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A Collection of Short Stories toward the Completion of a Novel

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Senior Honors Thesis

University of Wyoming

Artist's Statement

Abstract

For almost six years now, I've been writing my way into a novel. This novel is written from the points of view of six different characters. In order to pull this off without giving my potential readers too much mental whiplash, I needed to differentiate my character's voices and separate the concrete details of their pasts. To do this, I decided to write a series of short stories, each from a different character's point of view, that revolve around pivotal moments in their pasts, moments that will converge in a way that becomes critical to creating the architecture of the novel.

Point of View

Since I am trying to mirror the style of each character's voice in the novel in these stories, I wrote each of the short stories in the same point of view as the novel. I chose to use third person limited for both because the novel is a fantasy novel, and fantastical fiction is generally easier to swallow when it is written in third person rather than first or second. It takes less effort for the reader to adjust to third person than to a different point of view, because third person is the default, and it is what readers see the most of. I could have written in third person omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about every character at any given time, but with six main characters, I thought third person omniscient would be too confusing. So I decided instead to break my novel up into chapters which are each narrated by a different main character.

Two examples of authors who do this well are Susan Powers in *The Grass Dancer* and Joe Abercrombie in *The Blade Itself*. Both novels contain fantastical elements, are written in third person close focus, and have multiple main characters. In both of these novels, each character's section has a different style, tone, and perspective that reflects the character's

personality. One can pick up either of these books, open to a random page, start reading, and figure out very quickly which character is the focus of that section. My goal for this novel is exactly that, which is why I wrote four short stories that focus on the four main characters whose voices I thought needed the most work.

Genre

Fantasy is a fairly wide and overarching genre to fit a novel into: almost any story containing elements that do not seem realistic or plausible can be categorized as fantasy. But there are many subgenres, and my novel fits the best into these three: coming-of-age fantasy, high fantasy, and crossworlds fantasy. Coming-of-age fantasy requires a young character to discover that they are different, go on a quest to find the truth about themselves or their abilities, learn how and why to use their powers, and fight a villain (Best Fantasy Books). My novel fits this subgenre because all six of its main characters are young people with special abilities who follow this general story arc. High fantasy requires a secondary, or parallel world, in which the action takes place. None, or a very minimal amount, of the action in High Fantasy can take place in this world, the real one (Best Fantasy Books). My novel fits this genre because the vast majority of the action takes place in a separate, highly complex world. Crossworlds fantasy requires a protagonist from the “real” world, that the action doesn’t start until this protagonist is in the “other” world, and that the protagonist is unique and essential in some way (Best Fantasy Books). My novel fits this genre because all of my main characters cross over from the “real” world into another one.

Plotlines within these fantastical genres aren’t always the most original, which makes their characters even more important. So I spent a great deal of time and energy on developing my characters to make them unique but still relatable, and writing these short stories really

helped me round out their personalities, voices, and pasts..

As for the short stories themselves, three out of the four contain no fantastical elements. But every character still has a back story, with goals and beliefs they carry with them over into the novel. Because the main plotlines of the novel don't really start until long after these short stories are over, these stories have their own plot lines and can stand on their own. "Short story" is a genre in and of itself: a short story is "a short written story usually dealing with few characters: a short work of fiction" according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Which is a very broad definition: "The term short story is applied to every piece of prose writing of 30,000 words or less, without regard to its matter, aim, or handling..." (Barrett, 2009). But in order to be a story, there has to be plot, or characters, or a setting, and it has to be in prose (Barrett, 2009). Within short stories, though, the same kinds of genres found in longer works of fiction can be applied, such as realistic fiction, drama, or fantasy. Three out of the four short stories I've written for this project are realistic fiction, and the last one is more of a fantasy/horror blend. The focus of each of these stories, however, is the main character and how the events within them have affected that character's goals and personality.

Stories

Fluffy

Sarah sits on a chair at her dining room table, mindlessly knocking the tips of her tennis shoes against one of the legs. She's been waiting for—she pulls her sleeve back to check her watch—ten minutes. They're not late yet. But that doesn't do anything to quiet the shivers racing down her spine and through her stomach. The TV murmurs in the next room, where her older sister's still awake. Of course, her sister's in on it. Rose is too perceptive for Sarah to slip away under her nose, and besides, she needs Rose to distract her mother. Sarah's mother usually works in her office at home every night from dinner until bedtime, when she makes her round of the house to put all the kids to bed. Rose is going to tell her that Sarah's already asleep, and she's going to believe it because Sarah stuffed some pillows under her bed covers. Sarah's a light sleeper, so her mother shouldn't stay long enough to realize it isn't actually Sarah in the bed. Hopefully.

Sarah adjusts her knitted winter hat more snugly onto her head, and checks her watch again. They have five more minutes. Rose is taken care of, and her mother should be too, so Sarah's thoughts turn to another loose end. Her brother, Christopher. If Chris sees her, she's dead meat. Not only because she's up later than she's supposed to be, and Chris has always been a tattletale, but because Sarah snuck into his room earlier today and stole something. She bites her lip and snatches another quick glance at the door. Not here yet.

Her brother had been out at soccer practice when she'd stolen the tiny blue plastic pet carrier from behind a pile of old video games and sports trophy rubble on his shelf. She hoped he wouldn't notice. He certainly wouldn't suspect her if he found it gone: Chris and Sarah had always gotten along well, and Sarah had never done anything less innocent than occasionally

sneak extra cookies after her parents went to bed. But something coils sickly in her stomach when she thinks about it, and she's certain he'll be able to read it on her face if he sees her now.

She was just lucky no one saw her taking it. She'd half expected Chris to be standing in the doorway when she'd turned away from his shelf, mouth open in shock. She knew he was supposed to be at soccer practice, but what if he'd come home early? What if he'd never really gone? But Sarah had tiptoed safely out the door into the mercifully vacant hallway, hiding the carrier as a large lump under her shirt, and that had been that. It shouldn't have been that easy.

Sarah starts as footsteps tap softly down the hallway and to the living room where her sister is sitting. She scoots back a little, further into the shadows, careful not to make a sound. Quiet voices murmur from the couch. She swallows involuntarily, and stiffens her limbs, trying even harder not to move. Her mother's in the living room, now. She promised to give Rose her allowance for the next two weeks, so her sister *better* not screw this up. Sarah's heart beats in her ears. All other sound drains out, the TV, the talking, because Sarah's mother is smart enough to ruin this, and now she's heading towards Sarah in the dining room.

About three and a half months earlier, Sarah had moved with her family from Pueblo up to Denver. Well, really just outside of Denver, in Aurora. But it was a ways away from their old home, and Sarah didn't really care much what it was called. What mattered was that it meant a new house, new school, new people, new everything. This new school didn't look much different from her old one: red brick and low windows rose out of a yard spread with bright green grass. It was right by her new house, within walking distance. She wouldn't even have to take the bus.

When she'd stepped into her first classroom on that first day (several minutes early), the first thing she'd noticed was the terrarium in the corner. She walked toward it as quickly as she

could—she didn't want to draw attention to herself by running. Her older brother had a terrarium: it used to have a spider in it. And to Sarah's absolute delight, this one had a spider too. The tarantula in front of her had a lot of curly hair sprinkled across its forelegs and abdomen, and Sarah wondered what it would be like to run a finger down its fluffy back. One of the legs lifted up in the air. Sarah flinched backwards for a second, but then decided that she shouldn't have been scared that easily and instead pressed the tip of her nose against the glass. She'd never been allowed anywhere near her brother's spider: she wasn't allowed in his room, and he didn't want her to hold it. The longest glimpse she'd got before was from the hallway when Chris had forgotten to close his door and had the spider out on his hand. Her name was Coral, and Chris had had her since he was Sarah's age. He was very protective of her: Sarah and Rose never got to hold her because he was afraid they'd hurt her. And last year, Coral had died, and Chris had kept the terrarium so that he could get another one later. Which wasn't fair at all, because Sarah had asked and been told that she wasn't allowed to have even *one* spider. Chris had said it was because Sarah was too scared of everything, that spiders needed to be picked up and touched and moved about when you cleaned their cages or to check if they were healthy. He thought Sarah would be too scared to hold the spider. And, of course, her parents had listened to *him*.

