountability increased tremendously. Normally someone who has a legendarily hard time getting out of bed (I have actually slept through a chair being dropped on my head), every morning I exploded out of bed, ready to change diapers and wipe butts. Everywhere I saw a mess I cleaned it up, something that had never entered my mind until this past summer. No matter how tired I was, the most important thing to me was making sure my campers were comfortable and safe. The constant repetition of these actions and thoughts ingrained these ideas into who I am as a person today, and who I hope to continue being tomorrow.

But despite how much I’ve grown as a person, character refinement is not the reason why HASC became a “Heaven on Earth” for me. Every night that I laid my head on my pillow, I knew that I had earned that sleep and that I had done a good job, a feeling that’s incredibly underestimated. I felt as if I were doing something that I was meant to do, something I was trying my best at (which, frankly speaking, I’d never done before) and succeeding. Every single second of every day in every week of this past summer, I felt fulfilled. And that is a feeling that, outside of Camp HASC, is nearly impossible to replicate.
Girl Meets Fandom

by JORDAN deJONGH

“...because nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff... Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can’t-control-yourself love it. Hank, when people call people us nerds, mostly what they’re saying is ‘you like stuff.’ Which is just not a good insult at all. Like, ‘you are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness’.”

— John Green

The icy wind from the Hudson River whips by as I step out of the passenger seat of the car. I’m trying to ignore my mom’s nagging about wearing warmer clothes as I pull my Harry Potter sweatshirt tighter around my body. Yes, it is freezing for late October, but I’ll be inside in about two minutes and I’m not planning to come back outside until the end of the day. Plus, there have to be about twenty people who look perfectly content in costumes that are clearly only meant to be worn in summer, so honestly, I’m not worried. The dark glass of the Jacob K. Javits Center is striking in the fall sunshine. There is something about the 80s design that makes the giant convention center seem less intimidating than it probably should. My older sister hops out of the car and onto the sidewalk next to me. She’s also decked out in a sweatshirt with her favorite Anime on the back. We both triple check to make sure we have our badges, phones and money, and then we make our way inside.

The lobby of the Javits Center is a flurry of excitement and chaos. People are streaming on and off the convention floor at a near constant rate and wandering towards the cafeteria or the coat-check. One side of the high wall and ceiling is made of a geometric matrix of dark steel and tinted glass. Across the granite floor is a grey wall that clearly marks the delineation between the entrance way and the show floor.

There isn’t really any way to get around the fact that Comic Con stinks. I know that if I arrive in the middle of the day, my first step on the floor will be
accompanied by the subtle funk that comes with thousands of people being in the same room together for four days, no matter how many showers people take. I always try to get to Comic Con as early in the day as possible, to try and avoid noticing this peculiar phenomenon, but after about five minutes, the smell is easily forgotten in favor of ogling the intricate displays and witty t-shirts. At first, I’m not sure where to focus and everything seems to rush by in an intense blur of Doctor Who cosplayers and brightly colored posters. I take a moment to let my eyes wander, feeling the strange mix of absurd excitement and curious calm wash over me. I’m back.

Sometimes it is easiest to be completely yourself when surrounded by complete strangers. New York Comic Convention is a four-day gathering of over a hundred thousand enthusiastic comic, science fiction, anime, and pop-culture fans. When I attended my first Comic Convention, I was quickly consumed with the energy and vibrancy that it provided. It is like leaving the real world behind and indulging in your favorite imaginary universe (to be further referred to as a fandom). My sister and I look forward to it every year.

For the first few hours, unless we have a specific panel that we want to attend, we simply pick either the north or south side of the Javits Center and wander the show floor. The show floor is the largest section of Comic Con. It takes up about sixty-five percent of the Javits Center, and is composed of merchant booths and artists’ tables. It is important to note that a Comic Convention is first and foremost, a trade show. It is specifically designed to suck as much money from its attendees as possible. You always can find a t-shirt or keychain from almost any fandom imaginable, and for every Darth Vader lunchbox, there is a fan just waiting to fall in love with it. With this in mind, my sister and I have a self-imposed rule that we should buy as little as possible on the first day and never buy anything on the first walk through of the floor. The con is four days long. If we really want to get something, it will almost always be there on the second day. The first day of wandering is reserved for looking at and taking pictures of all of the amazing costumes we can recognize. At Comic Con, somehow it is really easy to just walk up to someone, and strike up a conversation about anything from the t-shirt or fez they’re sporting, to the price of rice in China. There is a sense of camaraderie in the air-everyone has come to this place to enjoy being nerds, together.

We plan out the panels, screenings and signings we want to attend ahead of time, to make sure there are no conflicts. We always force ourselves to have lunch
before starting in on any of these activities. Because New York Comic Con hosts about 105,000 people annually, we make sure to arrive early to each queue to secure at least a chance to see the panel that we want to see. Waiting on lines can sometimes be tedious and boring, but at Comic Con, because I am surrounded by people who are as crazily obsessed as I am, I try to strike up a conversation with the people around me. I meet people from other countries, long time diehard fans, as well as people who just dropped in for the day. We laugh at jokes that only make sense in this sort of temporary time-warp we are existing in. In those moments, it always hits me that the stuff I obsess over and fall in love with means something to more than just me. Comic Con shows me the bigger picture of fandom. There are people in the world who face problems that are totally different from mine, but we can still share interests and not be afraid to show each other our similarities. During the panels and screenings we holler and yell, letting the hours pass in a haze of euphoric geeking-out. We laugh at stupid jokes and silly puns, and bond over the absurdity that is the concept of a cliff-hanger. I am utterly free in my nerdyness and the moment is absolutely perfect.

The remaining three days fly by at an alarming rate. By Sunday evening, not many people are enjoying walking the show floor, because everybody’s feet are dead tired, but no one wants to go home. People are sitting anywhere security will let them; on the windowsills, abandoned corners, and the wide steps. New friendships are marked by traded cellphone numbers and tumblr url’s. Even as security starts to usher everyone outside, and the merchants are making last minute deals, there is a feeling of contentment in the air. The trek back to Penn Station is filled with the last minute compliment of someone’s outfit, or running to catch up with the fantastic Eleventh Doctor Cosplay I’ve wanted to get a picture of all day. When I finally sit down on the train next to my sister, we share a smile and start planning our costumes for next year.
HER NAME WAS RUTH. SHE LIVED isolated from the rest of the world in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her father took care of the family farm. Her mother was a homemaker. She took care of the house and made quilts that were sold at the farmers’ market. Ruth, like her family was Amish.

Until about the age of nineteen, Ruth wore the traditional Amish garb for women. She wore a one-piece black or navy dress, covered by an apron made by her mother. Her hair was tied up in a neat bun, covered by a white cap. According to Amish society, this dress code is necessary for modesty, which is a value their community shares. But when I met Ruth, she was not dressed that way.

I met Ruth in JFK airport. I was an eighteen-year-old college freshman heading to Florida with a few friends during semester break. I really loved going to college. Getting to work towards a degree in education, a degree that I got to choose, made me feel that I was striving for something that was important to me. But at the same time, my friends and I felt that we had worked really hard and decided we needed a vacation. So we booked tickets to Florida and headed for JFK airport. As my friends and I sat waiting for any updates on our delayed flight, a young woman, with what seemed to be her brother, sat across from me. Her name was Ruth. My friend asked Ruth if she knew anything about our flight delay and Ruth told us what we expected to hear; she was in the same boat as we were and knew nothing.

As we sat waiting, Ruth initiated a conversation that would bring me into a world that I didn’t know much about. When she asked us on what occasion we were going to Florida, we told her we had just finished our first semester of college and were celebrating our small milestone. We spoke about the transition from high school to college. The conversation then went from what it felt like being first-semester freshmen to going to school on a big
campus as opposed to our smaller private schools. At this point Ruth said, “Oh, I also went to a smaller, private school.”

“Oh really, what’s it called?” I asked. Ruth smiled and said, “I went to Amish school.”

My friends looked at each other as I thought, she doesn’t look like a descendent of George Washington. Her clothing totally betrayed her traditions. Where were her colonial times dress and Little Bo Peep bonnet? She wore a black, tight-fitted pencil skirt that came right above her knee caps. A white button down was tucked into her skirt with a Hermes belt that accentuated her thin waist. She wore a headband in her perfectly blown dirty blonde hair, and just enough makeup to enhance her natural beauty.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Ruth.

“You’re not Amish; you just went to an Amish school,” concluded my friend Sara.

“Not quite,” replied Ruth, running her fingers through the side bangs that lay so perfectly smooth on her forehead. “I’m Amish and before I moved to Florida, I went to Amish school in Pennsylvania. There I learned English, German, writing, and reading from a single Amish teacher. But it wasn’t enough for me. I wanted to continue going to school so I could eventually go to college and get a degree in education. Those weren’t the accepted goals of mainstream Amish girls so I left to pursue my dreams.”

Since Amish education only lasts through eighth grade, Ruth did not go to high school. The Amish believe that higher education, that is an education beyond eighth grade, would pull children away from their tightknit communities, thus threatening their values and traditions of a simple life style. After meeting Ruth, I did a little research of my own via the internet. I was surprised to learn that in 1972 the United States Supreme Court ruled that Amish could not be forced into a high school education. I remember thinking of all the people who fought for the right to an equal education such as Ruby Bridges, Medgar Evers, and James Meredith and how the Amish condemned it. It amazed me to see the major gap between people who would do anything for the chance for an equal education and those who, like the Amish, had full access to it but didn’t want it. It also made me think about where I’d be without a high school diploma or at least the chance for one.

Ruth left her Amish home at the age of nineteen to further her education. She liked learning and realized that if she furthered her education she’d be able to get a well-paying job and live a life beyond the isolated world of Amish society, but this came at a price. This meant she’d have to
say goodbye to her parents and six siblings, perhaps never seeing them again. After an emotional goodbye, with her parents begging her to stay, promising her the Amish life was the most sublime she’d find, Ruth packed up her bags and spent most of her savings on a ticket to Florida. She chose Florida because it was not too far, the weather was warm, and she had heard about a family that was looking for a nanny.

Ruth got herself a ride to the airport, where she boarded flight #97. When she got to Florida at 10:00 A.M., she took a cab to a nearby hotel where she stayed the night. With money running out, Ruth contacted her Amish friend Annie, who had also left Pennsylvania. Annie had told Ruth about a woman seeking a nanny to watch her twins while she taught in a local public school. So with a phone in one hand and a pen in the other, Ruth quickly jotted down the information and called the mother. When Ruth finally got in contact with the mother, she booked a day to meet with her. Ruth didn’t know it yet but she was on her way to making money that was to be used towards her GED and possibly her college education.

Ruth bought two new skirts and shirts, since the only clothes she knew were dresses and bonnets. The clothes she bought weren’t very stylish but they were more modern than the clothing she wore in Pennsylvania and she was on a tight budget. Ruth met the twins’ mother and she got the job. Ruth cared for the twins and began working towards her GED, something that was not accepted in Amish society.

Even with all the things that Ruth told me that didn’t add up to the lifestyle she wanted, a part of her wanted to go back to Pennsylvania. To feed the chickens, and feed the cows, and have dinners that weren’t rushed. But this was the life she chose. It turns out that the young boy sitting next to her wasn’t her brother but her fiancé. His name was John and like Ruth, he was also Amish.

As our nearly two-hour conversation came to an end, an announcer called row number one, two and five to board. That was us-row number five. My friends and I said goodbye to Ruth and John. As I boarded the plane, I thought of the differences between me and her and I realized we weren’t so different after all. She had a loving family and so did I. She had set goals and so did I. In fact, our goals were so similar; we were both going for a degree in education. The only difference is that my family was accepting of the very same goals that Ruth’s family condemned. I didn’t have to fight society to achieve my goals. I could do what I wanted without felling that I was disappointing my family and my choices were my choices. I had freewill.
About a month after meeting Ruth, I took my first class in early childhood education. As I sat waiting for my professor on my first day of class, I thought about Ruth. Ruth probably sat in an education class just like me at some point. But unlike me, Ruth gave up what seemed like everything to pursue something that was important to her. I gave up nothing, while Ruth gave up her family and life in Pennsylvania to do the same thing that I was doing: sitting in a classroom and working towards a degree in education.
The Boogie Down

by YSABEL REYES

IT WAS A BLAZING, HOT DAY IN JUNE. I was wearing my school uniform—white button down, beige pants and burgundy cardigan tied at the waist. I was in the hallway of Eximius College Preparatory Academy which, ironically, was ranked one of the top ten worst schools in the Bronx. There was laughter echoing off the walls and a water fight was taking place. It had just been announced earlier that week that no type of liquid was allowed in my school’s building. I didn’t quite understand why a school would restrict liquid or just liquid in the summer for that matter. According to our principal at the time, we didn’t deserve the privilege of bringing liquid inside. She claimed our school was in need of discipline and this was her way of disciplining us.

I felt like a person who had walked into a crime scene at the wrong moment. I didn’t fit the description of someone who needed to be disciplined. I didn’t fit that school altogether. At that moment, I was convinced that I couldn't stay there anymore. Not just that particular 6-12th grade school, but I refused to study in a public school in the Bronx. The Bronx was becoming a bigger challenge with each passing day. Yet, as challenging as it was, I refused to live by “If you can't beat em, join em.” Instead, I convinced myself that if I couldn't beat them, avoid them. So I began to neglect the Bronx.

As a middle schooler, my Bronx was an average height tomboy with corn rows, a wife beater, and sagged jeans with a really bad attitude that had “It’s a dog-eat-dog world” tatted across the forehead. My Bronx intimidated me. I was surrounded by violence, attitude, and more pessimism than a half empty cup can possibly contain. My solution was to distance myself from my Bronx as much as possible. I was afraid that all of the negativity from this one place would eventually consume me and make me into a replica of what I wanted to get away from the most.

Eventually, I started falling in love
with Manhattan. To me, Manhattan was a breath of fresh air. My Manhattan had her hair out past her shoulders and was wearing a beautiful floral print dress. She had a smile that convinced you that the sun shone from each one of her teeth. Manhattan to me had a picture perfect face. I made my world revolve around Manhattan. I attended a high school in downtown Manhattan, I got a job in downtown Manhattan, I ate and I breathed Manhattan. Manhattan provided me with the comfort and safety that my Bronx refused to give me. In a way, I had Manhattan as an escape.

Despite the things my Bronx lacked, I can't say she's altogether bad. My Bronx raised me to be aware. I feel like she exposed me to all the evil things not exactly to hurt me, but to educate me. My Bronx provided me with reality. That hot summer day in June accelerated the chase after the beauty that existed everywhere else. My Bronx told me, “It’s a dog-eat-dog world, but there are such things as vegetarians.” At that moment, I realized that I wasn’t forced to stay there. In fact, I was being forced to experience everything else in the world; the Bronx wasn’t my world.

At that moment, I was surrounded by the fake smiles, the constant pressure to be something that you are not, something that I am not and refuse to take part of. That moment in the hall, witnessing the water fight was the moment I grew aware of the liberty I rightfully owned. My Bronx didn't mean to intimidate me but, in fact, prepare me—prepare me for the scary, but push me towards the beauty.

