

# *Second Choices*

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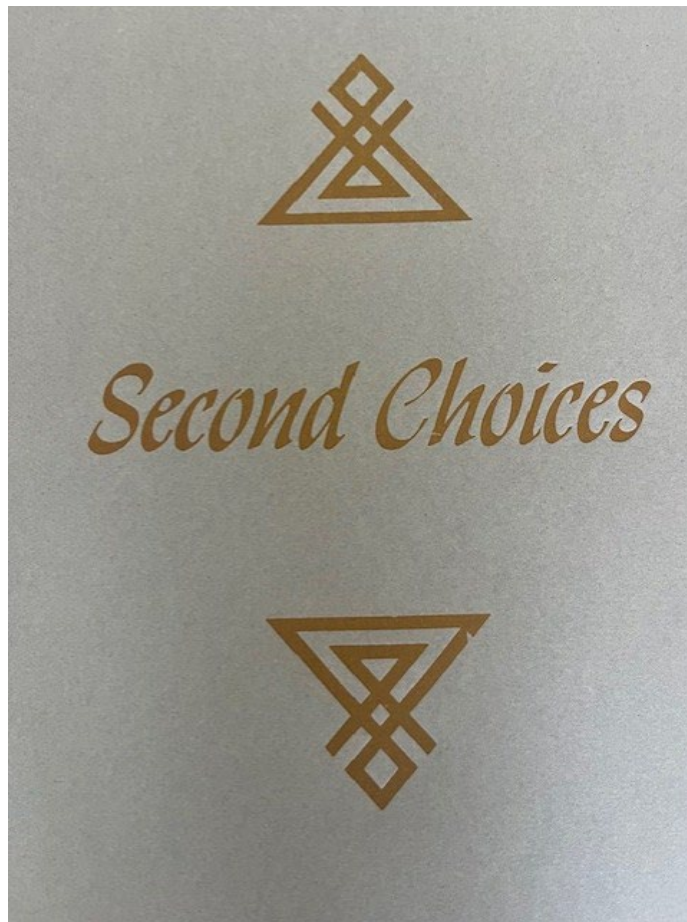
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*There are three constants in life ... change, choice and principles.*

*- Stephen Covey*

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# The Dryad

## By Zoe Gemignani

*Take from me all my years of life and grant me but half of a May fly's life! Free me from my prison; give me human life and human happiness, though it be but for a fleeting moment, for only this one night, and then punish me, if you wish, for my longing for life! Free me, even if this dwelling of mine, this fresh young tree, wither, be cut down, turned to ashes, and blown away by the winds!*

*- From Hans Christian Andersen's "The Dryad"*

*I am grateful for this moment with every breath I take.* The thought runs through her mind as she whorls round in her dance. Though breath burns like fire, though she wheezes like a bellow a hundred years old, still she smiles joyfully. Though each step is pain, an ancient grace runs through her.

Why should she not be amazed? She traded all she could have been for this. This dance, this night, this moment. Twenty years dreaming, watching swallows learn to fly. *I should like to learn to fly.* The hour strikes five, and the dance ends. She feels each passing moment like a clock within her heart. This party has run its course for her.

She steps out upon the cobblestones, starts towards the square where she will die. The light has not yet begun to break upon this city, but still the bright lights of its joy illuminate her way. She sits upon the root of the youthful chestnut that stands in the square.

A night of wonder, she has had. *One night*, he said. *One night, young Chestnut, and you'll lose all those future years.* Still, she thought it a fair trade. What use is dying if you have not lived? She spoke with many, through those hours. Spoke with them of stories, and far off places. *Fairy tales?* One scoffed. *We don't need them any longer. What use have children for fairy tales when they can have steam engines?* How the words had burned. But that was just one man. Others had not been so cruel. Had told her of places far off, where water rose in a great plain to meet the horizon; where trees like this stood thick and deep, and drowned noise in their embrace. An old man had told

her tales she had never heard, of princesses and sunbeams. And she had made reality of all her oft-thought dreams.

A light begins to break upon the square now, and she knows dawn draws near. She thinks now of earlier days, when she listened to the old priest tell his stories in the churchyard, when she begged tales of wonder from the birds that perched upon her branches, the earliest of days, when her chestnut head had not risen above the bushes around her, and she had hidden herself deep, and dreamed.

She had dreamed of pure water, and clean air. She had dreamed of falling leaves, stretching tall, laughing in the sun. She had dreamed of the great oak, and the graceful willow, the waterside reed and the rose.

And then she had dreamed of other things. Of whorling petticoats and stamping feet, and a song more beautiful than the shaking of her branches. Walls above the treetops, and the rumbling earth beneath the train tracks. The humble hands that alter the world.

He had promised her no one would impede her. She might have all her dreams tonight, for she would have no more tomorrows. His promise had been true, no one had questioned her. She had walked among the glittering folk of the city, so much brighter than any fairy of old, and been thought one of them. *How will I die?* She wonders, *Perhaps I will turn to sea's foam, as my sisters sometimes do, or to dust, like so many old things. Perhaps I will die as a human does; leave a body to be buried. Perhaps I will just fade away, like moonlight.*

The clock within her strikes six, and light sweeps across the streets. *Ah, none of those.* She thinks, as flames begin to lick at her feet, and at the roots of the tree upon which she sits. She feels no pain, only the warmth. This, she knows, would have been her death regardless. Perhaps it would have been a hundred years, but still she would have perished in the flames. The fire surrounds her, tinting all around her with its light. *The fire and the dawn are sisters of a sort.* They lick at her hair, wisp at the leaves of the tree, and she leans back and closes her eyes.

A whorl of golden light leaps up, and in that moment all is gone. The ash upon the streets does not tell whence it came, from girl or tree. In that moment, they were one again, chestnut and dryad. The early risers tisk at the soot upon their houses. Where once the chestnut stood, pavement is laid. And the dryad, who for an evening burned so brightly, is forgotten. Obsolete, like all the fairy tales.

# Merrid's Execution

By Franky Pwynn

## ***Executioner Eramund***

The breeze outside caused my skin to tighten and my pores to become goose eggs as I exited the house. I considered it mild for an autumnal night and yet the crowd was unusually somber, and a lone woman saying nonsense. I didn't much care, there was always someone in the crowd that didn't approve of the execution, for one reason or another.

My lot today was one woman who volunteered to go first and three men of which, held no objection to her going first. A known hero three towns over, but here in Eishwald the governor saw fit to charge her with sedition and high treason against his office. Apparently encouraging the townsfolk to commit to something called "equitable living standards". The thought of it was beyond me; after all, I didn't get paid all this time to be hesitant on whose head I chopped off. The perch, built by my hand, was a few feet from the house, I also can make a mean armoire. Anyways, I had better get into position. Finally, I picked up my axe ready to swing down.

## ***Bystander Bythilda***

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly! Merrid, what have you done?"

People had begun to stare but I didn't care. Faith is often misunderstood, as is prayer. Prayer is about setting our intention and focusing it on a point. Right now, the prayer "Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!" was set with the intention of hollowing out the executioner's axe.

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly."

"Ma'am, are you ok?"

A young boy next to me spoke up, such a pure and honest concern without judgement. His voice was sweet like strawberries. The kind you find in spring after the

last of the frost clears. Why was a boy like this at a beheading? His face reminds me of... I had better keep moving, if I get distracted, I'll lose concentration.

"Everything will be fine."

I almost ran away from him. I won't let that boy or anyone here be traumatized... never again. Merrid was strong, stronger than most of us, whose convictions were new and revolutionary. However great her strength I did doubt the conviction of her neck to be able to stay attached in the face of an axe.

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!"

My words quickened at the recollection of Merrid's capture moments before this. She should never have spoken out

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!"

Arrested and brought to the square as if she were an animal brought to slaughter. For the high crime of advocating for equitable living standards.

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!"

All the while she is calmly telling everyone that they are going to be ok. As if. Was she delusional?

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!"

The executioner stepped out of the doorway, concealed only until now. I began to quicken my words, and I couldn't help myself from shouting just once.

**"Oh me, Oh my, by golly by golly"**

### ***Wealthy William***

The docks reeked of fish and salt permeated the air. Cornered like a rat, the town's entire guard subdued her and her top affiliates. The men caught with her, elders in this town, some call them wise men but there is no wisdom in capture. Three defenseless old men and a lone woman to protect them, I had better compose myself. Regardless of the side I'm on it is extraordinarily bad form to grin at someone's beheading, maybe at your own beheading it would be permissible.