The tarantula lifted another leg and Sarah fought the urge to step back. She was being silly—there was glass there. What would Chris say if he saw her flinching away like that? Even if the spider had wanted to (and she was sure it didn't, anyway), it couldn't hurt her. She was so engrossed in watching the spider move its legs she didn't notice someone coming up behind her.

"She's pretty, huh?" Sarah jumped a little, and then felt a rush of shame for getting scared *again*. It was just another girl, with an unruly cloud of blond hair and an enormous, friendly smile. "You're new here, aren't you? I'm Kaylor. What's your name?"

Sarah, still a little uneasy from being spooked, wrapped her arms around her middle and tried very hard to smile nicely back. "I'm Sarah."

The girl—Kaylor—stepped over right up next to Sarah and peered forward into the tank. The two of them watched the spider crawl slowly across the cage for a minute.

"Wanna hold her?" Kaylor asked. The furry limbs twitched their way across the dirt, and Sarah had to force back a shiver. *There's no reason to be afraid of it. Chris held his all the time, remember? He never got hurt.*

"Um...sure!"

Kaylor beamed impossibly wider. "I'll go get Mrs. Evans so she can open the cage for us."

She returned shortly with the teacher, a very tall woman with short brown hair and a nose like a hawk, who asked for Sarah's name and then smiled at her too, just like Kaylor had.

"Hello, Sarah. I'm Mrs. Evans. Did you two want to hold her? We still have a few minutes before class starts."

Sarah bit down hard on her lip and nodded. Maybe if she could hold the spider in her hand, she'd see it wasn't dangerous, and she wouldn't be afraid anymore.

Mrs. Evans smiled at her again, and pulled a key out of her pocket to unlock the padlock holding the top of the cage closed. "I keep her locked in here so no one will steal her when I'm not here. Her name's Fluffy, she's a Honduran Curly Haired tarantula. She used to belong to my nephew."

Sarah couldn't help but break into a grin, "Fluffy, like from Harry Potter?"

Someone scoffed from somewhere behind Kaylor, and Sarah had to take her eyes off the spider for a second to see another girl duck out from behind Kaylor. "No. The spider in Harry

Potter is Aragog. Unless you meant the three-headed dog. But why would you name a spider after a three-headed dog? She has hair all over her, that's why they named her Fluffy."

"Anna," Kaylor shot the other girl a warning glance, "Be nice. This is Sarah, she's new."

But then Sarah stopped paying attention to them, because Mrs. Evans had the cage open and was coaxing Fluffy onto her hand. She lifted the spider slowly out of the cage, and then bent down, holding Fluffy about a foot away from Sarah's face. Her breath caught in her throat, but she swallowed and forced it out. *Don't be scared.*

Mrs. Evans smiled down at her, a little crookedly. "She isn't dangerous. She's very tame, and even if she does bite you it won't be any worse than a bee sting."

Sarah bit her lower lip, and then held out her hand, palm flat and fingers spread wide. Mrs. Evans started to lower the spider down, until her hand was level with Sarah's. Mrs. Evans gently stroked one of Fluffy's back legs, and the spider took a searching step forward. An icy tendril of fear crawled up Sarah's spine. She dropped her hand in an instant, curling it protectively into a fist against her chest. She couldn't do it. Why couldn't she do it? There was *nothing* to be scared of.

"It's alright," Mrs. Evans said, "They can take some getting used to. We'll try again later."

Instead, Fluffy gently walked into Kaylor's hands, where the spider stopped and settled down. Kaylor reached out a finger and very lightly brushed the tips of the hairs on the spider's back. A spike of envy shot through Sarah's gut.

Sarah, still sitting at the table in the dining room, tries to scoot back even further into the shadows. She winces when the chair screeches as it moves against the wood floor. She's dead now.

"Sarah?" her mother blinks at her in surprise from the doorway, "I thought—Rose said you were asleep."

Sarah swallows, curling her fingers into fists and digging her nails into her palms.

"I was," she says. Lies. her mother gives her a look. She doesn't believe her.

"Where are you going?" she asks, waving a hand at Sarah's packed backpack, jacket, and winter gear. Sarah swallows hard again, and tries desperately to keep her voice from wobbling.

"The movies," she says. Her mother steps forward and picks up Sarah's flashlight off the table.

"Are you sure you need this?"

"It's dark out, and the parking lot is far away from the theater."

Her mother looks at her sideways, her eyes a little more narrow than usual.

"Sarah."

"What? We have to walk across town in the dark. Kaylor told her brother to pick us up at the...park."

This whole lying thing is a lot harder than Sarah thought it would be.

"Why would she tell him that?"

"Kaylor...wanted to walk there. She wants to play flashlight tag on the way."

Sarah swallows. That didn't sound convincing at all. Her mother stares her down.

"Please? I promise I won't get into trouble. I'll be with Kaylor and Anna, and Kaylor's older brother Jonathan."

Her mother lets out a deep sigh, closes her eyes, and pinches the bridge of her nose. She isn't going to let her go. But Sarah *has* to go, *just* tonight.

"Chris is out with friends right now. He's only four years older than me."

"Sarah—four years is a big number for someone your age. You're only eleven, your brother's in high school. Besides, I know exactly where he is, and I've met several of the friends that he's out with. I've never met this...Kaylor, or Anna." Her mother walks over to Sarah, and reaches down to stroke a strand of loose hair out of her daughter's face. "I just want to keep you safe."

Sarah turns her head away and scoots the chair back until it hits the wall. She *has* to do this, and if she tells the truth her mother will *never* let her go. This is *important*—so important, and her mother's going to ruin everything. "I never go out. I finally have real friends who actually want to talk to me, and you won't even let me hang out with them!"

"Sarah!" her mother leans forward slightly, and then crouches down in front of Sarah with her hands on her knees, "What's gotten into you?"

Wetness starts to pool in the corners of Sarah's eyes. Tears. She's crying. Why is she crying? She turns her head away from her mom, wiping a sleeve across her face.

"Sarah...sweetheart..." her mother reaches out a hand toward her, and Sarah gets up out of the chair, stepping around her mother. She walks quickly down the hallway, hugging her jacket more tightly around her. Once she gets to her room, she falls down sideways onto her lumpy, pillow-stuffed bed, tears still leaking out of her eyes. The flashlight jabs into her side from her pocket. This was supposed to be the most exciting thing that's ever happened to her in her life, and it's *important* because Fluffy's life is hanging in the balance, and Sarah can't even do anything because her mother's standing in the dining room between Sarah and her way out. She'd been so worried about Chris stopping her, and that seems silly now. Chris is always busy. Sarah's mother keeps tabs on everyone. Sarah grabs a pillow and throws it over her head, hiding from the world.

Something hits the window above Sarah's head with a loud *clunk*. Sarah throws the pillow away and gets to her feet, heart pounding in her throat. She gets back onto the bed, crawling forward slowly on her knees, just far enough to see through a crack in the blinds and into the back yard. Two girls stand side by side on the grass, one hefting another rock in her left hand, the other shining a flashlight up into her own face. Sarah grins and almost cries again with relief. *Of course. The window.* Why didn't she think of it before?