It is a very chilly day in September. I am wearing a white button down, my burgundy Brooklyn College crew neck, and beige pants. I was leaving my Bronx to pass through my Manhattan and go attend class in my Brooklyn. Now, every day when I travel from home to school, I'm going from my strict reality, passing through all of the beauty, and arriving to where my passion lies. My reality is the spine that I grew with in the Bronx, my beauty is the inspiration and love I acquired from my favorite city, Manhattan, and my passion lies in the institution of Brooklyn College where I study and get closer and closer each day to one day becoming a successful writer. And at the end of each day, I head back uptown where it all started, the Boogie Down.
Finding Home
by SARA SREMAC

My first memory is also my most meaningful, the moment my family left our native country, Serbia. I was four years old, my sister was six, and it was 1996. Serbia had just made a name for itself comparable to that of Nazi Germany. Thousands of Muslim women in Bosnia were raped in the name of crude nationalism and my parents wanted out. Serbia was not progressing with the rest of the world, and religious and ethnic conflicts dominated its ideology. Unemployment was high, the government was corrupt, and all shared a general dismal view of the future. After years of relentless protesting and rioting, my parents grew tired of trying to build a home under an oppressive dictatorial government, and even the tragic thought of having to leave their family and friends could not keep them in Serbia any longer. In a desperate fight for freedom, my parents miraculously won the green card lottery and escape became a tangible prospect. But it couldn’t be easy; of course it couldn’t be easy.

Even with these golden tickets, Serbia had restricted emigration as the result of a massive brain drain and with our illegally obtained green cards we would be immediately stopped at the airport gates. My parents devised a plan to pretend to take a day trip to Hungary, where the green cards were valid, and then leave for the U.S. from there. It was risky, papers were sometimes checked, but the futures of their two precious little girls were worth it.

My first memory is in that train car, looking out across the platform. My mom grabbed our tiny faces and with cold tears in her eyes gave us aggressive instructions not to acknowledge our family members and friends dispersed throughout the train platform. Everyone we knew came to see us off, but in a further effort to conceal our fugitive attempts, they pretended to be strangers, not waving or even smiling. She told us to just look at them; no other action would be allowed. Dozens of our loved ones now became strangers in a situation which
exemplified the radicalness of this decision and hinted at the idea that we might not return for a long time. They came to show their love and support but knew that any emotions or acknowledgements might draw attention to a significant departure, which could lead to having our papers checked, so they just stared. We were now aliens, aliens to our new home and aliens to our old home.

Obviously at the time, it was impossible for me to grasp the severity of the situation and the burden it placed on my parents, still only in their twenties. They were moving their family out of everything they had ever known in hopes of creating a life for their children that would contain opportunity, progress, and freedom. I remember my mother’s grip on my arm, a grip of authority but also an anxious grip, the desperate grip of someone who needs support. I remember crying out as I saw my grandma faint on the platform, her heart taking over. I remember my dad’s sweaty palm clapped over my mouth.

“Everything’s fine, stop crying, close your eyes,” he said.

I was so confused; no one took the time to rationalize to me what was happening, and in my undeveloped thought process it was impossible for me to piece together a coherent explanation. I remember the confusion, the frustration, the sadness I felt but couldn’t understand. Everyone was talking to each other and yet not much was said.

How is it possible for me to so distinctly remember a moment from my infancy? It is possible because of the look in my mother’s eyes, the tone of my father’s voice, the nervous bouncing of my sister’s legs. To this day I have yet to experience a moment comprised of such elevated tension and emotion. It is hard for me to be consoled for the fact that I have no memory of my life in Serbia, no memories of playing in my grandmother’s orchard or running around with gypsy dogs, or any of the other memories that are described to me by relatives. It is hard for me to be consoled for the fact that the first memory I have is leaving a place I am told is my home. But this memory is also precious and sacred to me. My parents made the ultimate sacrifice in uprooting their lives for my sister and me, and the fact that I can recall the memory of when the sacrifice all began makes me feel closer to them and proud of who I am and what my existence in this country represents.
My Grandfather’s Secret

by DINA YANOFSKY

LAST SPRING, I TRAVELLED TO ISRAEL for the Passover holiday. During my stay, I visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial museum in Jerusalem. As a third generation holocaust survivor, I felt it was something that I should see. As a young child, I remember seeing the numbers branded into my grandfather’s arm. He did not discuss the holocaust with us because the memories were too painful. I always knew what happened during those years but seeing the footage with my own eyes gave it a whole new meaning to me. Instead of the holocaust being something I read about or was told about second-hand in the history books, the horrific treatment that my grandfather and others like him had to endure became so real that hardly a day goes by when I am not sick to my stomach thinking about the events that transpired.

My visit to Yad Vashem was heartbreaking. I cried many times that day. Perhaps the most poignant part of the museum for me was the Children’s Memorial. The images of the sweet innocent faces of the children will be forever haunting me. As we entered the memorial, we were led into a room that was completely dark. I could not see anything. I had to hold onto the banister in order to walk. There was a memorial candle in the center of the room. The walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in mirrors. It appeared as if there were millions of candles surrounding us. A recorded voice was reading the names, ages, and countries of origin of the children that were murdered. A chill ran down my spine. It was haunting to hear. My heart broke for all the helpless children. Could any child have possibly done anything so wrong to even remotely deserve this? Children do not pose a threat. Children are loving, trusting, and innocent. They did not deserve any harm at all, let alone the monstrous torture from the Nazis. I thought of my grandfather’s siblings. He was the only one
from his family who survived. I then went outside to get some fresh air. I saw an Israeli soldier in his uniform, carrying a rifle, crying on the side of the road. It really struck me to see a young, strong looking soldier reduced to tears from the images that he saw.

I saw disturbing images and footage that I wish I could erase from my memory. I saw a video of piles of corpses being thrown like rag dolls into a mass grave. I was shocked to see such ghastly visual images. I was surprised that I was even able to look. There was one particular video that shook me up the most. It showed a brother and sister that looked between the ages of five and ten begging for bread in the streets of the Warsaw ghetto. All of the people walking in the streets looked cold and starving. Suddenly, the little boy stopped moving. His sister started panicking; she tried to wake him but he wouldn’t move. The little boy starved to death. My grandfather was also held captive in the Warsaw ghetto. Now I finally understood why he was so careful to never waste any food. To him, wasting food was sinful. I was once eating an orange and he told me that back in Poland, oranges were only for wealthy people. I was so far removed from what he had gone through that I thought it was strange. My grandfather survived the Auschwitz death camp eating mostly potato peels. Thankfully, I have never experienced hunger but I would imagine that it would be torturous beyond comprehension. Each method of murder that the Nazis used was more heinous than the previous.

I saw actual cans of Zyklon B gas that were used to systematically kill Jews in the gas chambers. Seeing this can and knowing that it was invented shortly before the war saddened me greatly. People with great minds that could have invented and discovered so many things that would have benefited mankind chose to use their brains to invent things for evil purposes. Towards the end of the war when the gas was becoming too expensive, the Nazis threw people alive into ovens. There were piles of shoes on display that were taken from the victims before they were murdered. I noticed that one of the shoes looked a lot smaller than the others. I took a closer look and saw that they had pink polka dots on them. Seeing personal items that were taken from the victims made a big impact on me. This shoe wasn’t just a piece of leather. It once belonged to a little girl. Seeing the little shoes reminded me of myself at that age. At that age, I had hopes and dreams. I dreamed of what I would be when I grew up. I dreamed of my wedding. I had goals and aspirations for the future. I felt so bad for that helpless little girl. Instead of thinking about school and her
friends as normal girls do, she had to worry about staying alive. Just surviving another day was a big accomplishment for her.

When I left Yad Vashem, I felt emotionally drained. I witnessed how man could sink to a sub-human level. I saw evil. It does not logically make sense to me how people can annihilate an entire race not because they were criminals or were a threat to them, but simply because of their race. My grandfather was a very kind man. All of the shopkeepers in his neighborhood looked forward to his visits, as he usually came equipped with a joke or two. The baker knew to reserve yesterday’s bread for him because unfortunately there were times in his life that stale bread would be deemed a luxury. I love my grandfather and it was painful for me to see images of the horrors that he went through. I remember him as a happy man that loved life and appreciated every simple pleasure that everyone else takes for granted. I was in tears when he passed away two years ago. There are not many survivors alive today and people are starting to forget what happened. It is painful to discuss the holocaust but it is important that we do. When I have children, G-d willing, I will tell them about the holocaust. I hope the world will never allow anything like it to happen again.
DESTINATIONS ARE OFTEN PREDETERMINED. Yet, in a place like New York City, there are an overwhelming number of destinations and multiple ways of getting to them. When going underground and entering the subway tunnels, I pay $2.25 for a single ride. I see the rusty steel trains that run on electricity and I usually know which train to take and which way I’m headed. What I don’t know, however, is who all is in the subway that I’m about to enter. Subways have a subtle impact on each passenger because when they enter, they enter into the unknown and are unaware of the connections they will make.

On the day of my father’s departure, I went into the subway with him knowing that I was going to have to tell him goodbye and that it would be the last time I would see him for a while. I knew that once we got off the subway, he would hail a taxi, get in it, and leave me in New York City by myself. When we sat down though, I didn’t know it would be the longest ride of my life. I had all of those preconceived realities in my mind, but they all seemed so far away.

There were approximately 12 stops till we would arrive at his departure. As we waited, I took notice of the structure of the subway. There were plastic benches colored orange or blue for passengers to sit on, steel poles for people to cling onto when all the benches were taken, a steel ceiling, and a floor with a pattern of scattered splotches of various colors. It was a fairly basic and plain place, but it felt like a nice place to be in.

Sadness and fear were building up inside of me, but being in the subway was postponing my father’s departure and gave me a little more time with him. We chatted a bit, but we both knew we were holding back some emotions, so we kept quiet most of the time. In our silence, I overheard conversations other passengers were having. These eavesdroppings did not last long though, as at each stop a set of people would
exit. As they got out, new people would come in. My father made simple conversation with someone who sat next to him, but I decided to look around instead.

Before moving there, I heard New York City was the most diverse place on Earth, but really, it was the subway. Above the ground, certain cultures of people had specific areas or communities where they lived. When they needed to travel though, they went underground, and underground was where the mixing took place. The subway held diversity from place to place and carried it from one direction to another. I saw a baby boy sleeping peacefully under his mother’s watch, and a baby girl screaming under her father’s. I saw a Hispanic couple embracing each other, and a black couple cursing each other out. I saw a young white woman reading something on her phone and laughing, and a middle-aged Asian woman sitting on a bench crying. Then I saw a boy who looked about my age. I couldn’t tell what his race was. He saw me too. We made direct eye contact, but we didn’t exchange smiles. He looked just as scared as I was. In that moment, I knew I wasn’t alone. The subway announced “this is Penn Station,” and then he got up and left.

After that stop would be my father’s. The person he was having a conversation with left, so it was just me and him for one last time. He looked at me, smiling faintly with tears in his eyes, and said, “Well, I guess this is it.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said, also teary eyed. I got off at the stop with him to say goodbye.

When I got back into a subway car, it looked identical to the one I was in with him. There was a sense of familiarity that I found comforting, despite the subway carrying a completely different set of people. I managed to maintain composure, but I could feel a few passengers staring at me and wondering why I was so teary eyed. I helped my father with his suitcases, so when he left, my hands had nothing to hold. I felt awkward. I clung onto one of the steel bars, and I felt better. Even though I usually knew where I was supposed to be going before I entered a subway, at that moment I sincerely had no idea where I was going or in what direction I was headed. I felt like a tourist, a lost one. That was ok though. For the first time in my life, I also felt like I was where I belonged.
Money and Social Injustice

by HUMZAYAQUB

In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, the reader witnesses a family who is told implicitly and explicitly to do the right thing. Although this family has contributed tremendously in the field of science and medication, they are treated as second rate citizens who are denied the treatment their genes have helped create. Here we see a paradox, where society has told these individuals to do the right thing and not “cripple” the scientific advancement for the sake of money, while those same individuals are making billions of dollars off of their genes. In the same sense, all individuals on earth have witnessed this problematic parallel injustice where we are told to do good while those same people who urge us to do the right thing behave badly. Below is my personal experience of a particular injustice I have faced, which made me question our society’s hidden morality.

In the summer of 2005, my mom, dad, sister, and I traveled to the country of Pakistan, the birthplace of my parents. We left JFK and reached Manchester in eight hours. I’ll never forget the trip partly because we stayed in Manchester Airport for an additional twelve hours, most of which was spent lying on a sofa in a half brain dead phase. Those brutal twelve hours were then accompanied by another seven hours of sleep deprivation on the plane coordinated sincerely by the symphony orchestra of wailing babies. Finally, after a very stiff back and disgusting “world class” cuisine, we arrived in Pakistan, or more specifically, Islamabad. But sadly, that happiness was short lived, for we finally set out to the place where I had my own epiphany on the connection of wealth and social injustices.

The place is the small rural village of Ravi, a peaceful place; you know one of those stereotypical villages with livestock roaming both indoors and outdoors. The entrance of the village is on a very small
narrow dusty road, so good luck trying to enter with a car. The first building to your left is a small mosque, ten steps ahead is a manual hand pump shared by everyone. The first house is occupied by my father’s youngest sister, my aunt. I have no prior knowledge of any one else in the village, nor did we meet them. We enter past the mosque and straight into my aunt’s house, few minutes after exchanging formalities it’s time for the night prayer. We all enter the small mosque and pray. Soon after, a common phenomenon took place that is quite normal in Pakistan. The phenomenon is called “load shedding,” or the random cancellation of electricity at any time. Every day in Pakistan we would experience eight hours of electricity, and sixteen hours of no electricity. So there we were in my aunt’s house under the beautifully painted starry sky and a few candles by our sides waiting for the light to come back. While talking with my cousins I noticed the insects in Ravi were diverse and plentiful. Once the lights came back on, swarms of bugs about the size of my finger hovered about near the dull lamps, and light bulbs. But anyways the fear of the “creepy crawlers” was diminished by laughter and dialogue, and by eleven o’clock we all fell asleep. Little did I know, I would wake up shocked.

The next day my parents were getting ready to go to another relative about four hours away. My family and cousins woke up and were indulging in their daily morning rituals. I however was asleep on the left side of my face until all my cousins tapped me on the shoulder and my mom threatened to drag me out of the bed if I didn’t wake up. I finally woke up and went straight to the bathroom to wash my face. As I turned on the faucet and looked at the mirror, I was horrified. I saw the left side of my face dried with blood most of it concentrated near my left ear. While I stood there staring at the mirror frozen wondering what damage has been done? I snapped out of it by my mother screaming. As I suspected, it was because the blood from my ear was imprinted on the pillow my head was on. Needless to say, we said our goodbyes as swiftly as possible leaving the village of Ravi with relatives and aunt praying, hoping the best for me, and headed straight to the doctor in the city.

We enter the city as fast as we can and park the car in front of a small medical clinic. The clinic was not extravagantly built, nor was it too shabby. Gray marble tiles dominated the floor, with yellow tape hinting towards three rooms. Along with my mother, I entered the first room which was plain and dull with little medical equipment on the wall. I sat on the bed, and was soon accompanied by an assistant. The assistant checked my ear and stated that there is no reason to worry that the
eardrum is not damaged, but the blood was from an insect bite near my eardrum, and that the only thing the doctor had to do was clean my ear with a metal swab-like apparatus to clean the blood from my ear. After being examined, the assistant accompanied us to the first room where there were probably twenty five patients already in front of me and told the doctor what was needed to be done.