Speaking of bad form, this woman in the audience won't shut up. Babbling on with great persistence.

"Is she with you?" I asked of Merrid regarding the woman blithering on.

"No," her words blunt and forceful. A lie perhaps?

"Guards bring the wailing woman to the stage I want to ask her some questions."

"No." This time the word reverberated through my skull, pushing the idea out of my brain and possibly the guards' brains too, none of them moved an inch.

What was this feeling. Yes, I remember, the day our carriage was attacked and an attempt on my life was made by bandits. Why does this bound and bent woman remind me of that near-death experience.

"Executioner, behead her at once!"

### ***Executioner Eramund***

This time the prisoner named Merrid spoke "Promise me this executioner, should you fail at this task you should no longer call yourself a death dealer." I laughed,

"In my 8 years as an executioner I have never failed, and I don't intend to start now. Are you sure you wanna take this bet?" I rested my axe.

"Aye."

Well, she was nothing if not confident.

"Very well. Please wait a moment while I ready my axe."

Patient, polite, and parley a model prisoner. I'll have to remember to start poetry as a hobby. Anyways, I readied my axe once again even lighter than before, my adrenaline must've been pumping, such an incredulous woman. I swung down with all my might.

### ***Bystander Bythilda***

He raised his axe, only to set it back down again. Was he talking to Merrid? What last cry for help could she be making, was she serious about what she said before? Not



to worry? I couldn't stop. Should I trust Merrid alone or in my skill to hollow objects from a distance?

"Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!"

The axe was once again raised, raised over my friend's head. I remembered taking away my brother's punishments. He would get into trouble often and my dad... he would... he just hit him so hard. He broke every implement we had until we ran out. He used his hand that day, and it was the last day he ever did, bastard broke his hand on my brother after I hollowed out his bones. Damn that strawberry boy, reminding me of my brother.

Oh me, oh my, by golly, by golly!" I incanted with every ounce of spare energy

The axe falls downward towards Merrid's neck out of my view and my vision blurs. The soft embrace of the ground greets me gently like a friend turned lover as I lost consciousness.

### ***Wealthy William***

Eishwald was small but not all its people were small-minded, unfortunately. Many people had grown fed up with the status quo of growing disparity between wealthy and working class i.e. me vs them. Unsure how to propose change aside from killing, she had suggested that the wise men, create a proposal of sorts to curry favor with me. Then I made it illegal to speak on such matters in public, hence today's predicament. Why was oppression so hard.

"Do it, do it now Eramund, like your father did and his father before him."

Eramund was as dumb as he was strong. The axe itself must've been steel in make. A long flat blade, a thin tongue of metal, mounted on a comically large quarter staff. Would that make it a three-quarter staff? The woman in the audience moved closer, shouting herself into a conniption before she eventually falls out of view. I walked towards the front of the stage and passed Merrid, smiling as I went.

Eramund raised his axe, and with that the spider catches the fly, or so I thought. In one fluid motion like a mighty wave crashing onto rock, the metal of the axe dispersed into a hundred pieces. A soft indiscriminate rain of rippling petals flew in

every direction. Eramund, closest to the impact had likely wished in that moment the veil he placed on himself every morning was of a thicker make because his mouth, now agape, filled with both blade and blood. I was next, the motes of metal flying towards me through space and time.

Each piece that pierced my skin would leave years long scars on my body. Having fallen face first, only my ears could understand the context of what happened next.

“I cannot be harmed by any of you.” The incredible girl said. “Your strongest hit the weakest most defenseless part of my body with all his might. None of the rest of you stand a chance against me” it was the same flat tone that she used before when I called her bluff.

The guards’ feet weren’t moving, were they too shocked to act? I tried to speak but the growing pool of blood underneath my face suggested that my neck had been pierced. Was I going to die here, like a common peasant on the street?

“May you find the strength to heal yourselves.” This time her words were followed by a warm and friendly sensation.

I sat up, no longer injured or bleeding nor actively dying. Eramund also was upright at this point. I looked at him, but his stare pierced through me, no longer did he look upon me with subservience. She had healed us, but why?

### ***Executioner Eramund***

“Death dealer here begins your path to redemption, kneel and take this oath.”

An oath, had I ever taken one before? We have a family moto... “One swing or its free.” but I didn’t feel that applied for this moment.

“Peace, patience, innocence, and wisdom these are the virtues I will uphold.” Merrid’s voice soothed my ears like a balm to sunburn.

Had my ears been so used to the contemptable grumblings of Mr. William on behalf of the governor? Nonetheless, I repeated.

“Forgiveness of even the gravest of sins can lead you to redemption.”

What if someone kicks a dog? A baby? A baby dog? Countless quandaries cascaded within my cranium. I guess I would just have to learn this new skill called forgiveness.

“By this oath I swear thine life in service to the pursuit of joy.”

Who on Planterra is Joy and why is she hiding?

“I promise Merrid, I will help you with this power you have granted me.”

Merrid turned back towards William and advanced a few paces.

“We aren’t going to bother each other anymore, are we? After all you’ve seen what I’m capable of,” Merrid said.

“Aye I’ve seen what you’re capable of, and nay I shan’t bother you as you put it.”

“And you’ll donate half your fortune to charity.”

“I suppose I don’t have much a choice,” William squeaked.

“That’s a good enough start for me. Now what happened to Bythilda?”

“Here, I’ll bring her to you Merrid,” I offered.

Bythilda was ok just passed out, basically woke up as soon as I set her down in front of Merrid. I couldn’t help but imagine an embracing aura around Merrid, blessing us with her presence. She was an impressive woman, standing tall hair billowing in the wind.

# Good Enough

## By Katherine M. Reilly

The hallways at EPIM Marseille Pensionnat were packed with students that were all headed to their next class. Students in the Terminale class were excused from classes due to their advisor meetings. Matteo Carlos Romirez Torres the Sixth, preferably going by Matt, was leaning against the open third story window, his cigarette loosely dangled between his fingers. The window was in a small alcove that was partially hidden from the passing teachers. Every couple of minutes, he took a drag from his cigarette. Matt's best friend, Vincenzo Riccardo Moretti IV, preferably going by Vinni stormed down the hallway pushing some students out of his way and came to stand next to Matt. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it and took a drag, then he sighed deeply. Matt looked at his best friend, "So, how was your advisor meeting?" Matt asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Vinni said, as he took another drag.

Matt nodded, "Okay."

"My father called and apparently I am going into manufacturing."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"Shut up."

Matt smirked.

"Wipe the smirk off your face, Matt. If my father called, then so did yours."

Matt took a drag of his cigarette and shrugged. "I know."

"When is your meeting?"

"This afternoon, I'll probably skip."

"One, you can't, it's required for graduation. And two, the headmaster would call your father."

Matt sighed, "What's the point of going if I don't have a say in what happens? My future job, my future wife, where I am going to live, where my kids will go to school, and when I am going to die. So, again, what's the point of going?"

Vinni shrugged. "I went."

"That's because you wanted to reopen your mother's winery."

Vinni sighed and looked at the school grounds. "I don't know why I tried."

"Because you care more about your mother's reputation than your father's."

"And you?"

"I don't care about either of their reputations."

Matt turned towards the hallway as Vinni leaned over the open window. Matt spots a girl with curly black hair mirroring her brother's previous actions by storming down the hallway. "Oh, look, Valentina is coming this way, and she is angry," Matt warned.

"Merda," Vinni said under his breath.

Matt smirked as Valentina turned the corner to the alcove with her eyes locked on her brother. "I just had my meeting," she said.

"Uh, huh," Vinni muttered.

"And apparently our father called."

"Are you shocked?" Matt asked.

"Not really, but you didn't stand up for yourself?" she asked her brother.

"No. Because I don't care anymore," Vinni says.

"You're unbelievable," Valentina said before turning and leaving the alcove. Matt turned to the Italian who was on his second cigarette, "Well she took that better than I expected."

Vinni rolled his eyes. "I need you to go to that meeting."

"Why?"

“Because the Torres family,” Vinni said as he gestured to Matt, “and the Moretti family,” he added as he gestured towards himself, “have businesses that rely on each other.”

“I know.”

“So, in a couple of years, we’re going to take over the businesses and nothing is going to stop us from running them into the ground.”

Matt took out another Charleston Red. “Are you suggesting mutiny?”

“So, what if I am?”

Matt leaned on the window next to his best friend. “Then I guess I am going to that meeting.”