Every free moment she had, Sarah stood in front of the terrarium in the classroom and studied Fluffy. Even though the spider didn't move much, all the times Sarah spent watching was worth it when Fluffy would stalk across the cage, moving only one or two legs at a time. She especially liked to watch when the other students took the spider out. Kaylor was the one to hold her most often, except for the boy in their class with the loose clothes and shaggy black hair. Until one day the boy dropped the spider, and then Sarah glared at him for so long and with such intensity that he never tried to hold Fluffy again. And yet, Sarah still could never quite muster the nerve to hold the spider herself.

One day, Sarah got to school and Fluffy was crouching in a corner, legs folded up beneath her, out of her hide and well away from it. Sarah squinted closer. She seemed smaller, shrunken in on herself. Sarah swallowed and backed up, glancing quickly around the classroom for Mrs. Evans. She saw the teacher and beacons her over.

"I think she's sick."

Mrs. Evans frowned, looking down at the spider from above the terrarium.

"She might just be molting. I'm sure she'll get over it soon." But there was a frown on the teacher's face as she urged Sarah to return to her seat. And Sarah remembered how her brother's

spider died. How it seemed to come out of nowhere. Sarah had already seen Fluffy molt before, and that involved a giant web spun in the spider's hide box and no sign of Fluffy outside of it.

This wasn't normal.

So she waited until the end of the day, and then returned to the science classroom and the terrarium, Kaylor and Anna in tow. Fluffy was still in the same spot.

"Mrs. Evans?" Kaylor called across the room to the teacher, "Is Fluffy okay?"

Mrs. Evans swept quickly across the room, and smiled back at Kaylor sadly, "I know she doesn't look that great. I won't lie to you all, I don't think she'll be with us much longer. She was fully grown when my nephew gave her to me, and I really don't know how old she is. I think she's just getting ready to move on." She sighed deeply, staring fondly down at the spider's tank. Then, suddenly, her face brightened, "But on the bright side, we get to vote for a new class pet, now! Isn't that exciting?"

That hit Sarah like a punch in the gut. She blinked a couple of times, and then turned from Fluffy to stare at her teacher. "But...aren't you going to take her to the vet?"

Mrs. Evans frowned. "I don't think there are any vets in the area that know spiders. And besides, like I said, Fluffy's old, and she really is only a spider."

She really is only a spider. Sarah wanted to throw something. Instead, she ground her teeth, turned firmly away from Mrs. Evans, and marched out the door, tears pooling in her eyes and threatening to overflow. The clack of running footsteps followed her down the hallway.

"Hey, Sarah! Wait up!" Kaylor called from behind her. Sarah turned around, wiping at her face. *Not now*, she wanted to say, but a knot had tied itself firmly into her chest, forcing up a sob instead that Sarah quickly turned into a hiccup. She could only stand there like an idiot, frozen with the effort of trying not to cry, while her friends caught up to her. Kaylor swung an

arm over her shoulders and Anna grabbed her hand.

"We'll think of something," Anna said, "Maybe we can save her."

"Yeah," Kaylor said, purposefully gazing dramatically off into the distance, holding a fist out like she was brandishing a sword, "We'll be her heroes."

Anna rolled her eyes. "We'll sneak into the school in the middle of the night and get her out. We'll be like secret agents."

Sarah laughed and tried to wipe away the tear trails streaking down her face.

Kaylor skips down the street ahead of the other two, her cloud of blonde hair bouncing with her steps, humming loudly along to a song Sarah doesn't know. Anna trails behind, lurking in the shadows, keeping watch. And Sarah's just sort of in the middle, her hands glued to the shoulder straps on her backpack, chewing her bottom lip nervously in her mouth. Her knee's still burning a little where she scraped it on her climb down from the window. Streetlights glow against the dark pavement and reflect off a patch or two of snow. Sarah keeps thinking she sees things darting by in the shadows. She keeps thinking she hears an echo of her mother's voice from just down the street, but she looks over her shoulder and there's no one there. Anna looks over at her and grins, the light reflecting eerily off her teeth.

"How did *you* get out?" Sarah asks her.

"Kaylor slept over at my house, and we snuck out. My dad doesn't really care what I do, anyway." Anna kicks sharply at a loose rock on the road. "He's too obsessed with his *new wife* and *her* kids."

"Will you two hurry up?" Kaylor yells from a ways up ahead, making Sarah flinch a little, "It's getting cold out here."

"You're wearing *snow pants*, you wimp!" Anna yells back. Kaylor turns around and sticks her tongue out at them, skipping backwards down the street.

They reach the school at 10:09. Kaylor leads them 'round the back and down a concrete stairway to an army green door with a padlock. Anna darts forward, fishing around in her front pocket. Breath billows out of her mouth in a cloud, but the tiny girl still hasn't bothered to zip her jacket up. She's still wearing a knee-length flowery skirt and a white polo shirt, the same variation of what she wears to school every day. Sarah pulls her jacket more tightly around herself and wonders how Anna isn't freezing.

Her smaller friend motions her forward with a wave of her hand, and points down at the lock.

"I need your flashlight," she says. She's twisting a large metal paperclip back and forth in her hand. She breaks it and sticks one end in the lock, and then the other. It takes only a minute or so before the lock clicks and Anna unlatches it. Sarah stares at her, mouth agape.

"How did you do that so fast?"

Anna sighs heavily, "Lots of practice."

Sarah looks over at Kaylor, who shrugs, as if this is really nothing out of the ordinary. Sarah wonders what kind of people her new friends really are. If they do this often. What reason Anna has to practice picking locks, and why Kaylor doesn't think that's strange. What would Sarah's mother think of them? Or Chris? But they're already through the door, and she doesn't want to get left behind, so she pulls her coat closer and hurries after them. But she makes sure to shut the door behind them. She doesn't want to get caught.

The flashlight shines down the hallway, reflecting off the tiles on the floor and the bright red lockers on either side. It gives the school an eerie, greenish glow, and Sarah wonders for the

tenth time whether or not this is actually a good idea, if there isn't some other way to get Fluffy help. If her mother ever found out—Footsteps tap down the tile behind her. Sarah whirls around, heart beating fast in her throat, and comes face to face with Anna.

"Stop being so jumpy," she says, "This place isn't haunted or anything."

"Did you see where Kaylor went?" Sarah asks in a whisper, shining the flashlight up and down the hallway. Anna shrugs.

"Kaylor's just fast. The classroom's this way, she's probably beat us to it."

Sarah nods and follows her.

"Hey guys!" Kaylor yells loudly from somewhere down the hallway. Sarah jumps out of her skin and almost falls on Anna, who pushes her calmly back up to her feet. Kaylor sticks her head out of a door ahead, "Where have you been? I've been waiting in here for *ages*."

Sarah and Anna hurry down the hallway and into the classroom, through the empty desks and over to the terrarium. Kaylor's frowning, cradling something in her hand.

"I forgot there was a lock," she says, letting it go and stepping back from the cage.

"No problem," says Anna. The smaller girl climbs onto the shelf and sits next to the cage, her legs dangling down. Her tongue peeks out from between her teeth as she gets to work on picking the lock. Sarah looks down at her watch. It's 10:45. It'll take at least ten minutes to get to the vet's office.

"Hurry, Anna," she says, bouncing anxiously on the balls of her feet. Anna gets the lock off and Sarah scrambles to remove the lid. Kaylor reaches in, standing on her tip-toes, and scoops Fluffy up off the dirt in the terrarium. One of the spider's legs twitches. Sarah lets out a breath of relief.

"She's alive!"

They quickly slide the spider into the plastic carrier, which Sarah tucks carefully under her arm.

"You're gonna be okay, Fluffy," she mutters quietly, "We'll help you get better."