Here we were in the medical room; a big room holding two patient beds, twenty five chairs constituting the waiting room, and one huge desk with a luxurious swivel chair. As soon as I entered the room, the doctor stared right at me and ignored the little boy whom he was examining. The boy was suffering from a very deadly waterborne disease known as dysentery, which kills thousands of children every year in Pakistan. As I lay there being treated, I couldn't help wondering why that child was ignored mid-treatment. I didn't understand: Why was I treated first? I thankfully don't have a dangerous disease; I'm basically here to clean my ear, while majority of children were there to get treatment for dysentery. What was the difference between me and them? The twenty five chairs were filled with scared mothers, like mine, holding their sick weak children. As we exited the clinic and went on our way, I had four hours to think about what happened in that clinic.

Then I realized a bitter truth; they were poor and I was not. The apparent distinctions in physical appearance was enough for any man to notice the difference of classes between me and them; I wore clean clothes accompanied by a woman (my mom) who had precious gemstones on her fingers, while majority of my counterparts were in tattered clothes with patches sewn on their noticeably dirty clothes.

I questioned my mother later that night and told her of my observation. I began stating “Did you know that those people were cheated, and treated unfairly? That doctor should be punished” She said “Yes, he should, but he won't.” I was angry and shocked at the remark and said “It's not fair you always tell me and Iqra (my sister) to be fair and kind to other people. Why can he treat them unfairly?” To this day, I remember what my mom told me, she said “That's the way life works sadly, I guess it's that everywhere around the world we as humans are instructed to be fair morally and in any other aspect of life, and yet society at large either ignores it collectively or attacks individuals who are just.”

The injustice I have felt, although not directed towards me, was that I was told to be just and fair at a relatively young age. If I comply with the rules, I get good treatment, if not, then I experience punishment. This
was the “Rule” but what this personal event did was show me that this golden rule is like most things in the world subject to change by the power of money. Because I was considered rich I was given better, quicker treatment by the doctor, at someone else’s expense. This incident affected me because I felt I played a crucial part in the injustice of a society that discriminates based on money and wealth.

Let us observe another clearer example one found in the United States. The most common example of parallel injustice is racism. Some minorities of color are told to respect the authority of white people, yet that same respect is not given to the minorities. And ironically, when minorities deviate from the norm, society punishes them and publicizes the acts as bad and yet when it is the other way around society often rewards those white individuals by ignoring aggressive hostile behaviors.

Another example is China. China as we know is in a state of industrial expansion, but what we do not know is that the lands that are holding these new industrial machinery, were lands of poor families. These families were forced to relocate and work on reconstructing their homes to make way for new machinery to make a “better China”. This injustice continues because those families are again forced to buy housing that is far beyond their financial reach. So they are forced to sacrifice for a better “tomorrow” while their “today” and “tomorrow” are hopelessly grim.

Basically in every society there is a moment in which one specific attribute is required of you while you are witnessing or experiencing the opposite treatment. These “parallel injustices” are a common plague to good collective moral values. Some examples of these injustices are when good moral ideology is tainted by the dark colors of money, racism, captivity, and so on. My personal experience was when I saw what monetary value can do to society’s conception. On an individual level, I am told to be fair, while people are being treated poorly by society because of financial status. On the state level, the comfort of some dominant financial individuals is greater than the welfare of inferior financial individuals.

What does this tell us about the society in which we live, a society where we are tailored and groomed at a young age to show off an outfit which is deliberately altered from our physique. A society that expects great moral values yet inadvertently alters those same values. But then again individuals are what constitute a society, so the problem lies within us. Pinning all the problems on society and treating it as an entity separate from will get us nowhere. What I suggest and hope is that people
understand that in order to purge this “disease” each individual must hold up their end of the bargain and promote morality while controlling their unjust impulses. Only by changing who we are personally can we affect who we are as a society.
War In the Village
by ZURNAIN RAZZAQ

There is a place in this world that is in a world of its own. It’s invisible on the map and unknown to all the city folks. It’s a remote village located in the southeast region of Pakistan called Bhouch (pronounced Booch). Bhouch was my childhood home and every time I think about it, chills of nostalgia begin to fill the air. Instant flashes of my most cherished memories start circulating in my mind. The village is very small in area but rich in open fields, lakes, farms, broken roads, and mud houses. The total population amounts to about three hundred. The people are generally very close knit and amiable, with a few exceptions. The people are separated and distinguished by a caste system. The people who consider themselves to be the wealthiest (in terms of the amount of land they own) are at the top and the poor constitute the lower classes. Inevitably, trivial arguments disperse once in a while over land between two members of the upper class. These fights are usually resolved without any physical violence or property damage. however, on one evening, a dispute broke out between two members of the upper class (they are called Jatts), and it didn’t end as expected. The argument wasn’t resolved and when the sun set and nightfall approached, a chaotic scene erupted and the outcries of the women (usually done during the death of a village member) signaled that the spirit of death had awoken.

This war separated many of us, and at the same time, it brought many of us together like never before. We were all left with a permanent scar which would remind us of this tragedy for years to come. I remember that long night as if it were yesterday, and I don’t want to forget it. I want to remember it forever, because I extracted a very important lesson from it. I have realized that most of the war and hatred that exists in this world is initiated through a small, nonsensical dispute.
which has infinite solutions, and war isn’t one of them.

It started out as a casual evening. The sun was setting and the sky was a clear blue. The air had finally cooled down after an entire afternoon of heat like that of a sauna. Every time I stepped on the floor in the afternoon, I felt as if my feet were melting into the ground. Everyone was returning from the fields after a long day of work. Most of the villagers returned with all their fruits and vegetables on donkeys. I remember the donkeys never looked up and the albatross they carried made it apparent how heavy the loads were. The children were playing in the open land. I remember I was in the garden in the back of my house with my sister. We had dug holes in the mud and were playing a game with marbles. They point of the game was to get the marbles into the hole in one shot (very similar to billiards). My sister and I never got along, except when it was game time. We went about with our game until suddenly we heard loud outcries from women nearby. Initially, we thought that someone must have died, but this time it was very different. We stepped outside and saw women scattered around a dead child. The child was killed by one of the Jatts who had started the dispute. My father came rushing into the house with my uncles and older cousins. He pulled my sister and me inside and gathered everyone in the center room, away from the windows. They took out the guns from the closets and began gearing for battle. They demanded the women in the house to begin preparing for casualties. My mother, grandmother, aunts and older cousins began preparing warm milk, gathering all the blankets, and ice for the wounded who would need urgent assistance. My mother and grandmother gathered all the children in one room and told us to remain quiet. I didn’t know what was going on at the time and didn’t really apprehend the situation. I was six years old and my sister was seven. My two brothers and cousins all sat quietly in one room without making a sound or picking a fight with one another. Shortly after one of my uncles left, he came back. He had been shot in the chest and my cousins were carrying him. He was in critical condition and my mother and grandmother tended to him, but they knew that his chances of surviving were slim. Suddenly, I heard a glass break and we all started to huddle closer together. Almost all our windows had been shattered from distant gunshots. As I sat, all I heard were loud cries, gunshots one after the other, and the desperate cries for life from my uncle.
All I knew was that my father, uncles and cousins were fighting a fight that had no meaning. They were fighting on behalf of the wealthy in return for some payment and valor. I knew that my father was brave and he never sat and watched while others bled to death. However, I don’t think he understood the reason behind the battle (if there was any justifiable reason to begin with), but he just knew that as a man in the village, he had to fight. No one in my family understood the war, but we knew that it was happening and there was no escaping it. Lives were being taken one by one and no one knew why. I didn’t think my father was brave because I knew that heroes almost never made it back alive. We all began praying to God in hope that all our family members fighting the war would come back alive. We knew that they wouldn’t escape the gunshots, but we were hoping that they would dodge one to the heart. At around two in the morning, the gunshots had stopped, but the cries were growing stronger. We waited inside and after an hour after the gunshots had stopped, we knew that the war was over. However, the cries grew louder, and we knew that this meant that a large number of men and boys had died. At around four, my father returned with a gunshot wound on his shoulder and blood leaking form his head, dripping down his hairline. He was shot on the shoulder and struck by a stone on his head. He was in need of urgent care, one that my mother and grandmother were unable to provide. He, along with other wounded men, was taken to a local hospital about fifteen miles away. I don’t think anyone slept that night and none of us wanted to. This night challenged all of us in many ways we had never thought possible. It was an out of the blue phenomenon that didn’t have a calling behind it. It just happened, but it changed the village forever.

The next morning, when we stepped out, the once silky brown sand had turned a rustic orange, and we knew that too much blood had been spilled the night before. Women were still mourning in their homes over the death of their loved ones. We all had a lot of cleaning up to do. This meant we all had to come together as a community and pick up all the shattered glass and all the lost souls who were struck with lightning from this tragedy. This war was the foundation for a time of everlasting peace. We all had lost a part of ourselves, because at the end of the day, we were all one community. Class systems had temporarily vanished and we didn’t care about who was rich and who was poor. All we were certain of was that this war was a turning point and an eye
opener. It was reality that had to be faced and it closed many holes that would have sunk deeper. This experience taught me and the whole village that the war was empty, without meaning. It was a lesson for everyone that we didn't need to go to an all out war for a problem that wasn't worth a single life.

The memory of the war remains fresh in my mind to this day. I don't want to forget it because it has shown me how to approach my own problems with others. I have learned that violence is almost never the solution for the problem even though many times, we forget this fact. Violence attributes long-term animosity and it deteriorates a chance of building a relationship. I think we lack communication and once we see that the solution is not very near, we choose war as the ultimate and only choice available. However, this is not true. For example, the large-scale world wars had petty causes and the justifications were absurd. War, even after its end, holds anger among those who have lost friends and families. Witnesses and victims of war are left with life-long imprints and as they embark upon new paths, they keep their experiences and memories in mind. The war of my childhood is a dark yet hopeful memory that helps me confront situations in different ways. The experience was essential to me and even though at times I am haunted my it, it also serves as a reminder of what happened and what can possibly be avoided in the future.
How do I know life is several games?
As an immigrant, it’s what I do.
Sometimes I play three, four, five games,
But at minimum I play two.

Like basketball to football
Each culture has its own rules.
Divisions from ground to wall
Being in between can be cruel.

To my family I’m an American —
I’ve lived here, grown here,
Learned American ways,
Gone to American school.
But to Americans I’m not.
Why?
Because I play by Guyanese rules.

Like punishment here,
is losing your phone.
Nothing, compared to the ideas of “discipline”
that my parents hold.
And certain things
Culturally you just don’t do:
i.e., curry isn’t for noodles —
It’s only for stew.

A purple card, not like the red cards or the blues —
A mixture of the colors and symbols
Often confused about what to do.

The kid who didn’t get picked
Sitting, watching, hearing the game.
Confusion, frustration and anguish fill up
Because either way, even if I get in
I’d just be a substitute “I,” it wouldn’t be the same.

Part of a team,
But not part of a team.
On the team,
But not on the team.

Don’t get me wrong though
There are times that are lots of fun —
All the places and food I know
Make me glad to play (for) more than one.

*Sizzling!* From the fire at Christmas
Lasagna in the oven, molasses open jar
Black cake and pepper pot, dishes from Guyana
Hee, hee—I doubt you know what they are.

The best, bold, beautiful flavor
It comes from them together
The mixture and mingling and medley
that’s the best,
No it’s better!

It’s the greatest when the cultures come together,
When things run smoothly, getting along.
It’s great until the timer runs out.
It’s great because at least for a moment
I feel like I belong.

Life on the bench —
Hoping to play.
Life on the bench —
Watching the game.

And when it ends
To each his own And in the end
Both sides retreat to what they’ve known
And in the end
Everyone goes back
to their homes
And in the end
Who’s left outside
In the middle
of the street
With a baseball
and a soccer ball

at a
different
foot each So
far that’s
me.
THREE

The Strongest Bonds
I sat in frustration as yells echoed throughout the hospital halls.

“How could you!”?
“‘We’re family!”

Curses bounced off the walls with every breath they took. I understood it; the stem of their anger, an aching fear of impending loss, and a feeling of betrayal because they had found out too late. But this wasn’t the time, or the place, to let their pain bubble into idiotic rage, stampeding through a hospital and threatening every family member they came across. Their stir seemed to arouse life in the cold and quiet hospital, their steaming anger sharply cutting through the still, dreary air. To be honest, I have no idea how you’re supposed to behave while waiting to see if a family member will recover, but this wasn’t it. Hatred wasn’t another emotion that needed to surface that day, not while my uncle was lying in a bed and hooked up to a machine in the very room next door.

It was as if I were a child burrowing his head into his pillow and pulling the blanket over his face to block out his parents arguing outside his door, trying to escape to a whimsical world of peace and positivity. In this childlike regression, I seemed to have crawled away and found myself falling down an *Alice in Wonderland* like rabbit hole filled with memories. This spiral caused me to collide with many thoughts of the past: remembering his coarse laugh and his memorable smile that could be wiped off in a second. No, literally, he had fake teeth. I don’t remember conversations, but I do remember objects, objects that flew around me as I descended further into the rabbit hole.

I was shortly jolted back into reality as voices were raised. It was his sister, then her husband rearing around the corner shortly after, and their son right on their heels. Their positioning was so intriguing to me. She stood first, yelling madly. Her spit flew out of her mouth and I could practically
taste her musky perfume from down the hall. She was the ring leader, the leader of this riot. The husband was backup, his chest puffed out a little too much for it to be natural. He was trying too hard, like a large bodyguard trying to appear tougher than he was. Directly behind him stood his son, the shadow. It seemed he mimicked his father's every move. He was equally as angry, but with a quieter voice. I had to struggle and lean in closer to hear him utter: “That isn’t right, that isn’t fair.” He kept saying “liars,” but in somewhat a whisper, like he was telling himself a secret he was to remember later in the night. They put on a big show, revving up the staff who now bustled in with concern and attempted to plead for their departure. They left.

Within the week that my uncle was hospitalized, I carried on within a daze, still cascading down into a seemingly endless pit. Images flew into my head, bringing recollection of the days we had spent together. I remembered the toys, especially the rollercoaster maze that I had become obsessed with, the book he always let me read (a *Flintstones* rendition of classic fairytales.) To be honest, I partially blame him for my current addiction to Oreos—he was always sneaking me some before dinner was ready. Sounds rang throughout my ears: his yelling at the television as the Giants played and those thick slippers he wore smacking the floor because of his heavy walk. I kept falling.

It seemed I was falling into pictures as I continued tumbling, pictures that held certain memories—random, scattered, and in no particular order: his becoming my godfather, birthday parties where he laughed, cracked jokes, and cracked open beers; his sleeping on the roof on the night of a blackout, my anger with my aunt because she wouldn’t let me go up there too. I fell into the pictures, tearing them, ripping them in half as if they were precariously placed for me to dive into.

Yet still, I panicked, fearful I didn’t remember enough and worried that if he died, my memories would be buried beneath the dirt with him. He deserved to be fully remembered. That is the weird thing about memories, there are either too many or never enough—and whichever it is, you’d prefer to have it the other way. This was one of those times when there are never enough in relation to all the moments you have shared together and as I desperately yearned to remember them, hysterically attempting to claw at them, they vanished. And so, I scrambled and reached out, eager to grab at these moments I needed so badly; trying my hardest to have a firm grasp of every bit of remembrance I possibly could—hoping to harbor and cling tightly to every detail,
every interaction, and every flashback. I continued my hazy drop down the hole, scraping and bruising myself until I had finally fallen face first to the very bottom.

