

Adult  
Short Story  
1<sup>st</sup> Place

Isabella Brown

There's been jazz music playing under my apartment for two weeks now. It doesn't stop, not even at night. I wish I could blame it on neighbors, but I live in a ground-floor apartment, so nobody lives under me. I've tried to brush it off as some newly-opened jazz club or maybe a jazz band that has started busking in the street, two things which wouldn't be uncommon here in New York City. But whatever it is, I just can't figure out why it seems to be coming from underneath my apartment.

With every day that went by, it seemed to grow louder, and I almost couldn't function because of it, which sounds ridiculous, like, oh my god I can't live because it sounds like The Miles Davis Quintet lives underneath my apartment, but seriously, I reached a point at which I couldn't take it anymore. The fact that it *never fucking stops*, and that I have no idea how it sounds like it's right under my apartment, and also that I work from home as an editor for horrible magazine articles. Lately, I find myself re-writing every article in a swing-rhythm kind of way, with every other word being longer than the one that follows it, and then I am sent into a fit of rage when I realize this. My boss sent me an email a few days ago letting me know that my work "Was not up to par with the quality of my usual work", and while I found this to be quite concerning, I couldn't stop myself from re-writing *that* email into a swing-rhythm cadence.

Two days ago, I dumped my problem onto an innocent delivery driver who'd brought me the ramen I ordered (extra egg, no green onion), partially because I had nobody else to rant to about it and partially because I wanted to be reassured that he also heard the music. I wanted to be sure I wasn't totally insane. Well, you can imagine how I reacted when this kid with a mop of ginger hair and a blank expression looked me dead in the eyes and told me in a monotone voice that he had no idea what I was talking about, that he didn't hear anything. *I must be insane*, I thought,

taking my ramen and shutting the door quickly. When I opened the container and found a heap of green onions floating around the broth, I threw it into the trash and screamed into my couch (Oh god, I hate that thing - it smells and it's full of holes with cotton spilling all over the place.)

Yesterday, the music stopped. I felt like I was in a daze; it didn't feel real, almost too good to be true. I wrote a normal article with normal words and I texted my landlord about all of the issues in my apartment I had been trying to ignore for weeks. I even ordered pizza and chatted with the delivery boy, which was the most social interaction I had had in a long time. These days, I don't leave my apartment unless I have to. I have too many phobias and there are too many things in the world that I'm afraid will hurt me, make me more sick than I already am. So, I stay here, in this rotting little apartment that also makes me sick, but I can deal with it because it's just me here. It makes me feel more in control.

When I wake up the next morning, the music is back.

Now, I am standing in the middle of my living room floor, holding a saw in my right hand and a hammer in my left. My curtains are shut, I don't want the police to be called. I close my eyes and listen to the music, a floating trumpet melody accompanied by some quirky piano harmonies, saxophone, and a shaker drum. *I am going to find you*, I think.

And then, I do it. I start to saw at my floor, which has been decaying for a while now, saggy floor boards that smell a bit sour. This helps me to remove them, because they are softer than healthy, strong wood. I use the back end of the hammer to pry up the wood. It's a relatively quick process, and as I pull up my floor, the music grows louder, motivating me to work faster. I

don't care that I am destroying my apartment. If my landlord gives me any shit, I will push him into the hole I have made.

Once I have created a hole big enough for me to fit in, I stop and look down. All I see is black - it looks like an eternal black hole, and the music is simmering in the hole, slowly rising into my apartment like steam from a pot of boiling water. And then, I jump.

I fall for several seconds before I land. The floor is cold and hard and the impact causes a sharp pain to shoot through my legs. I don't know where I am, only that it is completely dark. After a moment, the room fills with light, and in front of me is the music I have been hearing for weeks.

The first thing I notice is that the music is actually much more pleasant when I'm inside it. It's no longer background music, I am finally looking at the musicians I have been hearing for weeks. They're creating something right in front of me, and it's beautiful.