With their free hands, Matt and Vinni did their handshake, the same one they do whenever they work together on and off the football pitch.

\*

Valentina and Emmaliene were sitting by the fountain in the courtyard. Valentina rolled her eyes and groaned. “What?” Emmaliene asked.

“My stupid brother and his stupid best friend,” Valentina replied.

Emmaliene turned to see the two boys as they walked through the courtyard towards the football pitch. “What are they doing?”

“Vincenzo is probably going to practice. Matt however, who knows?”

“Don’t they have a game this weekend?”

Valentina nodded.

“Shouldn’t they both be going to practice?” Emmaliene asked.

“Probably, but you know Matt.”

Emmaliene scoffed, “Oh, his reputation definitely precedes him.”

Matt and Vinni paused as they were about to pass the girls. “Vinni are your ears burning?” he asked.

Vinni smirked, "You know, Matt they were."

Valentina stood bringing herself eye to eye with her twin. "Matt, Vinni, don't take this the wrong way, but go away."

Matt and Vinni exchanged a look. "There is only one way to take that," Vinni replied.

She smirked. "I guess playing football since you were four hasn't caused too much brain damage."

Emmalienne stood next to her best friend. "That was mean."

Valentina shrugged. "Maybe, but it was true."

"Emmalienne," Vincenzo said, acknowledging the red-head.

"Vinni," she replied. "Father's incarnate."

Matt smirked, "Emmalienne," he replied. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"I've been Valentina's friend for eight years, and you still don't know my full name, do you?"

"Why would that matter?"

"Let me reintroduce myself," Emmaliene began. "I'm Emmaliene Camille Petit."

Matt robotically shook the girl's hand, too stunned to speak. Matt stood frozen as the two girls moved around them and headed inside the school. "A warning would have been nice."

"Would you have listened?" Vinni asked.

"If it were her last name, maybe."

Matt and Vinni watch as the doors close behind where the girls entered. "My Father hates her Father."

"Yep."

"I hate my Father."

"Also yep."

"My Father would hate it if I had a fling with her."

"Probably."

"I should try to have a fling with her."

"You could try. But she won't date you."

"She's playing hard to get."

"No. She's playing impossible to get."

"Good thing that I am impossible to ignore."

Vinni shook his head, "Let's go to practice."

\*

Matt walked into his dorm room exhausted. Practice was a nightmare. Coach worked the team hard because he wanted them to get them ready to play in two days. He let his bag drop to the floor. His green and gold practice jersey stuck to his sweaty body. Vinni walked in behind him and threw his bag next to Matt's. His normally curly hair was slick from his shower in the locker room after practice.

"Smoke?" Matt asked.

Vinni opened the window, and a cool breeze rushed into the room. Matt tossed Vinni the pack of Charleston Reds from the nightstand after grabbing one for himself. Vinni grabbed the lighter off the windowsill and brought the flame to the opposite end of the cigarette that was perched between his teeth. Once the cigarette was lit, he tossed Matt the lighter.

Matt took a drag from his cigarette. "What is wrong with you today?" Vinni asked.

"What do you know about Emmaliene?" Matt asked.

"You're still on this?"

Matt shrugged.

"She wants to challenge how people in our society view the first-born daug-," Vinni said.



"She's a first-born daughter?"

"Do you want to know about her or not?"

"Fine."

"That's all I know."

"You suck."

Vinni smirked as Matt flicked the burnt-out cigarette out the window and headed to the adjoining bathroom to shower.

\*

Emmaliene was sitting in the library when Matt came up and sat in the chair across from her.

"Go away," Emmaliene said immediately.

"No. I want to talk to you," Matt replied.

"Why?"

"Because you are interesting."

Emmaliene glared at him. "And you are exactly how I expect."

"What do you mean?"

"A first-born son who is being molded into his father."

"You don't even know me."

"Trust me, I know plenty."

"So, my reputation precedes me?"

"It's not a good thing. The girls, the drinking, and the drugs, all bad."

Matt scoffed, "I'm not always that way."

"Then it shouldn't be hard to prove me wrong."

Matt raised an eyebrow. "How?"

“Win the game this weekend and then you can take me on a date. Then you can show me that you’re not like your father.”

“The team is slated to win.”

“I know.”

“Then you want to go on a date with me.”

“No, I want you to win and not take the celebration too far.”

Matt sighed before offering Emmaliene his hand. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

Emmaliene shook his hand. “Only if you guys win and you keep up your end of the bargain.”

Matt smirked, “I fully intend on winning, and I can keep my post-game celebration under wraps.”

Emmaliene took her hand away and stood from the table. “Good luck with that.”

\*

“I am taking her on a date,” Matt announced as he walked into the dorm.

Vinni sat up, “Really?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“No strings.”

“Okay, there is one teeny tiny string,”

“I am not helping you with anything,” Vinni said. “What is the string?”

“We have to win the game this weekend.”

Vinni smirked. “Perfect.”

“And then I have to keep my post-game celebration under wraps and not take it too far.”

Vinni’s face fell. “Whose idea was that?”

“Hers.”

Vinni bit his lip, "Did you think that through?"

"Yeah, it will be easy," Matt said as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"Where are you going to take her on the date?"

"I don't know."

"There is a bakery that she likes."

"I thought that you told me everything that you know about her."

"And when we spoke last, I did tell you everything that I knew."

\*

"EPIM Marseille's Boys Football Team Won the Championship Game" was plastered everywhere Matt looked. The school newspaper, EPIM Post and La Provence Newspaper had been at the game reporting on it.

"Have you read the article?" Vinni asked, holding a copy of the EPIM Post.

"Only the headline," Matt replied.

"Good. Don't," he said, throwing the paper away.

"I also saw the picture," Matt added.

Vinni paused, "And?"

"It's whatever."

"Is it going to change your mind about Emmaliene?"

"Is a picture in the EPIM Post of my Father not only being at the game but yelling at me going to change my mind?" Matt asked sarcastically.

Vinni nodded with a raised eyebrow.

"No."

"Good. Because she's over there."

Matt turned and saw her standing next to Valentina. Matt turned to Vinni who nodded his head towards Emmaliene.

Matt sighed and walked over to her. "I'll see you later," Valentina said before walking over to her brother.

"Hey," Emmaliene said.

"We have a date later today," Matt said.

"We do. Don't tell me you were worried that I'd back out."

Matt laughed, "I was not worried."

"Even with that?" Emmaliene asked, gesturing towards the newspaper on the wall.

Matt tore the newspaper off the wall, crumpled it up and tossed it into the garbage bin. "Yes, even after that."

"So, when should I be ready to go on this date?"

"I'll pick you up around 15:30."

"Don't you have practice?"

Matt shook his head. "Coach gave us the day off."

"Okay, I will see you at 15:30."

\*

Matt was in the connecting dorm bathroom. Vinni was sitting on the bed smoking his second Charleston Red in half an hour. "What's going on with you?" Vincenzo asked.

"I'm just thinking," Matt replied.

"About?"

"Saturday."

"Matt."

"He ruins everything."

"Don't think about him."

"I can't. He is everywhere in this damn school."

Vinni took a drag from his cigarette, as he passed Matt a cigarette of his own, "I'm even taking her on a date in the car that he bought."

Vinni stood, "Not if you take my car."

Matt looked at him. "Really?"

Vinni shrugged. "Lamborghinis are better than Aston Martins anyway."

"You're Italian. You're biased."

"Your father hates my car."

"And I'm in."

Vinni smirked and walked back into the dorm. "Why were you thinking about your father, anyway?"

Matt rolled his eyes as he tried to push his unruly curls into some semblance of put-together. "I told you. He infects every part of my life."

"And now you are taking back control by taking a girl on a date when you know damn well that he would hate her."

"True."

"You're taking her on a date to her favorite cafe which is a big no-no in the Matteo Torres V and Vincenzo Moretti III dating rule book."

"I thought that we agreed not to call it that."

"And you're taking her on the date in a car that your father dislikes immensely."

Matt nodded. "It's the perfect set up."

"And it's 15:15."

Matt adjusted his jacket and headed to the door of the dorm, pausing only to grab his phone, wallet and the keys to the Lamborghini Huracan.

\*

Matt led Emmaliene through the hallways of the school, headed to the garage.  
“Have I mentioned that you look great?”

“No.”

“Well you do.”

“Thank you.”

“You clean up pretty well yourself.”

“Thank you.”