Tito Cruz: one of the most kind-hearted men you would ever be blessed to meet, and easily one of the only male role models I’ve actually respected. He passed on March 16, 2011. It’s a crappy thing, honestly, to be stuck in the bottom of a darkened mine, to burn through the memories you had and sit there wondering why you can’t reminisce about anything else. Walls start to cave in as reality settles and you begin fearing death and questioning life. But at the bottom of that rabbit hole, you’re given the opportunity to look up at the light above: a light to guide you; a harbinger of hope; a symbol of the ones dearest to you that you’ve lost. And it’s comforting to believe that light is my uncle.
Drunk Christmases
by SHANNA DeCRESCEMNZO

I remember sweaters, wrinkles, white hair, cologne, egg nog, and drunken Christmases. Drunken Christmases were always my favorite; it’s when Pop-Pop got a little extra crazy. Every year he’d make his famous egg nog, sweet and yummy as can be, but of course with that extra kick to get the party going. With the drinks going around and the delicious, cheesy lasagna NaNa always made, you always knew it would be a great time. It was Christmas, the family was together once again, there was delicious food and of course a drunk grandpa.

My mom, dad, two brothers, and little old me would load up into my mom’s tiny Honda civic and drive off to Brooklyn for the day. There we head off to my aunt’s house; she lives in a wealthy neighborhood which meant we got to see all the extensive Christmas decorations, a favorite thing Pop-Pop always loved to see. Once we got to my aunt’s house and exchanged all of our hello’s and hugs, we would head upstairs to the Christmas tree, always decorated with the most elegant decorations. My brothers, cousins, NaNa, Pop-Pop, and I would sit down at the couch while the others got to cooking. NaNa’s lasagna would be put into the oven to stay warm and the mouthwatering scent would spread throughout the entire house.

Back on the couch, since NaNa and I are the only ladies, the conversation usually switched over to sports. This is when I tend to eat all the savory appetizers that were set out for us. I usually start to doze off while still listening to my family talk, with Pop-Pop being especially loud.

The loudness continues throughout the night; I mean we are a family of Italians, what else would you expect? But, when you think of Italian grandfathers, you don’t really see Pop-Pop. He was pale, with hair white as snow. He was frail, but he was a fighter. He was a smoker throughout his whole life, which led to his developing lung cancer. From what I know, since this had all happened when I was very young, he had to
have one of his lungs removed. This meant constantly lugging around a clunky oxygen tank, but that didn’t stop that stubborn, old Italian. Pop-Pop kept on smoking his cigarettes against all of our wishes. You’d even see NaNa whacking him with a rolled up newspaper whenever he’d reach for a cigarette out of his pocket. We continued to love that crazy man, so when we learned that he had developed pneumonia the whole family rushed to his side. Everyone except for me.

I spent the Christmas of 2010 cooped up in a chilling, stale hospital waiting room. You’re probably thinking “the hospital waiting room?” well yes, you’re right. I couldn’t go into his room. I caught a glimpse of him lying on the bed attached to what it seemed like a hundred tubes and I just couldn’t bare it any longer. So, every time we would visit I sat in that horrifying waiting room with the biggest lump in my throat just waiting to leave. I stared blankly at the elevators opening and closing while family would come and tell me that Pop-Pop was asking for me, but I just couldn’t.

We all knew that Pop-Pop’s life was coming to an end. All I could think about was how everything was about to change. Even my older brother Justin agreed, “Christmas won’t ever be the same without Pop-Pop getting drunk and ranting about politics.” That’s what I loved most about Pop-Pop, his rants. He’d go on and on about politics, saying everyone was stupid, except for him of course. Then he’d move on to his favorite topic, NaNa’s cooking. He always told NaNa that her cooking was “adequate” and that she should try again, but really meaning that it was so delicious and he wanted more and more.

Last Christmas Pop-Pop wasn’t there to tell NaNa that her lasagna was adequate. He wasn’t there to get drunk and rant. He wasn’t there to argue over politics. He wasn’t there with his famous egg nog. He wasn’t there. And he won’t be there for this Christmas, or the next Christmas, or the one after that.

On the day of his funeral, there was a huge snow storm. We were leaving the church just as it started; it was breathtaking. Tiny little snowflakes gracefully fell down from the light blue sky, where they daintily landed onto the stone steps. It continued to snow as we traveled to the Greenwood cemetery, where Pop-Pop would soon be laid to rest. Once we arrived the snowflakes grew heavier, almost as if there were mini snowballs falling from the sky. It was beautiful and I know Pop-Pop would have loved it.

I could barely see through all the snowflakes as they fell all around me and onto Pop-Pop’s coffin, but I didn’t need to see at that moment. I had to just think, think
of all the heartfelt memories I had with Pop-Pop, think of all the wondrous holidays we spent together, including those crazy drunken Christmases. I never got to say goodbye to Pop-Pop in person, but there in that snowstorm I did. I threw a rose into his grave and watched the layers of snow grow higher and higher. I was finally saying goodbye to that marvelous man.
WE ALL HAVE OBJECTS THAT REMIND US of a specific thing. Ranging from memories to people, these items mean a great deal to many. However, what happens when these materials are lost? That could result in heartbreak and even arguments, such as with my special object, my father’s chain cross.

Born in Puerto Rico, my father, Anthony, had been given a gift when he was younger: a gold chain cross. This cross was unlike many, as it had a “triple cross,” representing the cross Jesus died on, and the two prisoners he died next to. It shined as bright as the sun! In the following years, my father held on to the cross, even when he joined the United States Navy in the 1960s during the Vietnam War. In 1967, the USS Forrestal experienced rocket launch failure, resulting in the ship blowing up. Over 130 men lost their lives and hundreds were injured. My father survived. Ever since, he felt that God was with him on that day, especially when he wore the cross. It was more than a chain; it was a symbol of protection.

Years later, my father met my mother and they had a family. Everything seemed to be going well; however, from 2005 to 2007, my father suffered from three strokes. These strokes truly impacted his life in a negative way. He went from being a big, muscular man striving to support his family to someone who needed the support. I would visit my father with my mother daily in the hospital, and when the nurse entered the room one day, she said that my father had to take off the cross so that they could do a procedure. My mother and I took the cross home and placed it in a secure place, the locked box with other important items contained in it. Returning to the hospital the next day, we found out that my dad was not doing well. We gave him the cross back and stayed with him until late that night. In the early hours of the morning, around 1:00 AM, we received the heartbreaking phone call: “Mrs. Feliciano,
your husband has passed away.”

We traveled to the hospital within minutes of the call. Lying on the hospital bed, my father looked so peaceful. My mother and I were told to take the possessions he had on him, including the cross. Returning home, we placed the objects in the locked box and prepared for the even more painful days ahead. My mother and I discussed if we should leave the cross with my father or if I should keep it. Remembering how special it was to him, I thought it would be best to bury it with him. My mom agreed. After all, it was my father’s cross.

The next morning, we started to prepare for the services. My mother held a strong face to help me cope, but I could see in her eyes that she was just as heartbroken as I was. Preparing the objects my father would be buried with, my mother asked me in an alarmed voice, “Anthony, where is the cross?”

“What do you mean ‘Where is the cross?’” I replied.

“It’s not in here!” she shouted.

I went to look in the box too. The cross was gone. We knew it couldn’t have just disappeared. We searched every section of our home. It was not there. We even called the hospital to see if it might have fallen there. They had no reports of it. The cross... was gone.

When the services were completed, our family and friends supported us through living the new life without a father and without a husband. Still saddened by this fact, my mother knew that we had to move on as well. There were still bills to pay and other things happening. While looking through the files we stored in the desk of documents, my mother noticed a shiny object in the corner of her eye. Moving the files back, she couldn’t believe what she saw.

“How did it get here?” I asked in pure shock.

“Maybe your father really wanted you to keep the cross all along,” my mom lovingly responded.

And ever since, I have carried the cross with me. My father felt God was with him when he had the cross. Now, I feel that both my father and God are with me. After all of the issues and hardships that occurred after the death of my father, the finding of that cross made my family feel not only better, but also that my father was, in some way, still with us. That cross is one of the most important and meaningful objects I
have in my possession. Its value, while still spiritual, goes beyond that into personal experience and love. As I mentioned earlier, everyone has at least one special object, but this experience allowed me to understand that everything happens for a reason.
IN A GOLDEN FRAME IN MY ROOM hangs an old black and white photo of a woman I thought I knew all my life, a woman who raised me and taught me right from wrong before she passed away. It’s the late 1990s and in the photo she’s still smiling with radiance like she had all her life, completely oblivious to the fact that she will soon leave us and move on to a carefree world.

It all started in 1917 when she was born in Ukraine, a time when the Russian Revolution had taken over and times were hard. Families suffered from famine and disease, the rich turned poor, and the government had control over everything and left people to fight on their own. This revolution lasted for over twenty years, and she was forced from a very young age to fend for herself.

Growing up, she didn’t have much but what she did have she made the best of. Her favorite possession was a pocket watch, given to her by her grandfather who passed away when she was born. Her parents were both unemployed and struggling to keep food on the table for survival due to the economic crisis that was a result of the revolution. In the mid-1930s, she married and began her life with her husband. It was bad enough that Ukraine was suffering from a massive aftermath of the revolution but when World War II struck, it didn’t make things any better. Twenty-six at the time, she tried with her husband to make the best of these worsening times and hoped things would get better. One day, the Army showed up at her doorstep and drafted her husband into war, leaving her behind to raise two children.

Many weeks later, she received a letter from her husband’s good friend that stated her husband had been killed in battle. She was stuck alone with two children in a broken down little shack and had to raise them all on her own. Around the time of
1942, she was forced to evacuate Ukraine because she was a Jewish female, and she move to Tajikistan. She spent three years of her life there, where she worked harsh shifts in a factory that made parachutes for the war. The working conditions were awful: long hours, minimum pay, unsanitary conditions, and poor management. Aside from working those hectic hours, she had two children to think about. After serving her three long work-filled years in a foreign country, she returned to Ukraine, hoping to resume her normal life. But when she arrived it wasn’t what she expected.

The streets were empty; dust and gravel covered the once beautiful city. The wind whistled and the once playful, busy Ukraine stood still in silence and disarray. She went in search of old friends, family, and close relatives only to find that they had all either died in the war or had been mercilessly killed. With two kids by her side, she sought out help and eventually came across a small part of the city where all the exiled Jews were hiding in order to survive. It was then and there she knew she had to start a new life and do what was best for her children to make sure they had bright and successful futures.

After years of trying to rebuild and bring back what was once lost, she did and she laid out a strong foundation for her children to flourish. However, what was once a place she called home and had been full of life and happiness was not at all the same again. At age sixty-four and widowed, she packed her belongings, including her favorite pocket watch, and took her children to America, where she knew her children would thrive.

When she arrived in America she needed to start a new life. She didn’t know anybody; she was not familiar with the area or the people, customs, traditions, and practices in it. But with her perseverance, determination, and ambition she managed to start a new life and continued to live to her fullest extent.

Due to her years of experience, at age eighty, she helped my mother and my grandmother raise their children and taught them to do the best that they could. Although her life was full of hardship, she wanted nothing but the best for us. This lovely woman lived a tough life but lived it to the fullest. She passed away in 2005 but forever lives on in our hearts. When she passed, she left her great great grandson her favorite pocket watch. She stated that it has been in the family for generations and that she hoped I would continue the tradition to remind future generations of the hardships that their relatives went through just so we could have a better life today.

My story relates to that of Rebecca Skloot’s because it’s a tale of a person I didn’t
know much about and how her story helped others in the process. In the book Henrietta Lacks's cells contributed to vast improvements in medicine and the scientific world. In my essay, my great-great-grandmother’s ambitions contributed to my having a better future. This truly shows that no matter the case, someone in the past has somehow contributed to the well being of others, from medicine, to life and every little thing in between.

Finally, there aren’t a lot of people like my great-great-grandmother in the world, and people always take for granted what is given to them. Even if it’s the tiniest thing that has no importance to a person, my story shows that life isn’t easy, but it is manageable. You can’t go through life expecting to have things handed to you. When times are hard it’s not something you hide from. It is what you make of it. This story is proof of that. Lastly, just as Henrietta’s daughter gave Rebecca Skloot information about her mother and how she contributed to the advancements of medicine, I stated in this essay how a person I have known all my life and didn’t even think was capable of such extraordinary things, proved me wrong and gave me a life lesson for the ages.
YOU NEVER KNOW HOW THINGS ARE GOING to turn out. You make these plans, plans for your life. They're like these grandiose edifices of the imagination that you construct out of faith and ignorance. Out of sheer will. You sit there and you daydream—putting yourself in the center of these grand schemes you're planning, these epic films that you are the center and star of. You know how they're gonna turn out because you're planning it that way. You have a plan, you're inching towards it, day by day, minute by minute. Initiative by initiative. You've seen the ending but you can't even remember the beginning.

Things don't always work out the way you think they will. They just don't.

You think that the moments you're going to remember the most are the most profound ones. The ones meant for Hallmark cards and sentimental songs. Like holding a baby in your arms for the very first time and looking down at it looking back at you, and the look on its face isn't one of recognition, but wonderment. They're looking at you wondering who and what you are, and where did you come from, and why are they here, and what is this place that they've come to inhabit. That bewilderment is going to etch itself on you forever, you think. And you will remember it, but they won't.

You never remember the beginning.

You think it's going to be your first kiss, or the first time you fell in love. Or maybe you're not cut from that cloth. What you think you're going to remember really is the first time you felt in fear for your life. Like the first time you really get behind a machine. Sit on the thing and twist the throttle as far back as it can go. Feel the ping as your foot shivs up a gear and the tarmac rolls beneath the wheel faster and faster. Do it again and realize that you're sitting on top of little more than steel tubing and rubber treads. Going 145 MPH
down a long black highway. Right on the edge of things going completely out of control, utterly out of hand, and that the tires are starting to wobble...

Chances are good that it won't be any of those things.

The things you're going to remember are random and meaningless. Utterly prosaic occurrences that shouldn't even raise a bump on the graph of your lifetime. But they will for a bunch of reasons that you can't even imagine. They just will. And that is how kicking it with Mikey and the Evil Dead will be one of the most important memories burnt into my head when I am old and nearing the end of my life.

Me and Mike were friends because we went to the same school and liked the same things—some of which included watching horror movies. Acquiring beater cars you could get for cheap and drill holes in. Having fun and thinking way too much about everything. These are things that matter when you're very young.

Mikey was a special kid. Special not in the short bus way, but special. He got bounced from school to school out in the suburbs. Too smart and too much of an introvert to ever fit in anywhere. His parents got him tested. Pretty close to genius, the results showed, but also in need of some attention. They prescribed him a bunch of meds, and he took them religiously. Or so he said. I had no reason not to believe him, but some of the things he did and the concepts in his head made an impression on me.

He got into reading Camus for a while there, Mike did. One night he suggested that we go to a strip club and interview all the dancers about their feelings on existentialism. I could have cared less about depressed French writers and their personal philosophies, but this sounded like a great idea to me. We hopped in his 1980's FBI-agent K-car and did weak front-wheel drive burnouts en route to the nearest titty joint that wouldn't card. We then proceeded to confuse, annoy or amuse everyone there for at least a few hours.