Kaylor has eight brothers. That's how she knows the emergency part of the vet's office is open until eleven: her little brother Jamie had to bring his puppy there at night once, after he'd eaten chocolate. That's also how they're getting to the vet's office. Kaylor's older brother Jonathan, who's sixteen and has a driver's license, is going to drive them.

They get out through the same door they went in through, and Kaylor makes sure to lock the lock again. Sarah glances at her watch. 10:51. She sprints as fast as she can for the only car in the parking lot with its lights on, leaving her friends behind.

She stops in her tracks when a boy who looks nothing like Kaylor gets out of the driver's side of the car. Breath billows in plumes out of Sarah's mouth, and suddenly she's breathing so hard she feels like she needs to bend over. But she doesn't. She can't drop Fluffy.

Kaylor runs forward and embraces the boy, though, so it must be her brother. He doesn't have cloudy blond hair or light eyes or a face as round as Kaylor's, though. But whatever, he's their ride and Kaylor obviously knows him.

The three girls pile into the back and Sarah settles Fluffy's carrier on her lap.

"So Kaylor," Jonathan asks from the front seat, "Why are we outside your school this late at night? Did you guys get up to some kind of trouble? Am I going to have to tell mom and dad it was you when the trashed interior of your school shows up on the news tomorrow morning?"

Kaylor growls—actually *growls*—at him, and slaps his shoulder over the seat from where she's sitting behind him.

"We were saving Sarah's spider, you numb-nut. The teacher thinks it's dead," she says, "And you'd better not go tattling, or you'll pay for it."

Jonathan laughs at her, "You know I wouldn't tell. I never do. That's why you call *me* and not Richard." He shakes his head, and then looks at Sarah through the rear view mirror. "A spider? Is that the tarantula in your science class Kaylor keeps talking about? How do you know she's alive?"

Sarah's a little floored by how Kaylor's interacting with her brother. They seem so comfortable with each other. If *Sarah* growled at *Chris* and then slapped his shoulder like that, she'd get ignored and glared at for a week. And here she'd been thinking she and Chris were close, for siblings. She doubted Jonathan would be mad if Kaylor stole his old spider's plastic carrier.

"You okay there, Sarah?" Jonathan prompts, and she's forced back to reality.

"She moved, when we picked her up. And she doesn't smell, either." Chris's spider had smelled, after it had died.

"Oh—okay," says Jonathan, "But usually things only start to smell when they've been dead for a while. If you *think* she's alive, then we should still take her to the vet. I'm just trying to say...don't get your hopes up."

Sarah can't get out of the car fast enough once they reach the parking lot. *Little Valley Animal Hospital* gleams white across the top of a nearby building. But the lights aren't on inside. Sarah tries very hard to keep her heart from plummeting into her stomach. They still have one minute. They should be open. She sprints across the parking lot for the building.

Sarah grabs the door of the vet's office, breathing hard, Fluffy's carrier still tucked firmly under her arm. The knob doesn't move. She pushes down on it with all her might. It doesn't

budge. It's locked. Sarah sets Fluffy's cage on the ground and grabs the doorknob with both hands. It still won't budge. How could they have gotten here, after every single time where they might have been caught, could have gotten in trouble, after everything that could have gone wrong—Sarah refuses to believe it. She steps back and kicks the door as hard as she can.

"Sarah, wait!" Kaylor says, grabbing hold of one of Sarah's arms, "Jonathan says he found something! Come on, calm down!"

Sarah stops, breathing hard, and looks back down at Fluffy's carrier on the ground.

"He has a friend with a tarantula. He got a text—she might just be dehydrated. It's hard to tell, people do think they're dead sometimes when they aren't. But Sarah, if we hurry home, we can put her in a Tupperware with wet paper towels and we might save her."

Anna walks up to the carrier, picking it up and handing it to Sarah. She stares at it for a minute, heart still pounding, and then reaches out and takes it. There's still hope. The vet isn't open, but Fluffy isn't doomed. She's just too tired to do anything but let Kaylor lead her back to the car.

"You obviously care about her more than that teacher did," says Jonathan as he drives them home, "Maybe you should just keep her."

Keep Fluffy? She hadn't thought of that. She had always wanted her own spider, or at least she had since Chris got his. Fluffy could be her pet—her permanent friend. She could guilt her mother into letting her keep her, maybe ask Kaylor or Anna to help her talk her family around. She has an allowance, she thinks she's probably saved enough to buy a cage. She could hide it in her room. Even if her family says no, how are they going to stop her?

Sarah looks down at the cage with the spider in her lap and smiles softly to herself.

"Maybe I will."

Fluffy Changes and Analysis

Originally, Sarah's parents weren't present at all in this story. She mentioned them, and thought about them, but neither her father nor her mother were physically present in the story. I decided to develop her relationship with her mother by adding one scene with her mother present. When I first started writing this story, Sarah and her friends were supposed to be eight or nine, but I realized that it wouldn't be realistic for girls that young to break into their school in the middle of the night.

Sarah takes on a huge leadership role later on in her life, and this story addresses the moment when she begins to realize her potential. Anna and Kaylor fall in line behind her with little to no effort on her part, and these two characters form the backbone of Sarah's support in the novel. Sarah starts out as a very shy, reserved little girl, and the events in this short story are what begin her transformation into a confident young woman.

Escape

Anna has to wear the black dress with the uncomfortable long sleeves and the itchy satin skirt. It isn't really fair. No one's going to be looking at her—they think her mother's dead. Even her father thinks her mother's dead. He's standing out in the garage right now, in his black suit and his thick glasses, looking a little too clumsy and uncertain to be a proper adult. He wants her to come out to the car. But Anna doesn't want to.

"Anna," he says sternly, holding the car door open for her, "Come on. We have to go."

She clutches at the uncomfortable satin skirt and shakes her head.

Her father sighs and slumps, wiping at his forehead with the back of his hand. "We have to go, Sweetheart," he says, "Will you hurry? Please?"

Anna shakes her head again. "Why?" she asks. Why do they have to go along with this charade? Her mother isn't really dead.

Her father crouches down to meet her eyes and smiles grimly, like he's forcing his face to contort in ways it doesn't want to. "We need to go and...and say goodbye. All our relatives are going to be there, don't you want to see your cousins?"

Anna bites her lip. She's never been very fond of her cousins: she doesn't actually know them that well. Most of them live in Chicago, and that's a long ways away from here. They're all from her dad's side of the family. Her mother doesn't have any relatives.

"Anna, please?" her father asks, still crouched down and leaning even further forward than usual, looking almost as if he might collapse onto his face. Anna stifles a giggle at the thought, but she decides to comply. If he wants her to play along this badly, then she will. For now. She climbs into the car and her father closes the door behind her.

It happened a week ago. The new red car sat parked in the driveway, and Anna's mother was at the door, fussing with her black purse, trying to get something out of it. She looked up and smiled briefly when she saw Anna standing in the doorway, watching her.

"Where are you going?" Anna asked.

Her mother had stopped, then, looked hard at Anna and walked over to her, her heels making a clicking sound on the driveway. She crouched down, and held a gloved hand up to stroke Anna's cheek. "I'll be back," she said softly, holding something up to dangle in front of Anna's nose. It was a cross, a largish silver pendant on a thin silver chain. "This is for you." She folded it neatly into Anna's hands, a few brown curls leaking out of the tight bun behind her head.

Anna fiddles with the cross now, in her father's car on the way to a fake funeral. She can't help but smirk a little in pride, staring down at it. Her mother left it for her, not for anyone else. She didn't even give Anna's father a present before she left. He had no idea, none at all, that she meant to leave.

A few hours later, Anna's dad had called her back downstairs. She'd been acting out a rather important scene with her dolls, but he sounded so urgent that she had to interrupt it. She apologized quickly to them for jerking them so abruptly out of their adventure and back into reality before heading down to see what had her father in such a fuss. He was standing at the table in the kitchen, staring down at the phone in his hand. Anna stopped just beyond the counter and tilted her head.