Matt held the door open for Emmaliene as they entered the garage. “You have a car on campus?”

“Yeah, it’s that one,” Matt said pointing to a deep blue Aston Martin Valhalla. Emmaliene began walking towards the car, but Matt gently grabbed her hand. “We aren’t taking that.”

“Then what are we taking?”

“Vinni’s car.”

“Oh?”

Matt led Emmaliene over to a bright orange Lamborghini. “Really?” she asked.

Matt sighed, “If I say that he is Italian, will that count for anything?”

Emmaliene laughed. “No. Why aren’t we taking your car?”

“It has connections to my father.”

“Enough said.”

Matt opened the passenger door and gestured for her to get into the car. “We have a cafe to get to,” he said.

When Matt and Emmaliene got to the Delices du Port, Matt parks in the back parking lot and rounds the car to open her door. “You know, it’s working.”

“What is?”

“You proving me wrong.”

"It's already working? How?"

"I pictured that you would take me to the infamous F Pub."

He shook his head. "I was told that you enjoy this place."

She turned to him. "Who told you?"

"Vinni."

"Who told him?"

Matt gave her a look. "Do I need to answer that?"

"Valentina told him, didn't she?"

Matt nodded. "Most likely."

Emmaliene shook her head as she headed to the cafe doors.

There was a ringing of the doorbell as they walked into the cafe. "Emmaliene," the woman behind the counter exclaimed. "Would you like your usual?"

"Yes, please," She said. "Matt?"

"Uh, I'll have a Nutella Banana Crepe and an Italian Hot Chocolate."

Emmaliene looked at him in shock. "You looked at the menu?"

Matt shrugged. "Of course."

"It will be €20,95," the woman behind the counter said. Emmaliene reached in her purse to pay but he beat her to it, handing over 21 euros. "Pick a seat, I will bring your crepes and drinks when they are done," the woman told them

"Thank you."

They picked a table and sat down. "You did not have to do that," she said.

"I may not agree with all of my parent's teachings, but one thing that they taught me that I do agree with is to never let a girl pay on the first date." she laughed lightly.

"Now I have a question for you," Matt said.

She gave him a look. "What's your question?"

"Vinni told me that you like this place, but not why you like this place," Matt said.

She laughed. "You're going to think it's dumb."

He raised an eyebrow. "This cafe is female owned and operated. I want to open a cafe of my own at some point," she said as the owner brought them their order.

"And this is close to what you want," he said. she nodded and took a long sip of her hot cappuccino. "That's what Vinni meant about challenging our society's impression of first-born daughters," he said. "I'm sorry that first born daughters in our society don't get much of a say."

"First born sons don't either," she said.

Matt sighed, "Yeah, having my entire life planned out for me is not great."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because I feel bad."

"What do your parents think about you opening a cafe?"

"They would have to notice. They are too focused on my brothers."

"How can they overlook you?" Matt asked.

"Because I am a girl in a world where daughters are taught how to become housewives and sons are taught how to take over their father's businesses."

"Don't I know it," he said. "Okay, I have another question."

Emmalie took another sip of her drink. "Go ahead."

"The twins' Father and your Father don't get along."

"Not as much as our Fathers but go on."

"How are you and Valentina friends?"

She laughed. "I kind of already answered that question."

He looked at her slightly confused.



“Valentina and I are first born daughters. Our fathers would have to find value in our existence to notice.”

Matt clenched his jaw, anger obvious in his features.

“How did your advisor meeting go?” she asked. “Valentina told me that Vinni didn’t get what he wanted with their mother’s winery.”

“Yeah, our Fathers’ called the school and let them know what we were doing for the rest of our lives.”

She broke a small piece of her crepe off and popped it into her mouth. “So, the family businesses will be handed down again?” she asked.

Matt nodded. “Well, my father doesn’t think that I’m smart enough to make a decision for myself.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “I saw the game on Saturday. You were making decisions for yourself the whole time,” Emmaliene said. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“How are you going to show your Father that you are *good enough* to take control of your own life?”

Matt smirked. “Vinni and I have a plan.”

Emmaliene appraised the boy sitting across from her. “I don’t know whether to be impressed or concerned.”

“Both is probably the best path.”

# The Witch's House

## By Diana Rose Crispino

The bright red captain's sash did nothing to keep Gavek from feeling like an intruder. His orders gave him full access to search the old forest house, yet each step leading further inside felt like a violation. The alleged crime didn't match the atmosphere. There was no malice in the smell of sweetbread, the herbs hung to dry, or the last remains of warmth lingering by the fireplace. But it was his job to find the evil in it. The church had warned of a menacing presence surrounding the places that called upon the dark forces. He just had to find it.

The orders in his pocket told him to search for 'any and all illegal magic items or related paraphernalia,' whatever that meant. He admitted he wasn't entirely sure what he was looking for. The clergyman simply said, "You'll know it when you see it." But he wasn't so sure that was true. Magic was such a rare crime, requiring too much discipline and time to be worth the risk of execution or, even worse, the magic overtaking the one who tried to tame it. It was the sort of thing more suited for the dark alleys and hidden basements found in cities, not his little village where everybody knew each other. After all his years as captain of the guard, Gavek was sure that these sorts of secrets simply didn't have a place among his community, until now.

The home belonged to the apothecary, Udora, a sweet young woman too concerned with the well-being of others to invest in such an unsavory thing as magic. Despite her distance from the rest of the village, she was always around delivering medicines to those in need. Udora came in any weather, from the oppressive sun of summer to the frigid winds of winter. Gavek didn't want to believe the accusations against her, not when she had braved the worst of storms when his own wife was sick with fever. It was just the word of one angry father against a respected young woman, one who sat cold and alone in a prison cell awaiting judgment for the crime of rendering aid to an injured child. Would the child have survived such brutal injuries from a wild animal had she not opened her door? Gavek wasn't so sure. He couldn't help the

anxious feeling sitting in his gut like a rock. So, he stepped further into the house. One way or another, he would find the truth inside.

He passed through the living area and the kitchen, finding nothing of interest, and moved on into the study. The bookshelf was full, bearing an impressive collection. He carefully read the titles, looking for anything that could be considered nefarious. All he found were reference books and medical texts, reminding him of when Udora mentioned that she wanted to be a doctor someday. The books opened on her desk turned to pages detailing surgical techniques seemed to prove the point.

As he left the study and moved toward the back of the house, a small stain on the ground caught his attention. The trail of reddish-brown drops, blood from the animals attack on the child, lead from the back door to a door across the hall. Inside was Udora's workshop, full of tools and ingredients to make medicines and shelves full of jars and boxes. On her workbench was a collection of herbs and solutions being prepared for use. It was what he imagined a typical workspace to be for an apothecary, except for the trail of blood which led to a large, blotchy stain in middle of the floor where the blood had seeped into the wood. Next to the stain, a stray book sat open to a page on stitching wounds and a bucket of used, bloody bandages and cleaning rags. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but even though he knew what had happened to the child, the sight of the blood and bandages still caught him off guard.

It was hard to believe a child could lose that much blood and survive. Even more unbelievable was that he had talked to the child just hours after the attack had happened, after his father had dragged him into Gavek's home in an enraged fit. "I don't know what you're talking about," the child had said. "I didn't see any magic. I didn't see anything." He was barely into his teenage years, offering Gavek nothing but what he should have expected from someone his age.

"Your father told us you were injured in an animal attack while you two were out hunting. And I don't recall those scars on you last week," Gavek had said, pointing to the jagged marks across the child's neck and cheek. The wounds had already faded to little more than thin red lines.

The child hunched his shoulders and leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your father told us Udora fixed you up with magic. Is that what happened?”

“I didn’t see any magic. What would it matter anyway? Even if she did – which she didn’t – she did it to save my life. What’s the big deal?”

Gavek struggled to lecture the kid about the law, about how his father worried about him being touched by dark forces, and about the evils of something no human had any business trying to control. But it was hard for Gavek to blame the child’s father. They had always gone to service together, listened to the clergyman tell of the evils of magic. Of how magic had a way of changing you, of opening your soul to a dreadful force. Mortals had no business wielding such power, and to do so was an affront to the gods, would ensure the damnation of your soul. To be enthralled by magic was a fate worse than death, or so everyone in the community was told, giving them the impression that the execution of the guilty was in fact a mercy. It was natural for the child’s father to worry. But telling the child that what had happened was wrong – even if it involved magic – felt too much like telling him he should have died instead.