The next thing I notice is that none of the musicians have faces, although this doesn't freak me out like it should. There is a bass player, tall but kind of slumped over, gently plucking the strings of his instrument, and when I stare at the blurry pale surface where his face should be, I feel a surge in my stomach. Even though he doesn't have eyes, I can tell he is staring at me. I quickly comb my fingers through my greasy hair and look away from him.

The lights are moody, deep blues and shades of purple, swimming around the room. I turn around, and there is a bar; behind it, a faceless bartender, who is bald and wearing a sharp tuxedo. The air smells sweet and draws me over to the bar, where there is one red leather stool. I

assume that it is for me, and sit down. I don't know if the bartender notices me, his back is turned to me now, and he appears to be making something. When he turns around, I see that he is holding a china plate with a little dark cake on it, sprinkled with powdered sugar. He sets it down in front of me.

"Thank you," I say. He nods. I take a fork and stab into it, and chocolate starts to pour out of the middle. I eat all of it in five bites. I suddenly find myself overwhelmingly thirsty from the sweetness of the cake. "Can I have a dirty martini?" I ask. Within two seconds of the words leaving my mouth, he spins around and hands me the drink, and I am delighted. I drink it all in one swig.

The alcohol has given me courage to ask the bartender a question. "Where am I?"

His face, or lack thereof, doesn't move, but I hear him speak. "You're in a jazz club." His voice is low, raspy, like he hasn't spoken in a very long time.

"Yeah, but, why is it under my apartment? And why doesn't anyone have a face? And why am I the only normal person here?"

I fear that I have asked him too much, because he turns around and doesn't answer me for a while, but when he turns back around, he is holding out another drink. This one is in a tall silver glass, filled with a rose-colored liquid, shimmering in the light. He sets it in front of me, and I look into metal, which is showing me warped reflections of the room around me. When I see myself in the glass, I notice that I, too, no longer have a face. I turn around on my red stool and

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realize that a crowd of faceless people has formed, and they are all dancing. Maybe they have always been there; I might have been too distracted to notice them.

So, I did the only thing I knew to do, which was to slide off my stool and start dancing, to let the jagged rhythm of the music guide me to the middle of the crowd, limbs tangling with my neighbors, lost in the moving lights and gentle swaying of the floor and getting drunk from the smell of lava cake. I don't even think about how I could get sick from being with this many people.

When I look on stage, the bass player is still looking at me. I smile, and he winks. And when I look up for the hole in the ceiling that I came through, I discover it is no longer there, but I don't mind, because I have finally found somewhere I belong.

Adult  
Short Story  
2<sup>nd</sup> Place

Lauren E. Dejon

### “Pygmalion” A Short Story

At two years old, I remember lying back on my mom’s bed as she picked at the blackheads on my face with her manicured nails. I didn’t even know what blackheads were or why it was important I didn’t have them, and with each painful press of her nails, I squirmed and squirmed.

“Hold still!” She’d chide and squeeze harder. “You’ve been smelling too many flowers in the backyard. The pollen is clogging your pores.”

I pictured the afternoons I’d spent holding bunches of Queen Anne’s Lace and Lily of the Valley in my little fists, and the little bubbles of laughter that would escape me echoing through the yard. The next time I went out into our yard and saw the flowers peeking up through the borders of the fence, I hesitated...and I have been hesitating ever since.

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I am eight years old, sitting down at my noisy class cafeteria table during lunch and opening my Wonder Woman lunchbox. I pull boiled eggs, cherry tomatoes, and meat and cheese roll ups proudly out of my bento box. My family has been on a low carb diet for the past month and I have already learned all the important tenets of its creed: bread is terrible for you; sweets are even worse. If you are craving ice cream, mix cream cheese with sugarless chocolate sauce and try to ignore how bad it tastes

Across the table from me Jake Gardner, a boy from my grade, crinkles his nose. “What are you eating?”

I look over at his Lunchables, Capri-Sun and Dunkaroos. My mouth goes dry. “I’m on a diet. I lost two pounds.” I say it with as much delight as I can manage.



Jake laughs, loud and clear, the noise ricocheting across the cafeteria. He turns to his buddies next to him, and his face is no longer friendly, "Kayla lost two pounds, guys! Kayla lost two pounds!"