Now I can't remember how it happened but one afternoon many months later I ran into Mike at a 7-11. Standing between the Slurpee machines and the racked thermoses of burnt coffee in his Deicide t-shirt and shock of black hair, with cops and commuters filing in and out of the glass doors at a ceaseless clip, he formulated a plan to smoke enough haze to kill Godzilla and watch all of the Evil Dead movies in one sitting. Right then.

Mike launched into an extended exegesis explaining exactly why this had to be done. It involved seizing the moment, the futility of existence and suspect
narratological linkages between Homer's *Odyssey* and *Army of Darkness*. I doubted his sincerity until the moment he unslung his three-day backpack and unzipped it for me to see. Inside it was indeed the three DVDs and what appeared to be a sizable amount of bionic chronic.

With nothing on the horizon and nothing to lose, the idea seemed reasonable right about then. Why not?

It was on.

We settled down on the couch armed with convenience store supplies and began. People came and went during the six hour screening that followed. My girlfriend stuck around for an hour, declared that *Evil Dead II* was a better film than the first one. She got high. Got a headache. Left.

Big Ant, Killa and a squad of random hoodrats poked their heads in the house. They got excited about the mindless entertainment going down. They stuck around. Got bored. Left. Linda knocked on the door politely. She went into the kitchen and made tea. Watched for a while. Laughed. Left.

Carlos ran in loud and boisterous. He made fun of the film. He made fun of us for watching the film. He was more fun than the actual film. He got a phone call and went off through the door to the left. Justin walked in, cool and quiet as always. He broke down the whole history of cheap B-movies. Was clever, left. Around this time I realized that I couldn't even remember how the first film started, or what it had to do with the second one. Never mind. Keep going.

Maggie wandered in with Anna. They laughed at the skeletons and fake blood. They loved it. We cleared couch space for them and swooned. They stayed for three hours and left.

It was as if everyone and anyone in our immediate social circle somehow decided all at once to stop in and pay respects. And at the time it seemed completely normal. It was just another average afternoon. Killing time at the end of summer with no one to answer to and nowhere to go.

On the screen, the final credits of the final film were about to roll. Mike laughed hard and recited the lines from memory; “Hail to The King, baby.” I laughed too. The thing was done. His plan had come to fruition. I was woozy and wanted to go home. I got up and ready to go.

He said he was going to transfer yet again. Study cinematography or something. I said it sounded good to me, long as he liked it. I left. Went home. Fell asleep.

Mike did indeed transfer. We lost touch, because that's the way things happen. Months passed.

What happens during those months?
What's so important that you lose contact with people? Routine. Work. Sleep. Wasting time on pipe dream projects involving beater cars you can drill holes in. Watching movies. Study. Sleep. Repeat. Life goes on uninterrupted and you get lost in the details. Average days blend into one another, become weeks. You work your plans and follow the grand plot you've constructed. You take things for granted.

One day I ran into Big Ant. He looked like he'd been electrocuted, the way he was gripping his phone. The plastic disappeared into his huge fist and seemed about to snap. He stood there, just shaking and silent.

I asked him what happened and he said this to me: “Mikey's dead. They found him in his apartment.”

He had a heart defect, some people said. Others said drugs, he OD'ed. Another person heard it was suicide; he downed a bunch of meds, took himself out. Nothing was clear. I never asked his family or the authorities what happened. I didn't really want to know and did not care at all.

The things that sick with you are not the ones that you expect. Who knew that one afternoon, one fall, with nothing to do and no one to answer to would become as important as it would? You don't think that these moments are what they are when they happen. But you'll never be that free, that unconcerned, that at ease, ever again.

And your friends, well, they won't either. You won't remember the beginnings. Hell, you might not even recognize the endings.
I remember the heart tattoo on his ring finger, his naturally rosy cheeks that turned beet red if he got angry, and the very strong odor of cigarettes that trailed everywhere he went as he swayed from hip to hip; his laugh that made me laugh because it sounded like Santa Claus; his big beer belly and massive hands that looked like he could crush an apple with just one; his scruffy, unshaven face that always kept a shadow on his pale skin. This man that I miss so very much is my grandpa Eugene.

Grandpa Eugene lived in Ukraine; I used to visit every summer. He was a very simple guy; he followed a daily routine he created for himself out of habit. Every morning he would get up and go to the chess tables underneath the big willow trees whose long branches created almost a tent, where he would sit and play for hours with his friends. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that if you wanted to play chess, you would never be able to play there because it was always occupied. He came home at dinner time to eat and went out again until night time. When he came back, the scent of strong booze radiated off him as he walked tipsy to his room. I recall his favorite meal, because he made it every time my aunts were too lazy to make dinner. Buckwheat. That was it, no gravy, no sauce just plain old dry buckwheat he made every time. I watched the hot steam that came off his plate as he ate it in such joy. I never ate it; nobody did except him.

I remember the day when he asked me if I would like to go to the store with him. I immediately ran to put on my shoes because this never happened. As we walked down the broken, cracked pavement that was common throughout the streets of Ukraine, I observed how very different life was here from back in Brooklyn. Every few streets you had old ladies that sat on stools with a bunch of newspapers selling sunflower seeds, and my grandpa always
bought me some. The sunflower seeds were put in cone shaped structures that were created from the newspaper. Every neighborhood had a little park with monkey bars in the center for the kids to play, an aroma of sweet fruits that filled your nostrils as you walked by the apple and cherry trees that were planted along the sidewalks, cars in the roads that looked like miniature beetles that filled the air with a very keen smell of gas. Those summers were so very different than the last summer I saw him.

The day my grandma met my grandpa, she was only 16, their encounter completely arbitrary. My grandma told me “my sister begged me to go out with her to meet some guy friend so I agreed, and he ended up bringing one of his friends from the army, this tall dark haired handsome man, in a green army uniform that I fell for the moment I saw him. We fell in love instantly. He would pick me up from work and he would take me out to dinner. We would be out all the time together except the time I had work. I remember when he had to leave for the army and I left my sister and ran away with him. Eventually I had to come back before my mom made me do household chores for the rest of my life. We ended up marrying each other and moved into a big apartment together that you visit now when we go to Ukraine. We had five lovely kids together that resulted in your existence.”

Packing my bags for Ukraine, I knew this summer would be way different from the rest, I found out my grandpa had had a stroke and had become completely immobile. He couldn't walk, couldn't talk, and was pretty much like a vegetable. I didn't know what to expect. When I arrived and saw my grandpa lying in his bed, my heart stopped and my face all flushed hot. He looked nothing like himself; he was thin and fragile, unable to communicate, only grunts and moans that made my heart jump out of my chest. He had a slight but visible smile and a tear in his eye as he struggled to extend his arm forward. The harsh memory of his being carried to the bathroom by my aunts and uncle because he couldn't do it himself, the times I stood motionless outside the bathroom, my palms all sweaty and shaking as my aunt had to bathe him just like a little baby. Parts of his skin were covered in purplish brushes from not being able to move.

That summer I would wake up and pass by his door, and barely stopped by to say hello. It was too hard to face seeing my grandpa go through this. When I left, I remember putting up a fight with my tears. I hugged him with a smile just so he wouldn't worry and walked out of his room as the waterworks began because I knew that would possibly be the last time I got to see him. I
sniffled and sobbed, wiping my face with the
drenched sleeve of my right arm for hours on
my way home, but even my tears couldn't
save him—nothing could. He stayed like that
for four years, until that day after school, the
dreadful call I never wanted to receive
eventually came and became the first time I
ever heard that one of my family members
had just passed away. My brain was unable to
process the information right away. I heard
the sobs on the other end of the phone, my
grandmother's weak voice and slurred speech
that had me frozen still, unable to speak.

To this day I regret the times I didn't
stop by to say hello or goodnight. I wish I
had eaten his dry buckwheat dinner
because I know it would have made him
happy. It makes me upset that I didn't
spend more time with him before he
passed, to hear his funny laugh again, but I
know now that he's in a better place
watching us from above and that he is still
able to watch my family grow even though
his presence is no longer evident.
WE ALL KNOW THAT MOBILE PHONE technology is growing at an incredible rate. Almost everyone, from teenager to senior citizen, owns a cell phone. When you walk down the street or ride on the train, you can hear many kinds of ringtones. These diverse ringtones represent the personality and the characteristics of their owners. Even though I do not have a ringtone, it still depicts me. For me, my phone is not just a communication tool; it’s a notebook that records my life and represents me. Before I go to bed, I write a daily note; this has become my everyday routine.

I use a white iPhone 4S in a navy blue wallet flip-cover case with my metro card and college identification card in it. It’s not a year old yet, but my phone and I have been through a lot. I had around 400 notes in my phone and the first note I wrote was on Oct 7, 2011. It was a typical Friday; my usual routine was to go to the hospital right after school. As I walked into the room, all I heard was a loud breathing noise. The man who was lying in the hospital bed with an oxygen mask on his face was my uncle, Andy Liu. He had influenced my life in so many ways. Due to my father’s absence from my childhood, he was the father figure and my role model. Through his influence, I became more passionate and outgoing, rather than the timid child I once was. I remember I always made fun of him about the hospital being his second home because he was a sickly man. However, looking at his pale face and his scrawny arms, I suddenly realized that this time was different.

This was the first time in my life that I sensed death close to me. That Friday, I was sitting next to my uncle’s bed and made a long distance call to Hong Kong to reach his son using my new phone. My uncle was so excited. After the conversation, he carefully closed the case cover with his rough hands and touched it in the way he had done to my hand in the past. He passed me back the phone with his scrawny arm and said...
“Thank you” with his signature smile. I had a feeling it would be the last time.

I couldn’t fall asleep that night; I was recalling the old days I had with Uncle Liu and what he had taught me. So I touched the notepad icon on my phone and started to write a note for him. I was planning to read it to him next week, but on the next day he passed away after having battled lung cancer for six long years. His death deeply saddened me and I regretted never having told him I love him. But at the same time, I am glad that he delighted in what I did for him before he left.

Today, in the twenty-first century, people seem to save more phone numbers in their phone than ever before—perhaps some people have dozens and others have hundreds. I am not an exception; I have saved more than eighty numbers. It’s so dramatic that my phone barely rings; it is just for receiving text messages. Only a few people will actually give me a call. It sounds pathetic that when I am in a bad mood and try to express my feelings to someone, I search from the top to the bottom of my contact list, but I cannot find a friend that I can talk to.

I love being alone, especially on a quiet night. My mind is relaxed and I can enjoy the quietness after a stressful day, think about the past and plan the next day. With my phone next to me, I can spot the stars using the astronomy guide application, read different books and play music to calm my soul. Sometimes I want to write some ideas, but I am too lazy to take out my notebook and turn on the light. So I take out my phone, lie on the bed, gently press the screen, and edit some of the thoughts I saved in my phone. My phone and I have been through so many lonely peaceful nights, my mind wandering on the monitor. It records the process of my growth, the maturity of my mind, my thoughts of life and my imaginative ideas during sleepless nights.

I have gotten used to using my phone to write everything. Perhaps people worry about losing their phones, and that all their friends’ contacts will disappear. But I am afraid of losing those saved drafts. I cherish my thought in words. It’s not just letters, it’s words from my soul and memories. I care about those notes—they are my happiness and they have filled up my loneliness and emptiness. Technology is improving, but our relationships are getting worse. We seem to have a large friend zone externally, but who are our friends? Who can have a heart-to-heart discussion with us? Maybe the only one who can have a conversation with us is Siri, an intelligent electronic personal assistant in the iPhone.
A traditional item is one that is passed along through the generations in a family. It is often cherished and has a special meaning to each member in the family who has the privilege of obtaining the item. I was able to experience owning a piece of memorabilia. It was a small bag, containing five golden lead pencils. I cherish these golden pencils because they were hand crafted about one hundred years ago by my beloved grandfather, and this is all I have left to remember him by.

When I was about three years old, my grandfather passed away. His name was Leo and he spent his entire life crafting these gold pencils. He was my mother’s father, so she would always tell me stories about him. She would tell me he was a cherished man who had always done good deeds for other people. For example, he would always offer to watch my sister and me so that my parents could have some alone time. They needed their time alone; otherwise they would get ferocious and angry so often and take it out on me.

Yesterday, I came to my mother, almost as if it was an interrogation, and I started asking her all the questions that came into my head about my grandfather. Questions such as: “Did Leo sell these pencils or made them for fun?” and “Is this real gold or just metal?” It turns out that these pencils were not made of real gold and they were actually goldplated and made of copper. Leo also never made a penny off these pencils because he was too kind-hearted to charge a person for this artifact. He actually gave pencils away to many friends and family members just so they could have them.

Unfortunately, I was too young to remember seeing or talking to him, but I do remember hearing the story, for the first time, of how he hand crafted pencils. I was seven years old when I heard my mother telling my eleven-year-old sister about these pencils. She had no reaction to the story, but I was sitting on the side in shock.
I was determined to see these pencils because I had nothing to remember my grandfather by. I never understood the value of them or why they were special until they were in my possession.

On the day of my eleventh birthday, my mother came to me and presented me with a bag of five golden pencils. The way the sunlight reflected off them from the window was astonishing. It was as if the world had stopped spinning for just one second and the sun was hitting only the pencils, nothing else. I automatically knew these were the pencils my mother was telling my sister about four years ago. When she gave them to me, she told me everything about these pencils in detail. She told me that my grandfather would sit for years, putting these pencils together piece by piece. Each pencil took about three hours to complete. My mother told me he had to form the pencil in the correct shape to keep it from dysfunction. The top of the pencil was circular, which can screw off to insert more lead. The pencil itself was three and a half inches long from top to bottom. The tip of the pencil was made to rotate to dispense lead. Turning it clockwise would dispense lead; turning it counter-clockwise would retract it. The most important part was the fact that these pencils took only 0.9mm lead, which is the thickest and most durable lead there is. If any of these features were slightly off, the pencil would be disposed of and he had to start all over.

Shortly after I had received these pencils, I ran to the store to buy a plastic container to put the pencils in. I made sure to buy one with absolutely no scratches or dirt stains so that the light could shine right through. When I came home, I put them in the container and moved them to the windowsill where the sun hits and reflects light that fills up my entire room. I sat down and stared at these golden pencils for about twenty minutes. I realized that this is all he had left us after he had passed away, and I had nothing else to remember him by. From that moment on, I came to realize that these pencils were my most prized possession. They had my grandfather’s heart in them since he had to hand craft them by himself. I couldn’t have asked for a better memento from him than these golden pencils.

It has been seven years since I received these pencils and they are currently still lying on my windowsill. Every time I clean my room, I make sure to lift up the container that has my pencils and dust all around it. After I clean around it, I put it back in the same spot where I lifted it from because that is where the sun hits most directly every day. This is all I have to remember my grandfather by, and every time I look at the pencils I can see my grandfather crafting them piece-by-piece until one is complete.
EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT WHEN I WAS a child, for as long as I can remember, my family and I would go to our neighborhood Applebee’s and have dinner. It would be my mother, father, younger brother, and I, and we’d always sit in the same fashion—my brother and I on one side, and our parents on the other. My brother and I would get the chicken finger kids’ meals with fries and color on our napkins with the cheap crayons the waitress gave to us.

My mother would always order this large fish-bowl margarita every Friday (I remember begging for sips; how could I not? It was colored so brightly!) My father wouldn’t drink in front of us—only Coke—and I never understood why. But nevertheless, my Friday nights were spent rather pleasantly. We would sit in the non-smoking section, back when those existed, and discuss our school week, our work week, and things of that nature.