He swallowed down the growing rock in his gut and searched the room. What had happened clearly wasn’t natural, there was too much blood, but he needed proof. He tossed the bucket of bloody rags out onto the floor, opened every jar, searched every box, and read every scrap of paper only to find nothing. It was all so mundane. He continued on to the rest of the house.

The last room left was the bedroom. Udora’s bed was unmade, the blankets still tossed back from when she got out of bed that morning. Had she known what would happen when she got up? Or was she blissfully unaware that the day would have her arrested before the sun set? He checked under her pillows, inside her wardrobe, even under her bed. When he pulled open the drawer of her bedside table, his heart sank.

A small charm hung on a chain. The small polished rock was inscribed with a symbol he didn’t recognize, illuminated with a soft orange glow from somewhere inside. It gave off a gentle heat that warmed his fingers. “You’ll know it when you see it,” the

clergyman had said, and he was right. Gavek had never seen anything like the charm, but it was unmistakable and the law was clear.

With the charm tight in his fist, Gavek shoved his hands in his pockets and left the house out the front door. His partner greeted him outside, looking expectantly with raised eyebrows. "Find anything, captain?"

Gavek squeezed the charm, feeling its warmth in his palm. He imagined the orange light against his skin, finding himself surprised that it didn't feel wrong. "No, not a thing."

They set off on the trail back to town. Gavek stole one last look at the witch's house before leaving it to the company of the trees.

# The Door's Unlocked

## By Cameron Ignizio

"So, tell me more about yourself!" Stacy smiled so confidently at me.

"Uh... like what?"

"You know, like literally anything? I've been talking about myself this whole time. Tell me something about you!"

What was she getting at? Did she already see right through me? What on earth was I even supposed to say to a question like that?

"Uh... anything specific?"

"Oh my god!" She laughed. She was trying to be nice. "What do you do for fun?"

"Well, I like to go out to bars."

That's where we met. This was our first date. Hell, this was my first date period. I wouldn't consider myself a real stand-out guy. I hopped from bar to bar, mostly because if I stayed in one place for too long, people began recognizing me. They'd try to do things like 'have conversations' and 'ask questions about my personal life'.

"Ok... anything else?"

"...I have a cat."

"You do? What's their name?"

"His name is Percy."

"That's so cute! I've always wanted a cat."

"Nah, don't bother. They're really bothersome. It'll just overwhelm you."

She cringed at me. What, did I say something wrong?

"I'm joking, by the way." I took a sip of wine.

"Ok...", she laughed nervously.

I met her at the most recent bar, the good old Gman Tavern. She approached me first, one thing led to another, and now we were at dinner at Mastro's Steakhouse, a fancy local restaurant that I'd never been to before.

The rest of the date went alright. The conversation switched back to talking about herself. We ate; we paid and left.

I met Stacy outside of the restaurant on the sidewalk. It was dark and chilly outside. "Sorry if I wasn't the best at talking, this is literally my first date." I felt ashamed to admit it, but I had to get it off my chest.

"No problem, I get it. I was nervous on my first date too. Anyways, I'd love to go out again sometime."

"Where would you like to go?" I asked.

"I don't know, surprise me!" She smiled, and she walked away.

\*

I walked back to my home in silence. I turned down each passing face. No matter how much I tried, I just didn't feel like I belonged with all of them. I got back to my house and took a deep breath. I lived in the windy city of Chicago, but I lived in a more residential district on Kenmore Ave, right off West Belmont Ave. Who my neighbors were, no idea.

Percy was on the windowsill again, meowing. I sat onto my couch and just pondered. That date was a disaster! Even I wasn't clueless enough to not notice it. Why on earth would she ask for a follow-up date? Where would we even go?

The silence was deafening, so I turned the TV on and grabbed my phone. I stared at it for a bit, before opening YouTube and typing "How to talk to people better". I felt silly for doing so, but the first video that popped up was a man who had a friendly smile. "10 ways to improve your people skills!" it said. Might as well.

I heard a bump coming from the wall. Almost to a tee, I heard that bump nearly every night. Was I attentive enough to care? No.

I resumed my YouTubing and got lost in the rabbit hole. I ended up spending all night watching video after video. Before I had even realized it, I was asleep on my couch.

When I woke up, my phone was in my hand, Percy was asleep next to me, and the TV was off. I got up and rubbed my face. How embarrassing, to still be asleep in my date clothes...

I turned the TV back on. Oddly enough, it was on a different channel. Weird, I must've sleep-watched a show.

I walked to my job, Percy in hand, to the VA Blum Animal Hospital, and began my shift. I might've worked at an animal hospital, but I was just their janitor. Someone had to clean up the mess the animals leave behind. It paid well though, and I didn't have to talk to anyone. Plus, this is where I first met Percy. The black cat with big beady eyes was brought in one day as a stray. Since they couldn't find an owner, I opted to adopt him.

During my break, me and Percy went through local websites describing big places to visit in Chicago. I've been living here five years, yet never really went anywhere other than bars. I found a good one, the Belmont rocks, and it was close by.

I shot Stacy a text. "How about Belmont rocks?"

She got back in less than a minute. "Sounds good! I've never been there."

"Watcha doing?" a voice from my left called. It was Jack, one of the hospital workers who regularly tried talking to me. I decided to try putting those people talking skills to the test.

"Just texting my date. I... suggested we go to Belmont Rocks."

He nodded. "Not bad, not bad, but when you get the chance, I'd highly recommend you visit Wrigley Field soon. The Cubs have a game in a few days!"

"Uh... thanks." How does he do it? How does he formulate a response so quickly?

He walked up and started petting Percy. "Taking good care of him?"



I smiled. "Yeah, he's been great." I found that looking at Percy made it easier to talk.

"You should bring him, maybe she's a cat person!"

"Well, she did say she wanted to own a cat someday."

"Dude, no way! You know that was a subtle hint, right?"

I looked at him dead in the eyes. "What's a subtle hint?"

He strained. "You know, when girls drop hints towards guys they like!"

"That's terrible." I said, a bit too bluntly.

"Well, that's just how things are."

Shoot! I steered too far again. "Uh, I guess so." I looked back at Percy. "Well, I'm excited regardless!"

"Go get her, tiger!"

\*

"What made you choose this place?" Stacy asked, as we walked adjacent to Lake Michigan.

The videos told me to **never** lie, since people tend to lose trust in you if they find out.

"It was local, so I thought it'd be a nice spot." Ok, nothing wrong with a bit of omission.

"Your cat is so cute!" she said while petting Percy. I had elected to bring him along.

"Oh yeah, I work at the nearby Animal Hospital, and..."

"You do?!" she gasped. I was a little taken aback by getting cut off, but the video said to just accept it when it happens, since it was normal for people to do that.

"Yeah, as the janitor. That's how I met Percy." Looking at him helped me talk, like with Jack.

“That’s so cool! How’s it like being near the animals. You’re still near them even as a janitor, right?”

The video said that when discussing personal life, it’s best to stay positive and not stick to self-deprecating humor. “I get to be around basically all of them. There’s no department that I have to stick to, so I’m near them all. I especially love being around the bunnies, they’re so cute!”

“Oh my god, I love bunnies!”

Nailed it.

\*

The date ended with a follow-up date at Wrigley Field (thank you Jack!) and two tickets to the Cubs! The video said that having hobbies could boost my relatability. I could absolutely accept the Cubs being one of my new hobbies.

When I got home, I noticed that the door was unlocked. My goodness, was I in such a rush that I forgot to lock the freaking door? I have the only key, meaning no one else could’ve unlocked it from the outside.

I quickly swept the house to make sure no one snuck in and took anything, but everything was where I’d left it. Percy went back to meowing out the window, how strange.

\*

“You know, Percy meows out the window constantly. Should I be worried?”

I ran into Jack while at work the next day. I was so proud of myself for starting the conversation!

“I mean, how often does he do it?”

“Everyday.”

“Hmm... odd. Typically, they do it because they’re trying to talk to something they see outside.”

I nodded. “Guess it means he’s just meowing at the people walking by?”

Jack nodded and gave me a reaffirming smile. “Probably. Percy’s probably just curious, nothing wrong with that.”

“More than me.” I sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked.

“Just... I don’t really pay attention to the whole city shebang and all that. Maybe I should.”

“Yeah. It could be nice.”

“Oh, by the way...”

Me and Jack had a nice conversation about how my date went, and I thanked him for his suggestion to see the Cubs.