The room becomes a cacophony of echoes, the same phrase repeated over again, the information traded exponentially as I sink down into my seat. My face burns and I listlessly pick at my turkey roll up. At home this news is a good thing. I do not understand.

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At ten years old, I run laps around the block each morning at my mother's insistence.

"I like the person you are better when you exercise." She tells me. "It's good for you."

I do not tell her that when I am out of view from our house window I slow my pace to a glacial stroll. I do not tell her that I keep books hidden under my shirt to read outside when she cannot see me.

And I try not to wonder if she would still like me if she knew.

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I am thirteen, staying up till midnight on a school day, pouring over copies of *Teen Vogue* and *Seventeen* that are spread out on my bed. The dim glow from my bedside lamp illuminates the symmetrical faces of models and celebrities in each photoshoot and advertisement. As I flip the pages, I itemize, in my mind, a wish list of all the clothes, characteristics and make-up I dream of having and how it would make me a better version of myself. I palm the pages. I want this girl's white, straight teeth, and this girl's hairstyle. I want this girl's eye color and this other girl's slim arms and legs.

It is now one o'clock in the morning. I get up off my bed and sit down on the floor to do some sit ups, as I usually do on restless nights. I count them out, one by one, and feel utterly defeated when I look down and realize my stomach still looks the same.

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I am seventeen looking with my mom in the Macy's department store for swimsuits to wear on stage for the yearly Miss Teen USA pageant. I picture myself standing on the cavernous stage, the glare of the stage lights blinding me as I pose and pivot in front of a faceless crowd that evaluates my every move.

She holds a beautiful sapphire blue bathing suit up on its hanger, "How about this one?" she asks. "We would have to add some silicon implants in the lining of the bust to perk you up a bit, but it's doable."

I nod and then look down at my own chest as it is. Every day on TV I see older women on reality shows going to plastic surgeons, begging them to reverse the clock and take their bodies back to when they were seventeen. I thought I would have more time, but I guess I was wrong.

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I am eighteen and having lunch with my family in the college campus cafeteria after spending all morning moving into my dorm. The dining hall is newly renovated, with option after option for students to choose from. There are salad bars, a macaroni station, and a homestyle buffet filled with comfort food. Families from all over the world, along with their children, fill the room, and the crush of bodies overwhelms me. At the buffet table I grab two chicken strips, too nervous and scared to look for anything else to add to my plate. I try to make them last but they are quickly gone.

“Are you going to get anything else?” My mom asks, as we sit at our table, looking up at me over her fresh salad.

I shake my head “no” in silent answer.

“If that’s how you eat the rest of the year it looks like you’ll finally lose some weight,” she responds, pleased. For the rest of the school year I try not to be disappointed in myself when I go back for seconds or have a full plate of food that day.

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I am now thirty, almost the same age my mom was when she gave birth to me. I sit in my chair on the porch, basking in the sunshine and feeling the curve of my belly that holds my daughter safe inside me as she grows and grows and grows.

I am far enough along now that friends, family, and even strangers in the street will approach me with bright smiles asking familiar questions, “*Is this your first? When are you due? Do you know the gender?*” I often smile back and tell them “Yes, this is our first child”, and “Yes, our daughter will be here in the fall when the leaves change.”

“I’m sure she’ll be just as beautiful as her mother,” they offer. “I’m sure she’ll be an absolute cutie,” they reply. I know they mean well, but in those words I cannot help but hear the sound of a chisel chipping away at marble. In those words I hear the carving of stone as the space my daughter will occupy is already decided. My daughter has not been born yet and already the process has begun.

As I close my eyes and feel my bump, I picture instead my baby in the womb. All around her are bright colors and paints, an aurora of shades basking her in their glow. She is both the painter and the canvas, and at this moment no one can tell her what to do or who to be. She already knows she is a perfect work of art and that she does not need to change.

Adult  
Short Story  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place

Tomoko  
Funahashi

## ONE STEP AWAY

A compact rented car turns around the last sharp curve of the coastline. The bright sun pierces through the windshield, and the Sea of Japan appears. Near the end of the winding road, a series of cliffs stand, forming a rocky coastline. The dark blue ocean sparkles and the waves silently crash against the cliffs, biting them with vicious white teeth.