"What, dad?"

He looked up at her, and then back down at the phone. "Come here, Anna, I have something to tell you." His face was bright red, and there was a shake in his voice. Something must really be wrong. She walked over and he pulled her into his lap, kissing the top of her head. "There's something you need to know about your mother."

Anna looked up at him curiously, remembering how her mother gave her the cross before she left in the red car and wondering if maybe it had something to do with that. She sensed that he might need to be comforted, so she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight.

"She—she got into a car wreck. There was...it was...it was bad, Anna, they couldn't— Oh, Anna, your mother isn't coming back." He said the last part in a quick rush of breath, and then buried his face in her shoulder. He was crying. She'd seen him cry before, but not like this. Some small part of her thought, briefly, that he was trying to tell her that her mother was dead. But then she stopped that. How could her mother have known she was going to die? Why would she have given Anna the cross, unless she meant to run away?

Anna saw a newspaper clipping later, and she knew she was right. The wrecked car in the picture was grey: the car Anna's mother left in was red.

She doesn't understand why her father's still so sad. Why doesn't he see it? Did her mother not leave him any clues? It's a mystery, a game, like the ones she used to play with Anna before she had to leave. She remembers how her mother would smile and get down on her knees to be at Anna's level, her pale blue eyes meeting Anna's green ones. She would grab Anna's hands in her own, her skin smooth as silk, and tell her a story about leprechauns or fairies or spies in the house, how they'd take some of Anna's or her mother's things and hide them away. She would show her a note that she'd found on the door, or a tiny footprint in the dust on a shelf.

They would follow the clues until Anna found what they were looking for, and then she and her mother would play with what had been stolen. One time, the fairies stole all of Anna's Christmas presents and hid them around the house.

Anna knew that wasn't real: she was seven. Real fairies might exist somewhere, but certainly not in her house. Her mother had been training her for something, she knew it. Maybe for this.

The funeral is dark and cramped in the little church, and the people around her are all on the verge of tears. Most of them are people she vaguely recognizes as part of her dad's family, but some she doesn't recognize at all. Her father tells her they're her mother's friends from work, or from other places. A little blond boy squirms and complains in the seat a few rows in behind them, so she has to keep glaring at him over her shoulder, because Anna's better behaved than that. She sits still in her seat, holding her dad's hand and swinging it back and forth. Someone coughs wetly behind them, and another girl's crying quietly. Everyone here is all so sad. Did her mother understand that she would make everyone sad when she left? Anna lets go of her dad's hand and takes the cross charm out from under the neck of her dress, running her thumb down its side. Anna knows she isn't dead, but why did she have to leave? And why didn't she tell anyone?

The service starts, and her father grabs her hand again. He holds his other hand up to press against his mouth, the fingers trembling. His glasses are slipping down his nose, but he doesn't seem to notice. He doesn't notice a lot of things: little things, clues. He never noticed the clues Anna's mother left around the house for her to find the toys she'd stolen. He never noticed when her mother left in the red car in the evening every couple of days or so. Or at least, he pretended not to notice. He didn't even seem to notice when her mother didn't come home some

nights, and when Anna asked him about it he wouldn't answer. Perhaps he never noticed because he didn't want to know. And Anna wouldn't tell him, because her mother wouldn't want him to know either.

When the people start to get up and file down the aisle to look at the casket, Anna's father makes her follow him. She turns to make a face at the unruly boy as they get up, and he stares back at her with wide, startled eyes. She wants to laugh, but that would offend her father. It would be out of place here, to laugh. It's part of the charade.

When they get to the front, there's a casket. Anna knows what that means. It's closed, nailed shut: she can feel the points of the screws when she runs her fingers across the edge. Her father gently takes her hand and guides it back down to her side. She frowns at him, but he only gives her a watery smile in return. He mumbles a few quick words under his breath, and Anna decides to follow suit.

"Wherever you went, mom, I'll find you," she says, so softly she can barely feel the breath leaving her mouth, "I know you've left me clues."

Escape Changes and Analysis

Escape did not need many changes from its original draft. I needed to clarify a few minor details and descriptions, but left the plot and sequence of events largely unchanged.

This moment in Anna's life is pivotal later on—Anna goes on to chase her mother's memory, convinced that she's still alive somewhere. At the start of the novel, Anna is willing to risk almost anything for information about her mother, even going as far as manipulating her friends and the people around her. She clings to the necklace her mother gave her almost as much as she clings to her memories.

Ghosts

It's too much. It's toomuch toomuch toomuch and he can'tthink and he has to get out of here because everything reminds him of her and he can't take it anymore. His breath is still coming and going in gasps as he stands on the roof of the building, clutching at the air with sweaty hands, staring down at the dark pavement below him. He closes his eyes and takes a sharp breath. It's now or never. He takes a step forward, and plunges down into the blackness, toward the pavement. The world is swallowed in black.

He comes to—and there are voices. His back aches and his throat burns and there's a searing pain all over his side and—he's not dead. That's—he isn't sure whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. But then he can't think about that anymore because his side's splitting down the middle and his head's pounding a mile a minute and he landed on his right hand and he's pretty sure he can't feel his hip anymore and then there are voices. Soft voices, pushing forward through the ringing in his ears. Alex clutches at them like a lifeline.

"Here, if you're so cold, you can have my jacket."

"Pfft, I'm not that cold."

"Is my jacket that repulsive to you?" says the first voice, "I'm offended."

"It's bright orange."

"It matches my hair. And bright orange isn't ugly."

"It also stinks. Like you stink."

A laugh interrupts her. "Wow, Trish, you are such a nice person..."

Alex suddenly lets out an involuntary groan of pain, and then grits his teeth as the wave of agony washes over him.

"Wait, stop," says the girl's voice, "Did you hear that?"

"What was that? It sounded like it came from those bushes over there—"

And then light filters in through a gap in the clump of bushes, and the boy's face is just above him, surrounded in a halo of light.

"Aw, dude, what happened to you?"

Alex blinks up at him, his vision blurring and sharpening in waves. He opens his mouth to say something, but all that comes out is a croak. The girl's face appears next to the boy's. She lets out a sharp breath of air through her teeth.

"Darn," she says, grabbing the boy's arm, "Go call an ambulance."

The boy leaves, and the branches of the bush swing across the light. Alex bites his lip as he fights another bout of pain, not even noticing as it splits and leaks blood into his mouth. He can hear the boy talking into the phone, somewhere not far off.

It didn't work. A tear leaks out the corner of his eye as he tries to fight the feeling coursing down his left side—did he break a rib? It feels like he broke a rib.

"Hey, hey, it's alright, Darn's calling an ambulance," The girl's voice tugs him out of the pain for a second, gives him something else to focus on.

"An... ambulance?" is all he can manage to get out.

She nods, reaching down to unclench his fingers from their death grip on his palm. She grabs his hand and he clutches her hand tightly as another wave of pain wracks his body. Ha, ha, holding hands with a girl, his mother would be proud of him. Sirens sound in the distance.

"Yeah, that's right. They're almost here. It's alright, it's going to be okay."

Sure. Alex gulps, holding the girl's hand even tighter. If he squints at her, she almost looks like—someone he doesn't want to think about right now. His older sister.

"Hey, Trish," says the boy, standing over him now, "Isn't that the kid from our math

class?" Alex can't stop looking at him—his hair makes a sort of golden halo around his head. He can see ghosts, why not angels? Alex almost laughs before he remembers his ribs and groans again instead. And then his eyelids flutter closed and he blacks out again.