“So, Nick,” Jack said, “Wanna go out for drinks later tonight? I know a good place, Cheesie’s Pub and Grub. They even have grilled cheese sandwiches!”

I’d heard of that place but never went. I recalled the video. If someone asks you out somewhere, it’s in your best interest to accept! You never know what kind of cool places you could visit.

“Sure, I’d love to!”

“Nice! My buddy Sam is joining us, I hope you don’t mind.”

Going out to places was a good opportunity to meet new people, the video said.

“Not at all!”

\*

When I got home, I decided to take a shower to clean the sweat off before dinner. From the moment I walked through the front door however, I noticed that I could hear the bathroom fan on from downstairs.

Percy jumped back up to the windowsill and started meowing again, and I went upstairs to investigate. Nothing was different, the bathroom door was wide open as I’d left it, but the fan was just on. Weird, have I seriously left this on all day?

That couldn't be it. That was far too strange. Plus, I feel like this incident had happened already. Goodness, why was I only noticing these things now? For the time being, I decided not to worry about it.

When I came back downstairs after showering and putting on clean clothes, Percy had stopped meowing.

\*

Sometimes meeting new people is scary. If you have someone with you who you already know, sometimes meeting their friend will be easier!

"This is Sam!" Jack said when I arrived.

"Nice to meet you, Nick! Jack told me a little bit about you!" Sam seemed nice.

We had settled down and ordered some grub. The video said that ice breakers that get people thinking are really good with multiple people.

"So, you two. Would you rather fight ten bear sized ducks, or one hundred duck sized bears?"

Sam laughed. "Wouldn't the bears still kill you even when they're small?"

"I think I can take them." Jack smirked.

"But they're bears! They'll still eat your legs!" Sam said.

"I can kick them." Jack said.

"What about the ducks?" I asked. "They're ducks, but they're pretty big.

"I don't think I could take on the ducks either!" Sam said. "I think this is a choose which one you'd rather die to!"

"So, you'd rather be digested by the ducks?" Jack asked.

"Well, I think the ducks would do other things first." Sam said.

"If it steps on you, it would quack you in half." I said.

Sam and Jack looked at me. We all died of laughter. This was **before** drinks.

\*

After a successful night out, I waved the two men goodnight and started walking home. The video said that after going out a few times, I'd feel like going out more often. I was fortunate that I'd be seeing Jack at work a bunch, so that would be an easy task.

Before bed, I played more YouTube videos, this time on my TV, to get any additional tips and tricks. At some point, I heard Percy head upstairs.

After about an hour at 10PM, I decided to call it a night and hit the hay. When I stood up however, I was surprised to find Percy at my feet sleeping. Wait, I never heard him come back downstairs, so who did I hear?

I walked over to the foot of my stairs. The darkness from the second floor was foreboding. I flicked the light switch from the bottom of my stairs and nervously headed up. Surely, I must've missed Percy coming down, right?

I wanted to be extra sure nothing was upstairs, so when I got to the top, I slowly peeked into the bathroom. It was the first door on the right, but the door swung in such a way that I had to actually peek my head in to see inside.

When I turned the light on and looked, nothing was inside. I slowly checked my bedroom, spare bedroom, and linen closet, but they were all empty. I must've just missed Percy coming downstairs.

Why on earth was I paranoid, all of a sudden? I mean, weird stuff does happen in the house, occasionally. A moved chair, a missing drink, some money missing from my wallet, that fan incident, but I had previously chalked that up to me being forgetful! I mean, I had even forgotten to lock the door a few days ago!

Well, before I started going out with these people, suffice to say I wasn't the best at picking up social cues, nor was I a very diligent person. Had truly unexplainable things been happening this entire time and I simply hadn't started noticing until now? I went back down, grabbed Percy, and took him to my room.

Something weird was going on. I couldn't afford to no longer think about it. Whatever was messing with me before probably relied on my inattentive self, but not anymore. Whatever was going on, I was going to get to the bottom of it!

“Hey!” I yelled. “I’m on to you! Show yourself!”

No response.

“Hello?”

Still silence.

No, no. I still must be losing it a bit. I must be so worn out from all the socializing I’ve been doing lately. I’ll get some sleep and worry about what actually matters tomorrow.

\*

The next few days were amazing. I got to know way more of the people at the Animal Hospital and had a great date with Stacy at the baseball game. The Dodgers played the Cubs, and even though the Cubs lost, we had a great time.

We started hanging out at a bunch of different places, a cute little building called the Taipei Café, Toons Bar & Grill, Michael’s Original Pizzeria & Tavern, the Sunflour Bakery & Café, just to name a few!

With each passing date, my confidence grew even more! Typically, the date recommendations switched between each other, but as I did more research on local places, I recommended our locations more often.

Eventually we found ourselves on Montrose Beach. It was pretty empty at night, so we had the place all to ourselves. As we walked to the Harbor Beacon, we had a light chit chat.

“So, I was thinking about what to do about my recent client, right?” She spoke.

I nodded. Stacy worked as an insurance agent downtown and was dealing with a nasty fraudulent case. Besides that, she still has minor things to deal with.

“You see, no one said they saw a car accident where they claim it happened, right? Better yet, the local car wash said none of their cameras reached that far. I just decided up and there that it meant that they didn’t see it either. Not like anyone will ask them, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. Stacy had a tendency to ramble on, and I enjoyed just letting her talk.

“I hope the case is freaking shut by tomorrow. Anyways, what’s up with you? Hang out with the boys again?”

“Yeah!” I said. I’d been hanging out with Jack and Sam a ton lately, and I’ve been meeting new faces because of it. “Just the other night we were at the VIC theater to check out some indie theater performance. They weren’t the best, very amateurish, but it was fun regardless!”

“Cool!”

“We were thinking about checking out the House of Blues over the weekend since a popular orchestra will be playing classical music there, want to come?”

“I’d love to! How much are the tickets?”

“Oh, Sam knows a guy who works there, so we’re getting them for free! Don’t tell anyone though!”

“Nice. That’s fishy as hell, but cool.” We reached the very end of the pier. It was shaped almost like a fishhook, so it curved right back into itself, giving a good view of Lake Michigan and the city.

“You know, you never told me why you moved to Chicago.” Stacy suddenly asked me.

“Well, like I said, I moved here five years ago. I lived in Toledo Ohio during my childhood, but my family suddenly moved to London.”

“London? All the way in Europe?”

“Oh no, London, Canada, right off of Lake Erie. Growing up I’d always call it ‘Fake London’.”

“So, what happened?”

“Well, got a bit fed up with my old job as a dish washer. It was at this place, I think it was called Piping Kettle Soup Co. It wasn’t bad, but I just needed to go somewhere where no one knew me.”

“And you can afford to live here how? That janitor job certainly isn’t paying for your house.”

“My parents.” I sighed. “They’re pitching in.”

“Neat.” She smiled.

“Anyway, like I said, I wanted to be alone, and that lifestyle kind of made my already bad social skills worse. I mean, you know how awkward our first date was, right?”

Stacy chuckled. “Yeah. Were you always like that?”

I stuttered. “Well, yeah, until recently. It might’ve taken five years, but I’m finally ready to break out of this shell.”

Stacy smiled. “That’s so cheesy, dude.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So, mind if I stop by tomorrow night?”

She said it so casually, it caught me by surprise. “My place?”

“Yeah, just the two of us.”

So casual, but if she was being casual, then so shall I. “Yes sir. Be there or be square!”

“Alright, dude.”

\*

And so, it was the next evening. Unfortunately, I had procrastinated tidying up the house, so I was now in a mad dash to get everything sorted. I had never had guests over before, so I didn’t really know what a clean house looked like, but I did my best! She had promised to arrive at 10 PM (she was dealing with a rough case), and the clock struck eight.



As I was cleaning, Percy kept meowing at the window. I had gotten used to it, but this time I decided to take a peek. This wasn't the first time I'd looked outside, and like every other time, there was nothing there. I had accepted that Percy was just meowing at something outside but never saw anything. Then again, it was dark out, so maybe I was missing something.

I turned my back and grabbed the wipes again to finish wiping down the table. Then I heard a knock. Not at the door, but at the window. Percy jumped back and ran towards me. What the hell? Was someone at my window? I put down the wipe and put my face up to it. Still, nothing was out there, just the quiet dark streets.

I ran over to Percy and tried to calm him down. The poor noise startled him badly, but at least it verified that I hadn't imagined it. I grabbed the wipe again and finished my work.