Then, one year, my mother kicked my father out of the house and they got a divorce. My mother maintained her custody of my brother and me, and we remained in the same house we had always lived in. My father, in an attempt to keep a connection with his children, continued taking us to Applebee’s on Friday nights. Things weren’t quite the same, but they were still alright. We sat in the same fashion—my brother and I on one side, and on the other, my father and an empty seat.

The first night we went back to Applebee’s he didn’t order any food with us, but, instead, sat there watching us eat with his elbows on the table and his hands clasped in the air. I told him to have some of my fries, but he didn’t want any. He said he was fine just being with us. Then, halfway through the night, my father called over the waitress and ordered one of those fishbowl margaritas, with salt. I found it very strange, as my father had always refused to drink in front of us. He sat there, his eyes glazed over with exhaustion, smiling through the back of his teeth at us.
The next time we went out with our mother, we didn’t go to Applebee’s. She said she wanted to try something different this week. She did her hair really nice, put on a little black skirt, and took us to this bar and grill in Bay Ridge that none of us had ever heard of called Skinflints. It was a little old rustic place that she had been to with one of her friends before the divorce.

My mother had also refused to order any food that night, no matter how much my brother and I offered our own to her. She just sat there with her arms folded, and her eyes bouncing about the room, occasionally assuring us that this place was great, and that these new things would be better for us. But, for the first time ever, my mother decided to order a diet Coke and sat there watching us eat while sipping her beverage—which I never understood either, because she used to love those fish-bowl drinks of hers.

[My father wanted to maintain continuity in his life. He, being the man who was forced out of his house, not the man who had chosen to leave, wanted things to remain the same. The same old Applebee’s, in the same old seats, eating the same old meals, with his children—who he had assumed would too remain the same. Meanwhile, my mother, being the one to kick my father out, wanted change in her life. She wanted better and more interesting restaurants, and larger things out of life.]

Ever since this week or two of events, my mother has refused to drink when she is out with us while my father continues to do the opposite. The places my mother takes us to have gotten stranger and more interesting while my father’s drinking habits have gotten progressively worse, especially in front of his family. Until now, I have never understood why. [They drank for each other, and they drank in spite of each other.]

I guess you can’t say either of them never cared.
IN MY FAMILY, WE DON’T HAVE A BEST STORY. We are a ragtag group of misfits who get into a lot of odd adventures. We also have a habit of turning everything, even a seemingly mundane trip to the store, into a story. This gives me a lot of material to choose from whenever I write about my family, but it also makes picking just one story very difficult. My grandmother’s stories have always struck me as particularly interesting. I love all of her stories, but I think her stories from the time she spent living in Tangier, Morocco in the early 1960s are great, especially when she had William S. Burroughs over for tea.

Now, my grandmother is very happy to tell almost anyone who will listen her stories. She has been talking about writing a memoir for at least the last fifteen years. One issue, though, is that when you ask her about specific dates or sometimes places, she responds in such a way that it makes me feel like she might be some sort of KGB sleeper agent. We actually got into a bit of a disagreement when I called her to get some details for this piece; she got very cagey about my using stories she wanted to use in her memoir. My grandmother grew up in Maine, where she got away with a lot because of her ability to impress adults by telling stories. When she went off to a small liberal-arts college in Vermont, her ability to tell stories didn’t help her as much as it used to, and she ended up dropping out of school and moving to New York City. She was young and living in New York City in the early 1960s, so there were lots of adventures to be had.

My grandmother ended up dating a young photographer, and together with their Kerry blue terrier named Prometheus, they moved to Tangier in 1963. Her boyfriend had gotten a job as the North African correspondent for a photo agency. One project the photographer worked on during their time in Morocco was photographing expatriates, and one of the people he was to photograph was William S.
Burroughs. When talking about her former boyfriend, my grandmother says, “His genius was to be consistently at the wrong place at the wrong time.” He never came home the day that Burroughs came over for tea, and that was the first problem of the day.

Her boyfriend had not shown up. Prometheus was off imprisoned in an abattoir in Casablanca because of a run-in with a shady ship captain when they were traveling to Tangier. This left my grandmother alone with Burroughs, with no reason for him to be there. My grandmother did not even know how to work the stove in the apartment where she was hosting Burroughs for tea. She made the tea over coals, and after she served the tea, they sat across from each other, pointedly not looking at each other. She was sitting across from him, and thinking that this man just looks like a junkie. He looked cadaverous. She had not read any of his writing, so she couldn’t talk to him about that. She was aware of how he had accidently killed his wife, and was wondering about that as she sat across from him. My grandmother felt like the situation was so bad, it seemed like the next thing that would happen is that Burroughs would burn his mouth on the tea. It was uncomfortable, to say the least. Eventually, Burroughs just left.

My grandmother usually ends telling the story with how she has always wanted to write about it, but could never think of how to end it. When I called her, prodding her for information, I wasn’t getting anywhere finding an ending, so I asked, “Did you ever have another run-in with him?”

My grandmother exclaimed, “Oh! Yes, we did!”

It turns out a few years later, my grandmother was at a get-together at the SoHo loft of an ex-boyfriend from before her time in Tangier. There was a knock on the door, and when someone opened it, she was shocked to see that there was William S. Burroughs, with a cat that looked strikingly like my grandmother’s cat, by the scruff of the neck. My grandmother was stunned by his drastic change in appearance. According to her, Williams no longer looked like a “disreputable Ichabod Crane,” but now like an “apple-cheeked Iowa schoolteacher.” It seemed like he was almost smiling. The scene was easily explained when she found out the cat belonged to her ex-boyfriend, the one with the loft, and it was actually a descendent of my grandmother’s cat. The ex-boyfriend’s cat would run up the fire escape and into the apartment upstairs, which belonged to Burroughs. So thanks to the ex-boyfriend’s cat, my grandmother got an end to her story about William S. Burroughs.
WHERE'S DADDY?

by CHAUIYI WONG

WHAT DOES THE WORD “DAD” MEAN TO YOU? For most people, a dad is the only man in your life who you can always call for help, someone who reaches out his hand to you when you’re in trouble, the one who not only will find money to support you but be there to support you emotionally. Dads play an important role in their children’s lives. I believe that dads who stay engaged in their children’s lives make their children feel they are important and worthy of their dads’ attention. The people who grow up with their dads beside them are the luckiest people in the whole world.

What does the word “Dad” mean to me? For me, this word sounds very strange. He’s the man whom I’ve never lived with for more than a month, a man whom I would only get to see once every two years. Our family was always separated. Before I came to America, my mom, my brother and I lived in Hong Kong, and Dad lived in a town far away from home where he made money to support the family. He would only come home once a year to visit the family. Eight years ago, when Mom decided that we should move to America, I realized that I’d lost my only opportunity of seeing Dad once a year. It turned into once every two years. I think that every child deserves a dad. My biggest dream when I was a little girl until now was still hoping that one day our family would all live together and never get separated again. I hate the feeling of separation. Every time when Dad comes to visit us, he will not stay for more than a week. It’s like you’ve just have the chance to see him and talk to him but the next day he has to leave already.

I’m always the girl that pretends to be strong, the girl that doesn’t want others to see my weakest side because I know that there’s no one there to protect me: therefore, I have to be strong in order to protect myself. However, they never know that I am an emotional person that will cry over the stupidest things. I don’t
want people to find out that I’m the one who needed the love from my Dad the most, the one who always wanted to be daddy’s little girl. I feel confused. I question myself every day. What did I do wrong? Does Dad hate me that much that he doesn’t want to see me? However, I know that I shouldn’t be asking these questions because Dad is trying his best to give us a good living.

I remember that January 24, 2004, was the coldest day of the year. I was in 4th grade and sitting quietly near the window of the classroom doing my writing assignment. Suddenly one of my classmates started yelling, “It’s snowing! It’s snowing!”

Then everybody gathered around the window to watch the beautiful snowflakes falling down from the sky. As everyone was enjoying the snow, I was worried about how I would make my way home. Around five minutes later, Ms. River told the class to pack up, put on our jackets and line up in the center of the classroom so we could get home as safely as soon as possible. Every one listened to the teacher and we each put on our heavy coat, hat, scarf and gloves. At dismissal, most of the classmates had someone to come pick them up, and I was one of the few who had to walk home alone because Mom was at work and nobody had time to come pick me up. I had no choice but to walk home alone in the snow. The street was very quiet which made me feel even lonelier and more helpless. I felt like a girl with no Dad. I can still remember that day so clearly, as if it just happened yesterday.

I don’t blame my Dad for not being with me for the past 18 years of my life. I don’t blame him for not being in my graduation pictures. I don’t blame him for not being here when I needed him the most, and I don’t blame him for not giving me enough love. I hope that one day my dream can true and Dad can come live with us and we will never be separated again.
FOUR

Under the Microscope
Eternal Motives
by SARAH BENNETT

UNTIL THE NUREMBERG TRIALS IN August of 1947, there were no regulations involving human rights in medical research. In The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code, Elie Wiesel, along with other contributors, responds to the trials by writing a code that signifies a shift of society’s priorities from progressing science no matter what the sacrifice to putting the individual first. In the publication, we find this passage which was also used by Rebecca Skloot as the epigraph for her book, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks: “We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph.”

Here one can see Elie Wiesel distinguishing between viewing a person as an abstraction and as a universe. To view a person as an abstraction is to see him as only an idea, or a shell, without any concern for what lies inside. To view someone as a universe, which is what Wiesel is advocating, is to see more depth to a person. Rather than deeming a person as a reductive idea, one must see each and every person as an expansive idea, which is done by considering a person’s secrets, treasures, anguish, and triumph from a perspective that is inconceivably wide (Wiesel). This is why Wiesel compares this perspective to a universe. An infinite amount of information can be learned about a universe; the same can be said about a human being. Wiesel is making this connection between a universe and the individual to show the significance of each and every person, and to try to change the lens we see each other through.

Rebecca Skloot had a similar motive in writing The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. In attempting to change the way society views Henrietta, her cells, and her family, Skloot makes an example of what Wiesel is requesting of humanity. To accomplish this, Skloot spends twelve years
expanding her knowledge about Henrietta’s “HeLa” cells, her life, and her family. In the process, she gets to know her latest-born daughter, Deborah, who after years of struggling simply wants to “know who her mother was” and spread awareness of her (9). She does not want the phrase HeLa to mask her mother’s identity; she wants the world to know her story—trials, triumphs, and all. With this in mind, Skloot delves into Henrietta Lacks’s life as well as the lives of Deborah and her family so that she and the reader can see the aspects of Henrietta that would make her what Wiesel calls a universe. By including her own perspective, Skloot expands the reader’s concept of Henrietta Lacks even further by sharing the lengths she took to develop Henrietta from such an abstraction. Furthermore, by including Deborah’s voice as well as her own, Skloot fulfills both her own and Deborah’s motives of making the world aware of the woman behind HeLa cells and, all the while, develops Henrietta Lacks’s life into an expansive idea in a way that makes Wiesel’s passage a perfect choice for an epigraph.

Skloot begins the reader’s journey by sharing Deborah’s voice and desires, and in turn makes Henrietta more tangible for the reader before the book has even begun. In discussing the effect of her mother’s cells, Deborah says, “I really don’t know how she did all that, but I guess I’m glad she did, cause that mean she helpin lots of people. I think she would like that” (9). Deborah addresses her mother’s cells as synonymous with her mother, which allows the reader to get a glimpse of Deborah’s lack of scientific understanding. One can also see the way in which she views her mother as someone who cares about others. Thus, Skloot manages to expand Henrietta from an abstraction by giving a glimpse of who she was based on her daughter’s opinion of her, as well as giving a glimpse of the effect her cells have had on her family. Deborah’s motive of spreading awareness is tackled, Skloot has successfully begun the reader’s journey, and the abstraction of Henrietta Lacks has begun to unravel.

Once Skloot establishes more of a solid foundation of Henrietta’s story for the reader, she begins to intertwine her own story into the narrative with the purpose of elaborating on the “universe” of Henrietta through the addition of an outside perspective. One moment when this is manifested is during one of Deborah and Skloot’s road trips to Clover. In seeing Deborah struggle with new knowledge about her late older sister, she writes, “I wanted to take the picture from her so she’d stop torturing herself with it, but she wouldn’t have let me if I tried” (278). If it were not for instances like this in the book,
the reader would not be able to get to know Deborah and the rest of the family the way he or she can through Skloot’s eyes. One can observe that her perspective expands the book from a one-dimensional narrative about Henrietta into a story that allows the reader to interact with her and her family. Deborah is experiencing anguish at this moment in the book, but her triumphs later on become that much more powerful. It would have been impossible for Skloot to write about the triumph of Henrietta that Wiesel mentions without including the struggles and triumphs of her family. While Skloot’s inclusion of her own story certainly allows the reader’s view of Henrietta to be expanded, this was not necessarily required in seeing Henrietta as more than an abstraction. Had Skloot written a dry narrative with one layer, she still would have been giving Henrietta the concrete significance of a published work; Skloot simply takes her task to a new level. Nevertheless, the inclusion of herself is fully necessary to share Deborah’s story, and therefore Henrietta’s.

Skloot does indeed share Henrietta’s story, but she inherently views her as an abstraction as well because of her background in the scientific profession. It can be argued that it is necessary to consider a person an abstraction for the sake of advancement of science; anatomy regards humans as members of the same species with the same bodily structure and function. Scientifically, the only difference between men and women lies in genetic codes. Skloot demonstrates this perspective and its counterpart in the Afterword when quoting the ideas of David Korn of Harvard University: “‘Sure... letting people decide what’s going to happen with their tissues seems like the right thing to do. But consent diminishes the value of tissue’” (320). Scientists like Korn are forced to view tissue not as part of an individual’s being, but as an entirely separate entity that acts as an advancer of science. Rather than delving into her own opinion on this issue, Skloot simply demonstrates both sides because they are, in fact, integral components of the Lacks’s story. It is possible that Skloot does not develop an opinion because science and individualism can never truly come together. Since humans are viewed by science as the same, it is difficult to approach one man or woman as special, or as an individual among the rest. Scientific progression is to the benefit of all humanity, so why should one person be exempt from the requirements science delivers? All the same, one can pursue ethics to the best of one’s ability apart from science, as Skloot does with her twelve-year journey and bestselling book to show for it.
Critics have said that our society needs more writers like Rebecca Skloot, people that are willing to dedicate their lives to giving stories the justice they deserve. She truly does everything possible to fulfill Deborah’s dream of spreading awareness of her mother. Not only does Skloot share the secrets, treasures, sources of anguish and a large measure of triumph, she also gives the scientific perspective of Henrietta as simply HeLa and nothing more. This allows her to support both what Wiesel both objected against and what he fought for at the end of World War II; the abstraction of humanity will always be prevalent because without it science cannot evolve. Perhaps the true concern is that when one man comes in contact with another, and he affects his life, he can see and treat him as a concrete and physical being with the same qualities he would wish to be addressed in himself. Rebecca Skloot was intrigued by the glimpse of Henrietta Lacks’s story that she heard from a professor, and chased and learned about her until she was satisfied; her own life changed immensely as a result. Henrietta was no longer an abstraction to her, but a beautiful and heroic universe.
The nonfictional work *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, written by Rebecca Skloot, is introduced with an epigraph by Elie Wiesel: “We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph.” In order to fully understand why this particular quote was chosen by Skloot as the epigraph of her book and how it connects to the story, we must first attempt to understand what message Wiesel was trying to convey, where his ideas stemmed from, and finally why Skloot feels it relates with the story of the Lacks.