He saw the first one when he was ten. He was walking home from school, kicking halfheartedly at a pale pink rock he found on the sidewalk, lost in thought about the new baby girl his parents had just brought home. Until now, Alex had always been the youngest. This new sister had been thrown into his life with little warning. He was a little jealous at first, when his mother was still pregnant and he hadn't seen little Sandra yet, but once his parents brought her home, and he saw just how tiny she was...his parents were excited, and so was his older sister Lilly, but Alex didn't think they understood the gravity of the situation. Sandra was so tiny and fragile and new, and there were so many things out there that could hurt her. Like the boys who would throw things at people who walked by the school yard, or the dog down the street who barked and jumped against its fence so hard Alex was afraid it'd fall over on top of him. Or buglers that might break into the house at night, or the monsters that Alex still isn't convinced don't live in his closet.

Alex bent down and picked up the rock. It was a pretty shade of pink, and he thought it looked large enough that Sandra wouldn't be able to choke on it. He'd bring it home and have his mother wash it, and then maybe she'd let him give it to Sandra.

But then Alex looked up, and there was a boy.

There was something terribly, awfully wrong about this boy. The features of his face seemed to ripple subtly with the wind, like he was made of smoke. He was pale—too pale, and his eyes stared right through Alex, dull and unseeing.

"Hey!" Alex called, forgetting the rock on the ground, "Who are you?"

And just like that, the boy's eyes focused and locked with Alex's. Alex froze, his limbs suddenly heavy as ice. And then the boy started forward, gaining speed until he was running straight at Alex, who didn't have time to react before the boy reached him. Reached him, and ran straight through him. Alex whirled around to watch the boy racing past him down the street, heart pounding in his chest, his entire body shaking. His limbs still felt cold.

He ran all the way home, and when he saw Lilly, he decided to tell her what had happened. She was fifteen, so she was smart, and she'd known how to get him out of this.

"Alex," Lilly said, once he'd finished his story, "It isn't real. You just have...an active imagination. Remember the monsters in the closet?"

"B-but," Alex sputtered, "This is different. It felt real."

Lilly frowned, grabbing both of his hands and staring straight into his face. "It's not real, no matter how real it seems. Either you're imagining things, or someone's trying to scare you. It might have been a real boy—"

"But—"

"But, it wasn't a ghost. I'm sure he didn't really run through you."

Alex tore his hands out of hers, averting his eyes to the floor. "But it f-felt real."

"Alex," Lilly said firmly, "If you ignore it, it will go away. Have you told mom or dad yet?"

"...no."

"Okay. Come get me when you want to tell them, and I'll help you. We don't want them to think you're crazy."

"Crazy?"

"You're not crazy, Alex."

"B-but...Lilly, what if I am? What if I r-really am?"

"You're not. And even if you were, I'd still look out for you."

An odd bright light stabs Alex in the eyes, so he shuts them again quickly. Someone's grabbing his arm. There's something on his face. Words swirl around past his head and through his ears, making him dizzy. He opens his eyes again, and there's too much light. It's blurry. Someone's standing over him—he tries to focus on the face. The guy's mouth is moving. Alex's mouth is moving.

"What?"

"I said, what's your name?"

"Alex...Alex Scott."

"Okay, Alex. You're on your way to the hospital. Can you tell me what happened?"

"There—I—the roof...I fell."

"Okay. Can you tell me—"

The words blur out into nothing. The man's mouth is still moving, but Alex's ears are ringing and he can't hear anything else. He's in an ambulance. It's all white and gray and there are wires and tubes and shelves full of things and there are people...it's too bright. Alex closes his eyes.

A week or so before Sandra disappeared, Alex and his mother were baking a pie for Lilly. She was coming home to visit from college, and apple pies were her favorite. So it became a tradition for Alex's mother to make them whenever Lilly was coming home, and Alex would

help her if he didn't have homework to do.

The smell of apple and cinnamon drifted from the pan on the stove to the rest of the house. Flour billowed up into Alex's face as he flipped the top half of the crust over. It had always been Alex's job to make the crust, ever since he was little. He hadn't particularly wanted to this time, since he was fourteen and it was a kid's job, but the pie was for Lilly, so he hadn't complained. Sandra, not yet old enough to help, had gone out front to play on the doorstep, still just within sight of the kitchen.

"It's too bad your father couldn't come home to help, huh?" his mother asked.

Alex snorted, grinning, "L-like he'd be any h-help."

His mother laughed. "You're right. He'd not much of a cook. I don't know why your grandparents never taught him, it's an important thing to know. Sandra misses him, though. I'm sure you do, too."

Alex shrugs. "Well, sure, b-but you guys have to p-put Lilly through college somehow."

She smiled at him then, one of her sideways half-smiles that was still just a little bit strained.

They'd just finished scooping the filling out into the bottom crust, steam still rising off the warm apples, when someone screamed. Alex looked at his mother, and then to the door. Sandra wasn't there.

They both ran for the door. But when Alex got to the door, his mother just behind him, there was Sandra, standing on the sidewalk, just barely out of view, her smile wide and her eyes bright. She ran forward and grabbed Alex's hand, and then her mother's, and towed them after her, tripping a little in her haste to show them what she'd found.

"There," she said, pointing down at the sidewalk. A thin crack twisted out across the

concrete, and from it sprouted a tiny dandelion, the single yellow flower bright against the gray of the sidewalk. Alex mother scooped Sandra up into her arms.

"Cassandra," she said, "You really scared me, and your brother. If you see something pretty like that, what do you do?"

Sandra averted her eyes, sticking her thumb in her mouth and mumbling around it, "Not scream."

His mother smiled briefly over at Alex, who grinned back, and then turned again to Sandra. "That's right. Just come and get us, okay? And use your inside voice."

"Like this?" Sandra whispered.

"Just like that."

Alex can feel his breath coming and going, in and out, down through his throat to his chest and back up. There are voices, unfamiliar voices, the paramedics and the boy who found him on the street. At least one of them is directed at him, but he doesn't want to open his eyes again, so he wills it to fade into the background. He's lying flat on his back in an ambulance. He should have followed Cassandra. That's what he meant to do. No one tried to stop him. Lilly's gone. His father cares, sure, but he's too busy at work. And Alex's mother hates him now, he's sure she does.

Years after the first ghost, Alex had been sitting at his desk, trying to concentrate on schoolwork, when he'd felt the wind shift. He tried to fight it—shutting his eyes tightly and pinching the bridge of his nose. The last time he acknowledged a ghost, something terrible happened. Something far worse than just an imaginary dead boy running right through him. But

then he heard a voice—a very familiar voice.

"Alex," Sandra said quietly, almost tentatively, and Alex almost fell out of his chair in his haste to turn around.

And there she was—standing, or rather floating, on the carpet in the middle of his room, a small smile fixed on her face.

"You're worried," she said, in her woobly, little-kid voice, "Don't. Alex, I'm fine."

She wasn't—she clearly wasn't. Dirt smudges marred both of her cheeks, and one of the pink ribbons on her ponytail was undone. Her flowery pink skirt was torn in a few places.

"Sandra," Alex said, kneeling to be level with her face, "W-what happened?"

She shook her head, toying with the hem of her skirt. "Doesn't matter. I love you," she said, holding out her hands in front of her for Alex to take. Alex knew if he tried to touch them, he'd just go right through them, so instead he lets his own hands hover a few inches under hers. "I love Mommy and Daddy and Lilly, too. Will you tell them for me? Please?"

Alex swallowed, still not quite believing his eyes. Maybe Lilly was right. Maybe he'd been imagining things.

"Alex," she said again. She looked just like his sister, with her light brown eyes and her round nose and the pink ribbons she loved so much twined into her hair, and Alex couldn't help but believe her.

"I will."

And she was gone.