The clock struck eight thirty, and I was done cleaning. I sat on my couch and laid back. Guess I had an hour to spare, but what should I do? Percy was laying on my lap, and he seemed scared about something. As I was petting him, I heard another noise, this time from the kitchen.

I gently picked Percy up and walked over to investigate. Was it coming from the kitchen window this time? If it was, then it meant someone was really determined to screw with me, since there was borderline no room between houses. I went to the kitchen and froze.

The pantry door was open, but there was something behind the back that I'd never seen before. I got on my knees, cat in hand, and peeked inside to get a better look. Inside the pantry, the back was actually a swinging door that led to a crawlspace that I'd never seen before.

I knelt in deeper to get a better look. It did a harsh 90 degree turn right and lead back to the front of the house.

When I looked down the space, I nearly had a heart attack.

There was a man lying on his stomach facing me, probably ten feet away, and he was smiling.

I quickly jerked myself out of the crawlspace, hitting my head on the pantry, and scrambled out of the kitchen. I heard quick shuffling as the man started heading towards me. On my feet, I noticed my arm was bleeding. I'd scrapped myself on a rock, the rock that the man must've thrown to get my attention.

I ran towards the kitchen door, but it wouldn't budge. I ran towards the front door, but that also didn't budge. Had the man barricaded them from outside? Without thinking, still with cat in hand, I ran towards the basement door, nearly flung it off its hinges. I closed the door right as I heard the man finish shuffling out of the crawlspace.

I knew I had to be quiet. There was a closet in the basement that I could hide in, but I didn't want to alert the man to my location. I held Percy close and began slowly making my way down the basement stairs. Each creak of the steps felt agonizing, and I held my breath as I heard the man walking around from upstairs. From the sounds of his footsteps, he was at a leisure pace, as if the damn fool wasn't taking this seriously.

His footsteps shifted near the basement door, and I nearly had a heart attack since I was only halfway down the stairs. Then, they quickly walked towards my other stairs, and he walked up to the second floor. I thought to myself for a bit, I could make more noise now, since there was no way he'd be able to hear me. I could see the closet from my vantage point, and there was a blanket in there I could hide under.

Then the thought hit me. Ok then, the man will obviously head down here next, and he'll definitely check the closet. Then what? I'd be cornered like an idiot. I was walking into a death trap. Then the idea struck me, I should book it for the crawlspace. The front door was barricaded by *something*, so that crawlspace was my only option. I didn't know how long he'd be upstairs for, so I had to be quick.

Cat in hand, I took a deep breath, and ran up the stairs. I flung the door open again and booked it towards the kitchen. From upstairs, I heard frantic shuffling start heading towards the top of the stairs. Inside the crawlspace, I grabbed the bloody rock and began crawling through it. It was so cramped that there was barely enough room to be on my knees.

The man reached the crawlspace and started crawling after me. He was screaming, not words, but an incomprehensible garble. Judging by the noise, he was gaining distance fast. I turned around and made eye contact again. His eyes were wide and crazed, his mouth agape and screaming. I chucked the rock at full force at his face, and he temporarily stopped, dazed and hurt.

Using that opportunity, I crawled the rest of the way. The crawlspace opened to a bigger area, where there was a bed, some old food and booze bottles. Yikes. There was an exit though, and when I made it outside, I was horrified to find the entrance was right near the window Percy meowed out of.

With my cat in hand, I ran over to the next-door neighbor. I was sobbing and knocked on the door frantically. Despite my adrenaline, I realized that I had never spoken to any of my neighbors before, and I was weirdly proud of myself for having the courage to do so. Also, in my haste, I left my phone in the house, so I needed someone's help. The neighbor, a sweet old lady, opened the door, saw the state I was in, ushered me inside, and together we called the police.

\*

The police showed up after an agonizing half hour wait. The neighbor, Miss Fezziwig, was calm and polite, and helped calm me and Percy down. When the police got there, they were surprised to find the perp still in the crawlspace. Apparently, the rock I threw at him knocked him clean out.

After some time, Stacy showed up, much to her horror, since I completely forgot to tell her what had happened. After some explanation, we decided it would be best to reschedule, but we got a good laugh out of it.

Over some time, the man was identified as Brad Gopher, who had apparently been living in that crawlspace for years. Turns out Percy was always meowing at him whenever he'd go in and out. Plus, he revealed that he had only gotten away with it because he noticed how inattentive I was. He said that he had planned to kill me after he realized I was on to him. Spooky.

Jack and Sam got a good laugh out of it when I told them, and it eventually became a common talking point. Percy stopped meowing out the window after that. I also became good friends with Miss Fezziwig and got to hear a lot about her personal life and challenges she faced in the city.

Me and Stacy broke it off a few months later. It was nothing personal, we had just both decided that it wasn't working, so it was mutual. That doesn't matter, I've been going stronger than ever. Since the incident, I've ironically felt more secure and stable now than before, and I've been bravely facing new challenges that life's been throwing me, and I've never been happier.

I walked out of my front door, cat in hand, on my way to work like any other day. I smiled as Miss Fezziwig waved at me from her front porch. I looked at the street, bustling with life, people, pets, animals, cars, and the like. I took it all in, and for the first time since I truly got here, I felt like I truly belonged in this city.

# Interviews

## *Interview with Zoe Gemignani*

by Cameron Ignizio

*Zoe Gemignani is a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College. She enjoys writing as a process, rather than a goal, yet is rarely satisfied with her own creations. She spends her spare time writing with friends, and the rest of her time procrastinating writing for school. When she can she knits and spends time with her family.*

**Cameron Ignizio:** Your story “The Dryad” was a beautiful piece ending with our titular character turning into a tree at the end. If you were a dryad, what tree would you become?

**Zoe Gemignani:** If I were a dryad? I think I’d want to be either a willow, or a cherry tree. I don’t have a *completely* favorite tree, but I find the sadness of willows, symbolically, to be beautiful, and I find them beautiful as well. And cherry trees I just find *beautiful*, it’s my favorite color, and they’re just such lovely trees.

**Cameron:** Who is your favorite musician from Napalm Records?

**Zoe:** Aether realm is my favorite from Napalm! I don’t actually listen to a lot of different musicians, especially metal. I love aether realm, but that’s because their music is very melodic (that’s the specific genre, melodic death metal), and the most important element of a song for me is that I can sing it.

**Cameron:** If the world was going to end in 24 hours, what story would you write?

**Zoe:** If I had 24 hours before the world ended, and I had to write something in that time... I think I would like to write something that encapsulates the love I feel for those around me. I have so many incredible, wonderful people in my life, people I consider chosen family, but will never meet in person. And I think I would want to spend that time thinking about how grateful I am to have met them.

**Cameron:** What’s your process for writing (what you would consider to be) meaningful characters?

**Zoe:** A meaningful character is something I don’t really try to write, exactly. Mainly because, in the style I write, I don’t think it has a true *meaning*. A character is only as meaningful as its containing piece. A character in a the Lord of the Rings (LOTR)-style epic is going to be meaningful in a different form from a character in a 300-word flash piece. Essentially, a character on their own does not exist. A character exists in service to their story, and their meaning is dependent on that entirely.

**Cameron:** What's your favorite kind of contemporary fantasy settings?

**Zoe:** My favorite kind of fantasy setting for writing is not the same as my favorite for reading. And both of them come with some caveats. In terms of reading, my favorite is a classic, tropey Literary Role-Playing Game (LitRPG). Which is a very specific genre, so let me explain! It's a semi-fantasy genre that takes on elements of gaming, stylistically and in terms of world building. Characters usually have stats that can be expressed in numbers, and abilities that can be triggered, and I just find it a ton of fun. Frustratingly there aren't a lot of books I like in a LitRPG style/genre, because a lot of them are uncomfortably sexist and make jokes out of sexual harassment, but the few books in that genre I do like, I adore. In terms of writing, I like the feeling of a classic fantasy setting. Think LOTR, though without the full deep past and setup that has I don't mind writing a little shallower, I'm no linguist. But I love a world with history, and stories, and peoples. I love writing that isn't so world-shattering or incredibly deep, just nice, quiet stories of people collaborating and learning to be kind. Except there's dragons involved! That's what I like best, simple little stories but set in fantastical settings.