One interpretation of Wiesel’s powerful words is that every person is a one of a kind perfect entity with no other duplicates or even other versions. Every person has a unique story and something to offer that no one else can. It can also additionally be taken to mean that no single man or cult has the right to belittle this truth and that neither he nor his group is in any way greater than this particular being.

When Wiesel says that we should not ever see anyone as an “abstraction,” he is warning us to never strip a person of his identity and sort what remains as someone would inanimate objects. On the contrary, we should look at someone as we do to the endlessness of the universe: as a unique entity that holds so much to offer and contains the power to do so much that we would never, even in multiple lifetimes, be able to ever fully comprehend it.

A clear reason as to why Wiesel would feel the need to express such feelings in these words can be seen by looking into his own horrific past. Elie Wiesel’s teenage years were cruelly interrupted by his abduction from his home and placement into the Nazi death camps Buchenwald and Auschwitz. In these camps Wiesel’s own personal universe was transformed into a mere abstraction. He, along with millions of other Jews and other “deficient” cultures and races, was reduced to a mere number. According to the fascist Nazis, Wiesel and
the others were no longer unique beings but rather just meaningless numbers. So meaningless were these people that the Nazis hung a child in a public square and forced everyone to watch while that boy, whose weight was comparable to that of a baby’s and whose body could not break his neck on impact, struggled to die. So meaningless were they that the Nazis did not even hesitate to burn babies, children, and adults in front of Wiesel and others chosen to work as opposed to suffering that fiery death. This, and other terrifying occurrences, undoubtedly shaped the words and reasons why Wiesel strongly warns us to never make anyone, no matter how insignificant, an abstraction.

Why Skloot chose this epigraph as her introduction is readily apparent throughout the pages of her story. The reason is that, similar to Wiesel’s personal tragedy that took place during the Holocaust, Skloot’s story deals with the prejudice against many individuals. These individuals in Skloot’s book are human scientific test subjects, with African-Americans and the Henrietta Lacks ordeal being her prime examples.

The epigraph relates exceptionally well to the investigative story by Skloot since the story repeatedly depicts the harsh conditions people have experienced at the hands of scientists as they attempted to advance their knowledge in various areas of science, while belittling their subjects’ humanity. The story tells how African-Americans in particular have been dehumanized into specimens and guinea pigs as early as the 1930s. Several examples where scientists let the fact that their human subjects are, in fact, human escape their conscience can be seen in the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments of the 20th century, the Mississippi Appendectomies, and Henrietta Lacks, the story the book is founded upon. The syphilis experiment was extremely horrible since the scientists not only withheld information on what they were doing to their African-American test subjects, but also withheld distribution of a cure that was discovered amidst the 40 years of experimentation. In the second example, young scientists were given the opportunity to practice hysterectomies at the expense of the African-American women losing their ability to bear a child.

In the case of Henrietta Lacks, the scientists took her tumor sample, never thought of informing her family of their mother’s contribution to modern medicine, and also labeled it HeLa, further demonstrating that they of viewed their patients as an abstraction other than what they truly are—a person. It even took the death of Henrietta to make Mary, the scientist who first cultivated Henrietta’s
immortal cells, finally realize that her test subject was an authentic human who at one point in time had a working body and mind and even perhaps a loving, caring family.

In conclusion, the epigraph by Wiesel is an impeccable choice for the introduction to The Immortal life of Henrietta Lacks. In Wiesel’s past, we see the dire situations of so many millions and how they were viewed and treated like insignificant beings deserving nothing more than being burned in furnaces. In Skloot’s account of Henrietta’s story, we see the prejudiced treatment of African-American patients during the 20th century. Ultimately, both stories deal with showing the importance of the human race in its entirety all the way down to a single human being.
Henrietta Lacks’ HeLa Cells: Do the Breakthroughs Outweigh the Ethics?

by STEPHAN DiGIACOMO

Henrietta Lacks, who was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951 and died later that year, is still living in test tubes till this very day. After they declared her dead, the doctors from Johns Hopkins Hospital took a sample of Henrietta’s cancer cells and grew them outside of her body. The Lacks family did in fact give permission for a biopsy, but were never informed that the cells were being grown, sold and experimented with on a global scale. The family was left in the dark when it came to the whereabouts of their Henrietta’s cells, and their lack of knowledge caused the family distress for most of their lives. The growing of the HeLa cells was never permitted; however, permission was not mandated by law, and this raised many ethical concerns in the world of medicine. Although the way the HeLa cells were obtained may seem unethical, the medical breakthroughs resulting from them, such as the creation of vaccines, cancer treatments, and modern cell culturing techniques, show that the medical benefits of the cells justify the questionable actions of the scientists that studied them.

Without Henrietta Lacks’ immortal cells, there would be no polio vaccine. During the 1900s, polio threatened the populations of Europe as well as America, and caused an alarming number of deaths. Scientists were studying the effects of their theorized vaccines on lab mice; however the results were inconclusive because mice are not humans. Since HeLa cells were derived from a human, they would react the same way a human would to treatments, so once scientists realized that they had an infinite number of reliable test subjects, they were finally able to release a polio vaccine to the public in 1955.

Because the HeLa cells were human, and cancerous, scientists were able to perform in depth studies on cancer. Scientists now had an unlimited supply of
cancerous cells to study, which is the equivalent of having an unlimited supply of cancer patients to study on, except much more ethical. Through the observations made, scientists were able to figure out how to treat cancer to eliminate it.

I am personally grateful for these studies, because my little cousin was born with cancer; her diagnosis left my family and me devastated. We were all so upset, and were scared for her life. Fortunately, due to the knowledge of cancer that we now have from studying HeLa cells, the doctors were able to rid my cousin of her cancer, and my family of our worries. Knowing that a life exists today because of an unethical decision made back in 1951 proves that the medical benefits yielded from Henrietta Lacks’s cells trump the injustice done to her family. Not only my cousin, but all of the cancer survivors, and all of the people who have had polio vaccines and their families, all benefit from HeLa cells.

Cell culturing is essential to all scientific study, and without HeLa cells, this process would be much more difficult. In order for cells to grow outside of the body, they must be placed in a Petri dish and given the nutrients needed to survive. Before the discovery of the HeLa cells, scientists had to make their own mixture of nutrients to make their own home made cultures. Because of this, the results of different scientists could not be compatible, because the difference of the culture in which the cells were grown was too big a variable. By studying HeLa cells, scientists were able to develop the most effective culture possible, and mass marketed that culture making it the industry standard. Having an industry standard means that their will be consistent results regardless if an experiment is done in a different part of the world. Scientists all over the world can now work towards the same goal, and this is just another way that Henrietta’s cells revolutionized the world of medicine.

What was done to Henrietta and the Lacks family was wrong, but the number of lives saved resulting from her cells is too great to get caught up on ethics. The way that Skloot portrays Henrietta in her book, it seems that Henrietta was a loving person, and I’m sure if she knew her impact on the world, she would be beyond herself with joy. Sometimes small sacrifices must be made for the greater good, and that is definitely the case with Henrietta Lacks.
THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS by Rebecca Skloot is based on one of the greatest scientific discoveries to occur: the HeLa cells. Scientists call these cells immortal due to their rapid growth. In her book, Skloot focuses on different aspects of immortality of the cells, trying to emphasize that people have two different types of immortalities: one that is biological and one that is spiritual.

A large section of Skloot’s work focuses on the biological meaning of immortality. Skloot explains that the HeLa strand was able to live due to its increase in telomeres. Telomeres are found at the ends of chromosomes in cells and act as protectors. As a chromosome splits, a telomere will become shorter, until it completely disappears or is renewed by an enzyme known as telomerase. Telomerase is usually found in cancer cells, since the cell cycle becomes disrupted in cancerous cells. Skloot tries to explain how Henrietta’s telomeres acted differently from normal ones by stating, “This explains the mechanics of HeLa’s immortality: telomerase constantly rewound the ticking clock at the end of Henrietta’s chromosomes so they never grew old and died.” This is a biological analysis of immortality. By producing enough telomerase, the HeLa cells were able to live longer than other cells. The telomerase prevented the aging process within the cells, keeping them forever young. The telomerase can be seen as the fountain of youth for the HeLa cells.

While Skloot explains the biological ways in which Henrietta is immortal, she focuses on the “cultural” aspects of her immortality as well. She illustrates this by showing the heightened degree of spirituality that Henrietta’s children exhibit. By keeping her memory alive and extending it into the next generations, Henrietta is becoming “immortal.” Her family believed that as long as the HeLa
cells existed, Henrietta would coexist with them. They believed that her name is an essential part of scientific textbooks and other scientific literature, since she has become a major component of scientific study. The concern for her to be known in science was of utmost importance to her daughter Deborah, who throughout Skloot’s narrative was upset that people did not know her mother’s name or that people referred to HeLa as Helen Lane.

The question of spiritual immortality draws attention to its ties with religion. Most religions believe that God is immortal, so how is a human being immortal? Does the immortality of Henrietta’s cells have anything to do with God’s plan? For some religious scholars, this may be a hard topic to understand. Others might feel like Gary Lacks, Deborah Lacks’ cousin, who believed that the Bible foretold that Henrietta was going to be immortal: “Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and those who live and believe in me will never die.” This verse shows that there is another aspect to life that is not just physical; all mortals have a spiritual life which represents the epitome of existence: immortality. From this perspective all people are immortal, and they have two sides to their existence.

The concept of immortality is perplexing in the sciences as well. Science states that mutations change the cell from its normal state and that in the process, a new cell stage is produced. Henrietta herself is dead, but there is no guarantee that the strain of HeLa cells existing today is exactly the same strand that Dr. Gey extracted when Henrietta was being diagnosed. Over time, many of the cells may have changed and become entirely new entities. Can it then be argued that these are the same HeLa cells and that they are immortal? Maybe these cells are relatively “new” cells that are related to the initial strand only because of the mutation of telomerase.

My views of immortality are based on what type of legacy one leaves behind. This is reinforced by Islamic teachings, which say that many prophets are immortal because people remember them to this day. Other than this, my views of immortality are undeveloped. I acknowledge that people would love to learn of the fountain of youth but I doubt that immortality is just what others think it is. People assume that it means longevity, but what will they accomplish with it? Will it lead to more chaos and violence or will it lead to world peace? These questions cause me to remain skeptical about the existence of immortality, although Henrietta’s immortality may be a special case.

I feel that immortality disturbs the natural cycle of life as well. Some years ago,
I remember watching a TV show that portrayed a utopian society. All of the people inhabiting this world were immune to diseases and were immortal, but for their immortality they had to pay a price. They were all infertile and unable to produce any heirs. To me this was quite disturbing. All species on Earth have to reproduce in order to occupy their niche in the environment. By not being able to reproduce, these immortals were putting the human species at great risk. What would happen if their immortality somehow vanished? All of them would die of old age, thus increasing the possibility of human extinction. This in turn would disrupt the food chain, in which humans occupy one of the main levels. Would the extinction of humans lead to a plethora of previously consumed animals, which would in turn deplete the Earth of all resources? There is a psychological aspect to this type of immortality as well. One can assume that after realizing that no one new would come into the world, those left alive would enter a state of profound ennui. They would most likely follow the same routines until the entire population became depressed upon seeing their current situation. In the same TV show, a mad scientist opened a portal into a parallel dimension, hoping to lure a younger group of people into the immortal world. When this was achieved, he attempted to have them forcibly reproduce, and when they refused, he opted for in vitro fertilization. So in a way, it is safe to assume that this type of society would increase the chances of one's becoming a psychopath in order to protect the human race. This all leads one to ponder whether there are any benefits at all to immortality on earth.

Immortality is a complex idea, but Skloot portrays it in an artistic manner. She delves into the spiritual and scientific definitions of immortality, presenting them to her readers and then allowing them to draw their own conclusions.
An Impartial Pen is a Virtuous Pen

by ELIJAH SHORT

Unfortunately, our nature is inherently imperfect. This inherent imperfection causes us to find and reveal truth and faults in others, while concealing or omitting the truth and faults in ourselves. By contrast, the author of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot, makes a conscious effort to reveal truths and faults about herself and goes as far as to respect the choices of her subjects to omit the truth and faults about themselves. Skloot in effect guarded the dignity of the people she wrote about. One realizes the essential reason Skloot used the following Elie Wiesel quote as her epigraph: “We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph” (Elie Wiesel). It provides insight into the importance of seeing past what someone appears to be, and rather seeing that person for who he/she truly is. Skloot’s role as a narrator and a character helps to build a rich identity for herself and each character in her book. The audience is forced to see in each human being presented, “a universe with its own secrets...sources of anguish and,...measure of triumph” (Elie Wiesel).

A Universe With Its Own Secrets

The author of a piece is in full control of what the audience is going to be intellectually fed. The author decides which secrets he/she wants to include and which secrets he/she wants to omit. In The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Skloot gives of herself and reveals the truth about her own faults while omitting some of the truths that her subjects were not comfortable with sharing. When Deborah and Rebecca are traveling throughout the country to investigate the true story of Henrietta and Elsie Lacks, they encounter hard truths that took time for the Lacks...
family, let alone Deborah, to accept. When Deborah discovers the truth about her mother and sister with the help of Rebecca, she becomes upset, and this leads to confrontation with the very person helping her:

*She sat down next to me and pointed to a different word in her sister’s autopsy report. “What does this word mean?”... I told her. Then her face fell, her jaw slack, and she whispered, ’I don’t want you puttin that word in the book... Her hand hit my chest hard as she slammed me against the wall... Then, for the first time since we met, I lost my patience with Deborah. I jerked free of her grip and told her to get the [expletive] off me and chill the [expletive] out.* (Skloot 283)

In this quote, Skloot expresses the raw emotion that suddenly struck between herself and Deborah. Although Skloot does expose the erratic behavior that Deborah displays, she does not omit the lack of self-control she herself displayed. As suggested by my professor, Ellen Belton, many may in fact argue that Skloot’s actions were justified and a perfectly natural reaction to the situation at hand. Although this is understandable and a more realistic outcome—especially in this day in age—it may subconsciously contribute to a reader’s rationalization of aggressive reactions in future contexts. Whereas, if one were to acknowledge the shock of the strong profanity that is strewn out of her mouth and onto the page, I believe one could see that Skloot lost her temper. And losing one’s temper is anything but a sign of true self-control. However, Skloot should not be stereotyped as a criminal or delinquent. Rather, we come to the realization that she is human. This is a very important moment in the book because up until then Rebecca has not revealed any flaws within her own nature. Even Deborah comments that she began “to wonder if [Rebecca] was even human” (Skloot 284). However, this is rectified as we read this passage. Not only does Rebecca openly admit her mistakes, but she is able to reasonably conceal the personal details of others to uphold their respect. Rebecca promises to omit a certain “word” in Elsie Lacks’s autopsy report and faithfully keeps her promise throughout the book. Although the reader may truly yearn to know the seriousness of the omitted word, Skloot is determined to respect the dignity of Deborah and her sister... even after their deaths.