Squinting through his Ray-Ban sunglasses, Haruki, a handsome male in his thirties drives the rented car. His sky-blue T-shirt is visible under his black biker jacket. Haruki's wife, Mai, sits in the passenger seat, holding her hemp tote bag on her lap. Dressed in a beige fleece jacket and white leggings, Mai stares at the breaking waves.

"That's Tojinbo." Haruki moves his chin toward the cliffs. "We'll be there in an hour."

Mai turns to Haruki. "Are you sure you want to go there?"

"Of course." Placing both his hands on the steering wheel, Haruki glances at Mai. "I want to overcome my weak point, acrophobia, and I want you to witness how brave I have become."

"I know you're brave. How could you become braver?" Mai smiles. "I wish I would be like you. I have many things I cannot concur."

"At least, you're not afraid of height. And don't worry. I'll protect you whenever you encounter anything you fear." Keeping his eyes forward, Haruki smiles. "I'm here for you, you know."

Mai happily nods and leans onto Haruki. He extends his arm around her shoulders and lightly kisses her head.

As their car approaches the park near the Tojinbo cliffs, clouds have formed to cover the sky, and gusty winds toward the sea begin to blow. Mai opens her phone. The weather forecast pops up, displaying a strong wind warning. It explains that a cold front is approaching the area.

“Oh... The forecast says gusty winds are blowing where we are now.” Mai looks up at the sky. “It’s getting dark. Let’s wait inside until the front goes away.”

“A front won’t stay. The blue sky will be back before we reach the cliff.”

Mai lowers the window a little. The cool air hisses and gushes in. “The wind is strong.” Mai hurriedly shuts it back. “It must be much stronger near the shore. Do you really...?”

“I want to go there, stand at the very end of the cliff, and pose for a photo or two...”

Haruki laughs. “...while I still feel brave.”

“Don’t force anything like that, hon.”

“I want to.” Haruki glances at Mai.

Mai stares back at her husband, a stubborn man. Whatever decision he makes means sincere. Mai knows no one can stop him now.

“What if a gusty wind sweeps you away from the cliff?”

“Impossible. I’m not so easy to get carried away!” Haruki hits the steering wheel and laughs.

Haruki drives his car into a parking lot. People walking by the souvenir shops shrink themselves into their jackets and tightly hold their arms or their bags. Haruki parks the corner spot close to the cliffs. The dark sea also looks agitated with the strong wind.

“Well, I should prove if I am brave enough to stand on a high cliff.”

“You know, you don’t have to do it today.” Mai touches Haruki’s arm. “Look, standing there sounds a bit crazy.”

“But you can stand even if on such a crazy day, huh?” Haruki grins. “Because you’re not afraid of height.”

"I'm OK with height, yes, but I'll stay away from high cliffs on such a stormy day." Mai smiles. "Let's wait."

"I just want to show I am a man. You got it?"

Haruki swiftly opens the door and steps out. Immediately, the door shuts with a bang. Mai jumps. She breathes deeply and glances at Haruki, who is already walking away.

*I know him, but he should know this challenge might threaten his life.*

Indeed, Haruki loves to challenge. He periodically competes in sports, like a triathlon or full marathon, and he used to challenge a worldwide game battle before. He was also certified as a wine sommelier and a barista.

Mai slightly smiles.

*That's him. Well, I will take his photo quickly and pull him away from the edge.*

Haruki stands on the sidewalk and turns. His hair whirls like a horsetail, and his face looks pale. Mai gets out of the car and hurriedly catches up with him.

Haruki takes his sunglasses off and puts them inside his chest pocket. "I don't want to lose my Ray-Ban to the gusty wind."

"Yeah, they're your favorite." Mai taps her tote bag. "Do you want to put them in my bag? It's more secure than your flattering biker jacket."

"They're good in my pocket." Without a smile, Haruki clasps Mai's hand. "Let's move."

Like dragging heavy luggage, Haruki jerks Mai's hand and strides out.