Alex could feel a sob trying to work its way out of his throat. He had to get out of that room. So he ran downstairs with tears in his eyes, and his mother was standing in the hallway, so he ran to her and just hugged her and sobbed. He told her what had happened, that Cassandra

said she loved her, and then suddenly his mother pushed him away, holding him back far enough that he could see the anger in her face.

"Don't make things up like that," she said, staring sternly back at him. Alex didn't even notice his dad at first, standing a little further down the hallway, a glass shattered on the ground at his feet. "You can't actually see ghost," her voice choked a little, but she kept going, "I don't know why you pretend that you do. We're going to find your sister. She's not dead." Alex stepped back, gaze flitting between her and his dad. She didn't believe him.

But of course she wouldn't. Alex hardly believed himself.

The ambulance fades in again around him, and the light doesn't seem quite as harsh this time. The boy—the one who found Alex outside in the bushes—is there, sitting on the bench next to him, talking to one of the paramedics. Is he allowed to be here? He's got—his hand is on Alex's shoulder. That's not supposed to be there. But, it doesn't feel awful: at least someone seems to care, even if he's a stranger and Alex isn't even sure he knows his real name. Alex clenches his teeth against a sudden wave of disgust with himself. That had been the tipping point: the straw that broke the camel's back.

It was his fault—everything was his fault. He doesn't deserve any kind of comfort. Alex shrugs, or tries to, since his muscles feel like he's trying to swim through syrup. It doesn't work. No one seems to notice. Except one of the paramedics, who shines a flashlight right into his eye. Alex blinks again, and tries to move one of his arms up to cover his face. The paramedic says something that he can't make out. Alex blinks, and suddenly everyone's moved. He didn't have his eyes closed for that long, did he? Maybe he did. He lets them drift closed again.

Alex had let something slip. Something else. But his mother already didn't believe him, so what was new there? Still. It was his fault she left.

He heard them, downstairs, through the floor of his bedroom. He tried to pull the pillow over his head, shut it out, but he could still make out most of what they were saying.

"I just want him to be normal!" his mother yells, tears in her voice, "Why can't he just be a normal boy?"

"Sharon—"

"Maybe it's my fault. Maybe if we sent him away..."

"Sharon—we need to keep him here. I want to have him here, where we can keep an eye on him, where I know that he's safe."

"Why can't he just tell us the truth," Alex's mother sobs, and Alex's heart clenched despite itself. He could shut out the ghosts, maybe he could shut this out, too? "You can't possibly believe that hogwash he came up with about the ghosts. About Sandra."

"I don't."

Alex's heart plummeted.

"But he's still my son. And I think he thinks he can talk to ghosts. Which means there's something wrong and we need to help him! We need to be there for him!"

"You can be," said his mother, so quietly that Alex could barely hear her, "But I shouldn't. This is my fault."

The door slammed behind her.

The lights fade in again, turning the insides of his eyelids a dull red. Why is it so bright? He opens the lids a crack, just to try and see what everyone's doing. One of the paramedics is

sitting on the bench next to the stretcher, looking at his watch. How long have they been in here? The hospital isn't that far away, is it? Or is Alex delusional? He almost laughs out loud at that. Course he's delusional. The question is, just how delusional. He sees things that aren't real—and he let those people kill his sister.

Sandra didn't blame him. His mother didn't blame him. His father didn't either, and neither did Lilly. But it was still Alex's fault—they just didn't know why.

Sandra had wanted to go outside and play basketball in the court at the park. It was just down the street, not far at all, and Alex was fourteen and she was four. Lilly was away at college, Alex's father was gone at work, and his mother was too busy making dinner to leave the house. So, completely unable to resist Cassandra's smile as she bounced up and down in front of him, the miniature basketball clutched between her hands in front of her chest, Alex had said he would take her.

He remembers sitting on a bench not too far away, where he could still see his sister playing, and hearing the noise—a sort of shift in the wind—one of the signs Lilly'd told him he needed to block out. And there was a girl, pale in a green dress, fading in and out with the wind as she stared out at the world from across the street, a tiny trail of blood snaking down the corner of her mouth. Alex wondered what had happened to this one, how long she'd been stuck here. If any of them even were stuck here. Her eyes flitted and darted across the street, to the buildings, past the few people outside in the park, seeming not to register anything in front of her.

He'd been curious, and against Lilly's advice, had let himself stare at the ghost for a little bit longer. Just a little bit longer.

Cassandra was always kind of a loud kid—she'd scream with delight when the neighbor's

dog sniffed her hand or if she saw a dandelion growing out of a crack in the sidewalk. She'd kept up a chattering commentary as she tried to shoot hoops at the court, yelling every time she threw and whenever the ball missed and hit the ground. So it took Alex a minute to hear the softer, deeper voices mixed in with her yells, or the change in her tone when they grabbed her. When he finally turned around, it was too late. She was gone.

Ghosts Changes and Analysis

When I wrote out the first draft of this story, I really had no idea what direction I wanted it to go in. I tried to include too many threads: the ghosts, Alex's mother and older sister's inability to accept him, the death of Alex's younger sister, Alex meeting Darn and Trish, Alex's other friends, and his relationship with his father. I had to cut four scenes that had extraneous characters, and two of those characters altogether. Eventually, I decided that I wanted to focus more on Alex's relationship with Cassandra and how her death affected him. But because Cassandra had died and moved on, I had to turn a significant amount of the story into flashbacks. Originally, this story took place in the hospital, and several people came in to visit Alex while he was there. But I decided that having Alex in the ambulance made the story more immediate and gave me an excuse to use a larger number of flashbacks.

At the start of the novel, Alex is full of guilt, and this story explains why that is. This story also explains how Alex came to realize that he could see ghosts, which is an important part of the novel. I also wanted to explain Alex's lack of drive to get home: compared to some of the other characters, he has much less incentive to leave the new, fantastical world he ends up in.

Outsider

The trees and fence posts speed by in green and white blurs, so fast it's hard for Max to keep his toy car from crashing into them as they go by. He tries to have it jump in time, but his arms can't reach high enough to go over the tops of the trees. In fact, most of them are so tall they reach from the bottom all the way to the top of the big car window, keeping Max's toy car from being able to fly over them at all, even if his arms were long enough. Resigned to losing the game before it's even started, Max settles the toy car back into his lap. He picks at the seatbelt for a minute or so, but that gets boring even faster than the car did. So he turns to his parents in the front seat.

"Where are we going again?"

His mother leans over the seat and smiles at him, "We're going to your Aunt Nora's. She's going to have a baby, so we're bringing her baby things."

Max has to think for a minute before he can nod. There was a stroller, bright clean white with a large pink bow tied right across the top. He can sort of remember Aunt Nora—she looks a lot like his mother, except for the huge bulge in her belly the last time he saw her, when she came over to their house to talk to his mother. She's his only aunt on his mother's side. He thinks. He hasn't seen a lot of the family other than his mother and father. He has more aunts and uncles, but he can't quite remember their names right now. But he doesn't want to ask his mother, because that would be embarrassing, having to admit to her that he didn't know the names of his own relatives. Maybe he'll remember when they get there.

They aren't in the car for more than a few minutes after that. Almost as soon as Max gets out, Uncle Ben is waiting for him and has to pat Max's head and rub his hair around. He remembers Uncle Ben now, too. That's good. It bugs Max a little bit when his uncle messes with

his hair, but he stands still through his grimace because it seems to make Uncle Ben happy, and all the other kids get their hair ruffled too. He remembers *that*. He's been to one or two family gatherings before. Max's parents lead him around to his various relatives, like Uncle Evan and Aunt Annie, and some others he still can't recall the names of. They all say "Oh, look how big you've gotten" just like they're supposed to, like it's something special. He doesn't know when he was any smaller than this, but he plays along. They all seem to know him well, so it doesn't bother him too much.