*“Sources of Anguish and... Some Measure of Triumph”*

Throughout the course of several decades, deceit and deception were deplorably used against the Lacks family for personal gains. The issues plagued the family
in such psychologically debilitating ways that it had a physical effect on some of the family members. As brought out on page 169, Deborah’s health dramatically declined around the same time that she learned more about the legacy of her mother. A photograph of Deborah can be found among the book’s illustrations, in which we see her holding her prescription drugs along with a caption that reads: “In 2001, Deborah developed a severe case of hives after learning upsetting new information about her mother and sister.” This gives further proof of the psychological toll on the physical body. Note that in the following quote, McKusick’s assistant researcher, Susan Hsu, explains to David “Day” Lacks the reason she and McKusick want to take blood samples from the whole family. David’s response is quite shocking at first glance. He obviously does not understand the terms Hsu uses or comprehend what exactly she intends to do with their blood samples. Yet David continues to comply with Hsu’s wishes. Skloot explains in further detail:

Day wouldn’t have understood the concept of immortal cells or HLA markers coming from anyone. . . . He’d only gone to school for four years of his life, and he’d never studied science. The only kind of cell he’d heard of was the kind Zakariyya was living in out at Hagerstown. So

he did what he’d always done when he didn’t understand something a doctor said: he nodded and said yes. (Skloot 183)

This quote has a powerful effect on the reader. One truly feels pity for David and the family because of their apparent lack of knowledge in the situation. However, there is more to this quote than just the emotion it stirs in the reader. By using this quote, Skloot shows the unequivocal imbalance of excellence in education between blacks and whites at the time. Skloot handles this delicate situation with care. She does not make it seem as if this family is made up of simpletons. Rather she gives evidence of the effects of a corrupted system and abusive childhood on the mind. Skloot openly sees the fault in the Lacks family while at the same time not omitting the truth of the sociological realities that affect the Lacks family at a more personal level. Skloot shows herself to be truly interested in truth and justice.

In conclusion, we as authors have the duty to dig deeper for truth and faults in all the subjects we choose to write about. By doing so, we will be able to express not only ourselves, but those who lack the will or ability to effectively express themselves. Writing does not only ensure the well-being of our healthy physical, mental, and spiritual
selves, but also can be of great benefit to others. We have the responsibility of showing dignity and respect whenever we write, and Rebecca Skloot did just that. Due to her active role in her literary piece, her actions as a character and narrator are highly cherished by her readers. This book is not just a book that offers a moral explanation as to how we should act as scientists or doctors; it is also a book that offers a moral explanation of how we should live as human beings.
Henrietta Lacks:
An Unsung Hero

by CHELSEA KORNFELD

IN THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS, Rebecca Skloot portrays a dark chapter in medical history when poor and uneducated black people were taken advantage of by the scientific establishment. Henrietta’s cells were taken away prior to her death without her or her family’s knowledge. No compensation was offered to the Lacks family, while researchers using her cells made millions in profits. Scientists should have gotten consent from Henrietta Lacks before they used her cells for scientific study. Not doing this was a serious breach of medical ethics.

In 1951, Lacks revolutionized modern medicine. Scientists took her cancerous cells and reproduced them infinitely in a lab. Her cells, called “HeLa” cells, were used during the polio epidemic to test a vaccine that saved millions from this dreaded disease. Her cells were also used in the study of cloning, in-vitro fertilization, and for the study of genetic diagnoses. In the last several decades, HeLa cells have been earning hundreds of millions of dollars for the medical industry yet the Lacks family has not been compensated at all. Henrietta’s children were barely informed of what happened to the study of their mother’s cells. Even today some of her grandchildren can hardly afford health insurance.

There seems to be a pattern of disturbing, unethical practice on poor African-American people throughout the twentieth century and earlier. There was the Tuskegee syphilis study, for one. This was an infamous study involving poor, rural black men on the natural progression of untreated syphilis. The men were never told they had syphilis nor were they ever treated for it. Researchers knowingly failed to treat patients even after penicillin was validated as a cure for syphilis.

There is a growing debate today as to what constitutes people’s ownership over various parts of their body including their cells and tissues. Today, doctors are required to get informed consent from patients to use
their tissues for research, and The National Institute of Medical Science requires it. From an ethical standpoint, a person should have the right to be informed of what is happening to his or her tissues or cells after they leave his or her body. Although the intentions of the scientists might have been for the good, sometimes the outcome ends up hurting people in different ways. In the case of Henrietta, she died without the satisfaction of knowing what a tremendous impact she would have in helping society at large, even though scientists were aware. All the while, drug companies were profiting from her cells. Her family was also kept in the dark about her contribution to society, and they were not even minimally compensated financially. When Henrietta died, her husband only authorized that an autopsy be performed. This is what he related to Rebecca Skloot in an interview. There is a lesson to be learned here. Although cells and tissues are objects that have no feelings, there are people behind those objects that have opinions and feelings. Medical science should acknowledge this and be more sensitive when using people’s tissues and cells for medical research. Just because there is a rationale that “ultimately it’s for the common good,” it doesn’t mean that the medical community can do as they wish. Scientists are walking a very thin line here, because one can apply this rationale to taking body parts, for example, without consent after someone dies.

Over the course of my lifetime, I have on occasion felt that people have exploited me without asking for my prior consent. During certain class projects in high school, people have used my ideas and taken credit for them. Had they asked for my consent, I might have been fine with it. However, the mere fact that I was not asked for my consent, upset me tremendously. Therefore, I can understand the problem with how the Lacks family was treated. When someone is being used or exploited, they deserve to be notified and asked for consent, at the very least.

Financial reward is another issue. If companies are making millions off an individual, then why shouldn’t that individual reap some benefit for themselves or for their future generations? Not doing so portrays the medical and scientific community to be insensitive and self-serving. This is pure common sense regarding ethics. If someone has something to offer that can create enormous wealth for an individual or a large organization, isn’t it only fair that she should be compensated? Drug companies spend millions of dollars every year on research and development, so why hold back when somebody gives you the tools to make millions? It is only right that
people be compensated.

Henrietta Lacks’ family is deserving of compensation for the contributions that her cells have made for society and the enormous wealth that drug companies have profited because of her cells. Our society today must pave the way for future generations by providing fair and just guidelines, whereby all individuals, regardless of race or color, rich or poor, are accorded the proper respect when it comes to preserving one’s dignity. It is incumbent upon us to clarify how far one can have “ownership” of one’s cells and tissues. No one can take away the magnitude of how the scientific and medical communities contribute to our society, but their actions need to be fine-tuned in how they go about it. Hopefully one day the Lacks family will find closure with this issue, and they will be properly compensated.
At this point in my life, I would think that I know everything there is to know about my family. At least, that’s what I thought a few months ago. Sleeping, staring at the walls of my room, and roaming the streets of Soho were the things I basically did during the month of July. Then, one ordinary night, the thought of going on a trip hit me. My close friends were all busy working, and they really had no budget or time for a vacation. But I was desperate to go on a trip, to get away from this dullness. So I decided to ask my father. I wasn’t sure if going on vacation with my father was the better solution to doing absolutely nothing at home, but I just had to get away. We decided to go to Canada because he longed to see his former coworkers. It just so happened that a vast majority of those that my father worked with immigrated to Canada while my father came to America.

On the third day of our Canadian trip, we arrived in Toronto, where my father’s former coworkers resided. I was expecting a boring dinner because it’s always been that way when I go to eat with my parents’ friends. They would talk about things that took place countless years ago, and I would just sit there blank-minded listening to them. This dinner was just like any other one in the past, until a voice uttered these words that surprised me. “Why did you suddenly quit the job? You worked hard to get to the position of team leader and were very likely to be promoted to a higher position.” Then my father replied with a response that made that dinner an unforgettable one. “My wife was about to give birth to my daughter, and I had to choose between my job or my daughter. I had no choice.”

My heart melted as those words slowly came out of my father’s mouth. My father gave up his job and possibly a better future for me. He gave up the opportunity to a higher position because of me. Nobody in my family ever spoke about this, not even my mom. I wasn’t sure what I could do to pay my dad back.

This incident basically left my mind
as my trip to Canada came to an end, until I read Rebecca Skloot’s book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Skloot goes on a journey to uncover the story of Henrietta Lacks, a poor tobacco farmer whose cells were taken without her knowledge, an act that led to major improvements and innovations in the medical and scientific fields. Henrietta was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951 (Skloot 27). The doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital took a biopsy of Henrietta Lacks’ cervical tissue and gave it to a research scientist by the name of George Guy (Skloot 33). Henrietta’s cells were able to reproduce so rapidly outside of her body, and they became so valuable in science that they were sold by the billions around the world.

Henrietta’s kids lost their mother at a young age, and they really didn’t have an idea of what their mother was like. Then one day, another scientist approached the Lacks family for blood research. She told the Lacks family that they were testing to see if they had genetically inherited Henrietta’s cancer cells. In fact, she was trying to find the secret to the immortality of Henrietta’s cells. Deborah says “My nerve broke down” when Skloot called her to ask for further information about the cells (Skloot 53). A lot of people tried to approach the Lacks family for further information on the cells, but everybody just took what they needed and left.

Deborah, Henrietta’s oldest daughter, had longed to find out the story about her mother. But she was undereducated and nobody who benefited from the cells bothered to teach the Lacks family about HeLa cells, the cells from Henrietta Lacks that were able to reproduce outside of the human body for the first time (Skloot 37-41). Deborah and her other siblings didn’t know what had happened to her mother because Henrietta didn’t tell the family that she was diagnosed with cancer. Finally, Skloot told Deborah, and the Lacks family finally found out that HeLa cells were still living and that the cells were able to be used in research for the creation of various vaccines and other innovations. The Lacks family finally received the recognition that Henrietta should have received too long ago and Deborah was invited to a conference held by doctors and scientists to honor Henrietta Lacks. They named it Henrietta Lacks Day (Skloot 220).

When I started reading the book, the words of my father’s former coworker vividly came back to mind. Deborah and I had some sort of idea that our parent made some extraordinary contributions. For Henrietta, it was towards the whole society. For my father, it was for me. I approached my father for more information, but he
refused to give me details and said, “It’s the past, there’s no point in bringing it up.” I knew that my father had been a great student in school. He was hard working and was one at the top of his class. But I didn’t know what jobs he took, and I’ve always wondered why my father didn’t get a good job or if he ever had one. No one bothered to educate me about what I deserved to know. The whole world knew about HeLa just like everybody in my family knew about my father’s past.

Both Deborah and I had an idea that our parent wasn’t just an ordinary person. Each made sacrifices for family and each didn’t want others to know about those sacrifices. Just as Henrietta Lacks didn’t tell her family about her having cervical cancer because she didn’t want to worry them, my father didn’t want me to feel bad about his sacrifice. That same feeling of honor, pride, and love that flourished in Deborah’s mind when she found out about Henrietta Lacks’ astonishing contributions flashed in mine when I found out about the sacrifice my father made for me. My father’s contribution and sacrifice might not have influenced others like Henrietta did for society, but it has shaped who I am and impacted who I will be in the future.
REBECCA SKLOOT IN THE IMMORTAL Life of Henrietta Lacks tells the world about Henrietta, the woman from whom HeLa cells originated. HeLa cells are cancerous cells that were taken from Henrietta in 1951. They became the first cells to survive and grow in a laboratory, and they have been used in scientific research and development of drugs for many different diseases. Although HeLa cells are basic material in research laboratories today, few people know the name of the person the cells originated from. This is why Skloot wrote The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, to give life to this mysterious woman. Skloot also discusses the many ethical issues that developed as a result of Henrietta’s cells and that are created every time cells are taken from people for research. The ethical issues of asking patients for consent, giving patients part of the profit their cells produce, and giving recognition to the patient that the cells originated from would not be issues at all if cells taken were seen as part of the person they came from rather than just materials for research.

There were three main ethical issues with the taking of Henrietta’s cells. Firstly, Henrietta had no idea that her doctor had taken a sample of her cells for research (Skloot 42); her doctor had not asked for her consent. There was no law in 1951 that required Henrietta’s doctor to inform her that her cells were being used for research. Still today no law has been created that protects patients from having their cells taken without permission because no “case law” has fully clarified whether a person owns or has the right to control their cells (Skloot 315-317). The source of the problem is that there is uncertainty in the status of cells when they are disconnected from their owner.

Secondly, Henrietta and her family did not benefit from the profits that the cells produced. Reader and Vincent, two men involved in research, built a factory that mass-produced HeLa cells for-profit (Skloot
HeLa cells were bought and sold for research around the world; almost every laboratory stocked HeLa cells as standard research material. Henrietta’s cells aided many advances in science and medicine and, ironically, her family was unable to go see a doctor because they could not afford it (Skloot 247). Today, when cells are sold for research, there are still issues concerning who gets the money earned. Mrs. Clayton, a physician and lawyer said, “You can’t ignore this issue of who gets the money... I’m not sure what to do about it, but I’m pretty sure it’s weird to say everybody gets money except the people providing the raw material.” (Skloot 322, 323). Clayton looks at the situation and recognizes that not giving part of the profit to the individual from whom the cells originated is an issue. This problem of who gets the money goes back to the uncertainty of the status of cells when they are removed from a patient.

There was also the issue of acknowledgement. Henrietta Lacks did not receive any recognition for what the HeLa cells accomplished. Lengauer, a Hopkins cancer researcher, admitted that science was in the wrong for not acknowledging Henrietta. “Whenever we read books about science, it’s always HeLa this and HeLa that. Some people know those are the initials of a person, but they don’t know who that person is.” (Skloot 266) The issue regarding the fact that one may know about the HeLa cells, but is unaware of their origin can be connected to the uncertainty of the status of cells when they are removed from a patient.

Scientists prefer to view cells as separate entities from their human origin so that they do not have any obligation towards the person the cells came from. At one point, two scientists developed a theory that “HeLa cells have become a separate species. HeLa cells are evolving separately from humans” (Skloot 215, 216). Robert Stevenson, a researcher, commented on this by laughing and saying, “Scientists don’t like to think of HeLa cells as bits and pieces of Henrietta because it’s easier to do science when you disassociate your materials from the people they come from” (Skloot 216). Scientists disconnect the cells they work with from the people they come from because it is easier when the person is taken out of the picture. There is no need to ask for consent, no patient that is entitled to a share of the money, and no one demanding recognition for all that the cells have accomplished. But the person cannot be taken out of the equation; the cells are a piece of them and they still belong to the person even after they are separated.

When cells are seen as part of the person they originated from, the ethical issues of consent, benefit, and recognition will no longer be issues. Consent will be
mandatory because cells are a patient’s property even after they are removed. Not to ask permission before using another person’s property is considered stealing. Patients would be entitled to a cut of any money their cells make through research because the cells belong to them. Once cells are established as part of the person they came from, then any great accomplishments that are achieved through the cells will be attributed to that person. Henrietta was not consulted about what happened to her cells and her children were not informed that their mother’s cells still lived because many scientist believed that HeLa cells had no connection to the women they originated from. Scientists studied HeLa cells, tested them and used them to advance science, but they never asked who Henrietta was.

The Immortal life of Henrietta Lacks ends with a statement from Sonny, one of Henrietta’s sons:

“I don’t want to cause problems for science... And besides I’m proud of my mother and what she done for science. I just hope Hopkins and some of the other folks who benefited off her cells will do something to honor her and make right with the family.” (Skloot 328)

He doesn’t ask for money or that all research using HeLa be stopped; all he asks for is recognition, because HeLa cells are Henrietta. All that they have accomplished, all that they have done for the world is on account of Henrietta. Similarly, all cells in research belong to those that they were taken from. Cells may be a small part of us but what would we be with out our cells, what would our cells be with out us?