The gray sky is thick, shifting the lower clouds. A strong wind blows from behind Mai, trying to sweep her toward the cliff.

The tourists stand a couple of meters away from the cliff, quickly shoot photos, and rush back to the parking lot.

The wind seems not to die down. Mai tries to slap away her whirling hair from her face.

The dark blue horizon comes into view. Haruki slows down, and step by step, he slides his feet toward the cliff. The rumble through the ground creeps up Mai's legs. Mai stops and clasps his hand. Haruki stops and turns.

"It's vibrating, hon." Mai clings to Haruki's arm. "The waves smash into the cliff."

Haruki pulls her and holds her by his side. He resumes his slow steps to the edge.

"It's just a nature thing. Let's take a selfie quickly." Haruki leans to Mai. "Film a brief video from our feet to our face and then shoot photos."

"But..."

Instead of responding to her, Haruki pulls Mai close to him and glances at the cliff. Holding Mai close to him, Haruki slowly approaches the edge. The ground rocks repeatedly as if the enraged cliff were trying to shake away the disdainful tourists.

"Can we stop, Haruki?" Mai touches Haruki's chest. "You can call me a coward. Let's go back."

"NO!" He glares at Mai. His eyes are bloodshot, and his temporal arteries are popping. Haruki raises his voice, "I want to finish this today!"

Haruki stands close to the edge of the cliff and turns around. The gusty blow sweeps his hair away from his face. Still fixing his eyes on Mai, Haruki takes his phone from his jeans pocket. With the other arm, Haruki grabs Mai's arm.

"No, I don't want it!" Mai swings her arm, which accidentally hits Haruki's chin. Astonished, Haruki shuts his eyes and turns away his face.

"Mai, Come!" Haruki extends his hand to Mai, but she swiftly leans forward, a step away from him.



Haruki's hand only grabs air.

Haruki turns pale. He loses his balance and falls on his back into the rugged coast. His slender body bounces twice on the wall before it lands on the sheer rocks in the indented coastline. Instantly, the raging waves swallow Haruki's black jacket, and his blue jeans sink under the swaying white bubbles.

Mai crawls over to the cliff. She screams for Haruki. Shaking, Mai screams again and again until someone rushes to her and calls a rescue.

Mai feels everything is topples over, uncollectable and unorganizable. Tears flood down her face. Regrets accelerate to fill Mai's mind. *I should have stopped him. I should have insisted on taking photos from a safe distance.*

Soon, the police and the emergency crew arrive. An officer asks, "Why did you folks approach the popular-for-suicide cliff in such violent winds?"

"My husband wanted to show me he was no longer afraid of height." Mai's voice is shaking. "I told him to wait until the storm was gone."

"He should have stayed being acrophobic." The officer taps Mai's shoulder. "I'm sorry for what happened to him."

Mai nods with sobbing. She recalls the day she found out Haruki had changed Mai's insurance policy from a half million to one million without notifying her. Mai wanted to confront him about it, but she also knew his determination would never change by her opinion.

All Mai can do now is sobbing. Dissolving herself in the pool of tears, Mai fully realized one step away from Haruki cost him his life.

Adult  
Short Story  
Honorable Mention

Marcia  
McGreevy Lewis

Leaping from my Perch

## Leaping from My Perch

My journey began with a mailbox. When I was growing up in Spokane, WA, USA, in the 40s and 50s, our mailbox, was a humble fixture that hung next to the back door. It served dual purposes as a receptacle for mail and as a delivery point for Benewah Dairy.

When the milkman arrived, he nestled white butter and at least six slope-necked bottles that resembled bowling pins into the mailbox. To make space for the mail, we shuttled these dairy treasures to the kitchen. Then we had the fun of squishing the yellow food color packet, the size of a penny, into the butter. Next we popped the paper caps on the milk bottles and slurped the thick, luscious cream from the tops. Then we'd tighten the paper caps so my mom wouldn't suspect that the milk ever arrived with cream on top. Right . . .