They're talking to Max's Aunt—Ella?—and Max doesn't *really* know anyone else and he doesn't really see anything else to go do or play with, so he stands next to his mother, holding a fold of her skirt with one hand and swaying back and forth. But that gets boring, and the grown-ups are talking about grown-up things that Max doesn't understand. So he starts to walk in circles, around his mother's feet, taking the toy car out to run up and down the length of his palm. He splays his arms out and spins around in circles, making the car glide over obstacles the way it had on the drive here. He starts spinning so fast he barely has time to react before his hand, with the car, collides straight into his mother with a soft *smack*.

"Max," his mother says sternly, grabbing both of his arms and pinning them to his sides, "Will you stand still for just one minute? We'll finish talking soon, and then we can go get some food, okay?"

Max nods sullenly, dropping his arms and tucking the car back into his pocket. He tries to invent a new game—he'll stand there as still as he can for as long as he can. He won't even move a muscle. He won't even breathe.

"Hey! You're Max, right?" The girl pokes him hard in the ribs. For a second, he loses his balance and almost falls over.

"Huh? Yeah, I'm Max," he says.

"What are you playing?"

"...I don't know. Nothing."

"Well, it doesn't look very fun. C'mon, I know what we can do."

The girl grabs the edge of his sleeve and tows him away. Someone says something behind him, but he filters it out as unimportant. He doesn't really recognize the voice, so it must not be him they want.

"Who are you?" Max asks.

"My name is Patricia," the girl tells him, "We're cousins. We haven't met before, I'd remember you," she says, flicking a piece of his hair with her finger, "You have funny orange hair."

"So what?" Max shrugs, reaching up to fiddle with a stray piece of it, "I like my hair."

The girl stares hard at him, her eyes going squinty.

"What?" Max asks.

"I bet you're not brave enough to jump in the pool and splash everyone."

Max scowls a little. "Why not? Why would I do that?"

"Cause I dared you to."

"No you didn't."

"Well, I dare you to now."

Max looks at her sideways, trying to imitate the way his mother looks at his father when he does something silly. "So what?"

"What do you mean, 'so what'? I *dared* you!"

"So? What'll happen if I don't?"

"...I know things. Things you don't," she looks over both of her shoulders, as if trying to make sure no one's listening in, "and if you jump in the pool, I'll tell you."

"Are you sure?" Max asks. But his curiosity's piqued: what could she know about him that he doesn't know already?

She nods vigorously, "Positive. Just jump in the pool, and I'll tell you."

Max can't swim. But he does want to know what this Patricia girl is talking about. If she's his cousin, maybe she really *does* know something about him that he doesn't. And Max has an idea. It's good enough that he can stomach giving in to Trish's dare without losing any of his pride. It doesn't matter that he can't swim—he'll learn.

"Okay," he says, grabbing hold of her sleeve, "Come over here and watch me, then."

Once she's walking along behind him, not even trying to tear her sleeve out of his grasp, Max breaks into a sprint for last few feet before the pool. As he slips over the edge and his legs hit the water, he can hear Trish scream next to him. He'd pulled her in after him.

Max's head bobs just above the surface. He grins widely at all the people staring at him, but then suddenly he's not above the water anymore. He panics and flails, trying and failing to suck in a deep breath. Water fills his throat and he chokes. He tries to move his arms and legs around, like he thinks you're supposed to when you're swimming, but it doesn't work. His eyes squeeze shut. This is harder than he thought it would be.

Someone grabs him under the armpits and suddenly he's choking and there's air again. He can't open his eyes, it's too wet. His ears pound for another second before clearing suddenly, and he can hear yelling.

"MAX!" his mother yells, and suddenly he's up in the air, watching the water hit the deck below him as it drips out of his nose. The planks of the deck are a blur as his mother carries him

away.

His mother puts him down on the deck, around the corner on the other side of the house. She starts to wipe his face off with a pale green towel that smells kind of funny. He has something he wants to ask her, but he can't remember what it is because his eyes are all blurry and his ears itch. His nose still feels like there are bubbles in it.

"Don't you ever do that again," his mother mumbles, wiping at his face with a corner of the towel.

"Is Patricia okay?"

"She's fine. Her father got her out. It's bad enough that you jumped in the pool, but she said you dragged *her* in after you."

"Well...she dared me."

Max's mother rocks back on her heels, taking a deep breath in through her nose. That's not a good sign. He's not in trouble, is he?

But she doesn't. Instead, she laughs. She laughs so hard tears start to come out of her eyes.

"Um...mom?" Max asks, worried. She sniffs, and wipes a stray tear off of her cheek.

"Max," she says, "Just because someone dares you to do something doesn't mean you *have* to do it," she carefully tucks a stray strand of hair—the bright orange hair Max is suddenly a little self-conscious of—behind his ear.

"I was just the same when I was your age," she says, still stroking the hair out of his face, "I remember—my brother dared me to jump off the roof onto our trampoline. I was terrified of heights, and I didn't really even like the trampoline that much, but I thought that if you didn't take a dare, you'd die. So I stole my father's ladder and took a plunge off the roof," she laughs,

her eyes crinkling, "I broke my jaw and both of my legs, but I healed okay. Just promise me you'll remember that, okay? Nothing bad will happen to you if you refuse a dare." Max looks up at her, then back at the floor, and then up at her again. She's looking at him, waiting for something. So Max nods, and she grins, "You're certainly my son." She laughs and ruffles his hair, the same way Uncle Ben did earlier.

You're certainly my son. But...he hadn't wanted to. He didn't think that. That's not why. But before he can explain himself, his mother's on her feet again, walking back toward the party and calling to Max to follow her.

Max finds Trish, her clothes still sopping wet, a few minutes later.

"What do you know?" he asks.

"I'm not sure I want to tell you anymore," she says, gesturing at her soaked shirt, "You got me all wet."

"But you never said that I couldn't."

Patricia crosses her arms in front of her chest and pouts. "I know. Okay, fine. You're adopted."

"I'm a-what?" Max is sure he didn't hear her right.

"It means your mommy isn't your real mommy. And your daddy isn't the real thing, either. You have a different mommy and a different daddy. My aunt and uncle, your pretend parents, found you out on the street."

"I know what it *means*," Max sputters. This girl is crazy. He stares at her for a long while, trying to parse out exactly why she would lie to him like that. And yet—

She stares right back. "You have funny orange hair. No one else here has orange hair."

You've got light eyes, too, and no one else here has that. It's okay, you can still be my cousin. Just not my *real* cousin."

Max looks back over at his parents, talking to Aunt Nora now. They're laughing. His mother has enormous dimples—Max has those too, he knows because people have told him. But, she's got dark brown hair. Now, he hasn't seen himself in the mirror enough to know for sure, but now that he's really looking, she has a completely different nose. And so does his father. They both have brown eyes, and so many other little features Max is sure now aren't on his own face.

She must be able to sense him looking at her, because she turns around a little. When her eyes meet Max's, her smile softens down into something more like a frown.

Outsider Changes and Analysis

Outsider started out as the story of how Max got his nickname, Darn, which is what he's called throughout the novel. The original title was *What's in a Name*, but the part where Trish gave Max his nickname felt out of place with the rest of the story. In the first draft of this story, Max had some very obvious memory problems, and some of the ways I used to show this were too heavy-handed. Additionally, Max's mother was overbearing, which drew even more attention to his memory issues. There was obvious tension between Max's parents, and I had to decide whether to expand on that or to phase out his parents and focus instead on Max.

At the start of the novel, Max knows he's adopted, but he's tried very hard to forget about it. When he crosses over to this other world, he refuses to pay attention to any evidence he finds that he's not related to his adoptive parents, and he is one character out of the six who fights the fiercest to get home.

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