After swigging cream, cruised past the clothesline swathed in diapers in the backyard because we needed the massive pine tree. During long, hot summer days, we plopped our bellies onto the swing anchored in the tree and pushed off. This was a delusional attempt to "wear off the fat." Truly delusional. While I cherished these moments with my siblings, my longing for solitude often led me to crave quiet.

Our garage held the reliable Woodie that ferried us to swimming lessons, Blue Birds and the grocery store. We always went along to the store because we loved counting up the S&H green

Leaping from my Perch

stamps, spending hours imagining what our next free gift would be. Mom ruled. It was a vacuum or a toaster.

Attached to the garage was the bike shed that held my beloved robin's egg blue Schwinn bicycle. I spent many summer days sailing on it to the candy store, school and our neighborhood baseball games. Playing cards clipped to the spokes with clothespins mimicked the roar of a motor to herald my arrival. I sacrificed countless decks of cards, much to my siblings' chagrin, as we often found ourselves with incomplete sets when playing Canasta or having gin rummy tournaments. I was a little remorseful as I prized those tournaments. I usually won.

My cherished oasis of solitude was the rooftop of the garage, nestled beneath the shade of a lilac tree with deep purple blossoms. It became my haven for lazy hours spent reading, intoxicated by scent of lilacs. The aroma reminded me of walking into a florist's shop, though florists had flat floors. My rooftop wasn't flat, and that occasionally led to undignified slides.

I'd pick one of my library treasures to haul up there: The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett, When We Were Very Young by A. A. Milne or A Child's Garden of Verses by Robert Louis Stevenson. I spent hours imagining peeking behind the gate of that secret garden, empathizing with poor Christopher Robin who had wheezles and sneezles or sharing Stevenson's "pleasantest experience of flying on a swing up in the air so blue."

### Leaping from my Perch

When I wasn't babysitting or at dramatics lessons, I would race to my rooftop haven. From there I could spot the backdoor mailbox and pounce when the mail arrived. The bounty would include magazines like "Reader's Digest," "National Geographic," "Time" or "The Saturday Evening Post." I was aggressive about grabbing the "National Geographic" because my brothers hovered, anticipating photos of bare-breasted women from Africa featured within its pages.

Upon snatching the mail, I placed the letters on the mantle in the living room. Then I disappeared to my rooftop sanctuary, taking with me whatever magazine I'd scooped up. By the time my parents perused the day's correspondence, I'd have devoured the magazines' contents and positioned them in their designated spot alongside the letters.

Each publication held its unique allure. "Reader's Digest" was a trove of witty jokes and stories short enough that I could read them before sliding off the roof. "Time" took a while to read, but was worth the challenge. The Norman Rockwell covers on "The Saturday Evening" Post transported me to lives I longed to live. "National Geographic" ignited my wanderlust.

Then, a seismic announcement rattled my idyllic world. My parents revealed their plans to demolish the garage and construct a double one in its place. They were going to destroy my hideaway and cut down my lilac tree! I recognized the need for an extra garage, but an intense desire welled up within me—an urge to persuade them to delay this project, perhaps until I entered high school, just one year away. I couldn't tell them that my secret hideaway would vanish. They didn't know about it. Did they?

## Leaping from my Perch

I implored for an extension, using the fragile excuse that the aging lilac bush deserved one more season to flourish before its demise. It was getting old and would probably die soon anyway. Giving it one more year to bloom would be big-hearted. Spokane was the Lilac City, after all. They shook their heads in puzzlement but gave me that year. Maybe they did know about my hideaway, but I will always appreciate their honoring my wishes despite their apparent bafflement.

During the following year, I weaned myself off my rooftop refuge, making a final leap from my perch when I started high school. However, the lessons learned in that valued space would forever influence my life's trajectory. As an adult, I now explore the very places I once idealized in my backyard tour, embracing the adventures and opportunities that my childhood hideaway allowed me to envision.

I share the wonders of Costa Rica, the Galapagos Islands and Paris with my grandchildren, igniting their own sense of wonder and curiosity. My voyages have included five Spanish language immersions in Central American countries. I've taken up writing and have ventured into teaching English abroad. My secret rooftop hideout, once a source of solitude and imagination, became the springboard for a commitment to adventure.