**Cameron:** What direction do you tend to lean towards in terms of tone/theming when writing stories?

**Zoe:** Tone and theming tend to run away from me. I usually sit down with one primary goal, but it's rare that a piece remains in the same form after I've gone through it. Pretty much everything I've ever *finished* has been the result of sitting down with a one-sentence idea, then writing for three hours, finishing it. Then never returning to it! The Dryad didn't begin with an idea of tone or theme, or even a conception of how it was going to end. Goodbye was only based on the song, without any thoughts beyond that. All my various other pieces have been the same.

# ***Franky Pwynn: Community and Writing***

## **An Interview by Diana Crispino**

*Franky Pwynn is a Monroe Community College student with a major in creative writing. He recently featured "Witches Chant: A Chosen Family" - a play in the 24 hour bakeoff at MCC. He enjoys saying the word chrysanthemum and getting down to boogie. Franky loves all things fantasy.*

**Diana Crispino:** How did you decide to move from your previous career to perusing writing?

**Franky Pwynn:** Writing has always been a passion. Everything it connects to, like plays, poetry, and short fiction, are such enthralling endeavors. While I studied psychology, my social time was always spent with friends in the art field who opened my heart to the creative path of life.

**Diana:** Many of your works feature LGBTQ+ characters and themes. How did you come to choose this as a topic to explore in your writing?

**Franky:** Because the dolls be dolling darling. This is to say that the LGBTQ+ community has been a great friend to me, and I intend to cherish and nurture that relationship for the rest of my life.

**Diana:** What does fantasy mean for you and why have you chosen it is the primary genre for your works?

**Franky:** I remember Aggie Cromwell from Halloweentown said, "Magic is really very simple, all you've got to do is want something and then let yourself have it," and I've been following this principle ever since. I feel that writing is the closest we can get to magic under this assumption. We weave our texts to compose greater meaning to life around us. Fantasy has been so ever present in my life that using it as my primary storytelling vehicle seemed to be the natural option. For what it's worth, I would love to write for the romance market because they have a hard time keeping good books stocked on the shelves.

**Diana:** Merrid is a recurring character, found in both 'Portents of Undeath' and 'Merrid's Execution.' What does this character represent for you and why have you chosen to revisit her?

**Franky:** Merrid is an old friend of mine. She pushes me as a writer to focus on reforming and mending problems by finding a way to uplift those in the community around her. She is a serial character of mine, one that is so fleshed out that I feel comfortable revisiting her and using her to explore different stories.

**Diana:** What's one takeaway you'd like your readers to have after reading your work?

**Franky:** I want my readers to take away that we can all make a difference. My stories are about overcoming odds by means of community and chosen family. My readers are not alone in the way they perceive and think about the world. My work should act as a touchstone or rallying point for conversations among like-minded individuals.

**Diana:** Who or what is your inspiration for writing?

**Franky:** I would say I am most inspired by my friends who have supported me through commemorations and commiserations alike. Ever since I moved to Rochester a few short years ago, I've been welcomed with open arms. I want my writing to show the appreciation and voracity I have for life.

*Diana Crispino is a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College. She will be graduating in May 2025.*



## ***About The Author: Katherine Reilly***

### **An Interview by Zoe Gemignani**

*Katherine Reilly is a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College. She will finish her degree at MCC in May of 2025. Katherine's favorite genre to write in is fiction and she likes to build characters. Her character-building process is answering a series of questions that slowly bring the character to life. The questions allow Katherine to give the character a personality and understand the reasons behind the decisions that the character makes. This process also helps Katherine discover the character's voice.*

**Zoe Gemignani:** In reading your work, you come across as very deliberate with your wording. How would you say that affects how you write?

**Katherine Reilly:** Being deliberate with my wording has always been natural. It only affects my writing when I realize that my characters would not talk like I write. But then I decided that my characters could talk how I write.

**Zoe:** Your piece, Constantly Spiraling, draws from your experiences with OCD, though as you've said you're not officially diagnosed. So much of that resonates with me as an Autistic person. How does that part of your brain impact how you approach writing?

**Katherine:** I have a hard time beginning to write a story when everything is not decided already. My first draft of both 'Organized Chaos' and 'Good Enough' were not fully developed and did not look as good because I did not have everything set up.

**Zoe:** What part of writing do you enjoy most?

**Katherine:** The part of writing that I enjoy is making characters and getting to know them.

**Zoe:** What part do you find most challenging?

**Katherine:** The most challenging part about writing is making sure that the message that I want to get across does not get lost in all of the fluff of my character building.

**Zoe:** When did you first think of yourself as a writer?

**Katherine:** In the spring semester of 2022, I was really struggling and I began writing fanfiction. I released my first fanfic on April 1st and it went well. After that I went to my advisor and changed my major to creative writing.

**Zoe:** What sort of writing is your favorite?

**Katherine:** Choosing a favorite type of writing is hard. I know that I do best at flash fiction/long fiction because of my characters. I only just realized that my characters in plays are as important as the fiction characters. So I probably would have to say flash fiction/ long form fiction.

**Zoe:** Do you have a favorite author? Why?

**Katherine:** Julia Quinn has been really inspiring recently. She writes the Bridgerton books, the main characters are all from one family and there are eight of them. Quinn is able to create characters who are individual and have plotlines that do not fall apart.

**Zoe:** Have you been given writing advice that helped or resonated with you?

**Katherine:** Seayoung Yim talked about making your play characters sparkle. I had never really thought about my play characters being able to be flushed out because someone else would play them. I would never want to step on anyone's toes as they tried playing my characters because I had already decided all of the background details for the character.

*Zoe Gemignani is a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College. She spends her spare time writing and the rest of her time procrastinating writing.*

# ***Diana Crispino:***

## ***Master of the Economy of Words***

### **An Interview by Franky Pwynn**

*Diana Rose Crispino is a creative writing major at Monroe Community College. Originally from a STEM field, she has expanded her horizons to study the art of storytelling. She has spent several years creating stories for a small audience of friends and is currently broadening her work through short fiction, poetry, and playwriting. Her spare time is spent doing a wide variety of craft projects from crochet and bookbinding to welding and masonry.*

**Franky Pwynn:** How would you describe your writing style in three words?

**Diana Rose Crispino:** Emotional, precise, immersive.

**Franky:** What is your favorite format of writing we've used thus far?

**Diana:** I think all the different styles have a place, and I'll use them each for different things, but I really like writing short fiction. It gives me enough room for me to sink into a story but short enough that working on them feel like little bites of creative expression.

**Franky:** How do you handle feedback or criticism of your writing?

**Diana:** Criticism and feedback are such important parts of the writing process. It's hard because I'm so self-conscious about my first drafts. I realize that, as the author, I'm inherently biased. I can see the subtle things I'm trying reference, and I understand what I'm trying to say. But I am not my audience. Knowing what is working and what isn't is how a concept becomes a real work, even if what I'm told isn't what I want to hear.

**Franky:** What do you love about magic/ fantasy?

**Diana:** Magic and fantasy are so important to me. I read and write as a form of escape. The day-to-day grind is so boring and uneventful. I often feel like life sweeps me along, bringing me from day to day, from work to home, from one chore to the next. Fantasy gives me a place to imagine something grander than what I have. It so reliably brings me somewhere else where things are different and new, where adventure is more obtainable and grander.

**Franky:** Where does your love of writing come from?

**Diana:** I grew up in a house of readers. My parents had a collection of 'The 100 Greatest Books of All Time' that my dad challenged himself to read when I was in high school. My mom often meets or exceeds her '52 Books a Year' challenge. She would read to me as a kid, take me to the library, play books on tape in the car on the long drives to visit her side of the family in Ohio. As a kid who was frequently bored, books were an exciting thing to do. I developed a love for writing because I love telling stories. I often run D&D and other role-playing games for a group of friends every week. Writing gives me a way to perfect this craft and keep a record of my stories.

**Franky:** Who or what is most influential to your writing/ what do you hope to emulate?

**Diana:** My biggest inspiration is my best friend Nate. He has read almost everything I have ever written. He has always been my biggest fan. I grew to love poetry when we spent a summer

writing poems back and forth to each other. A few years ago, the two of us gathered a very close group of friends who get together every week to play D&D and tell stories. We bonded over books we love and formed a little book club. They started reading my pieces and cheering for me, too. It's their support that really keeps me going.

**Franky:** What impact do you want your writing to have?

**Diana:** If I can do one thing for my writers, it's to provide them with an escape from their everyday lives. We all need a break from the grind. I want my readers to be able to forget about their problems for a while and experience something new.

*Franky Pwynn is a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College. He will be graduating in May 2025.*

# ***An Interview with Cameron Ignizio***

By Katherine M. Reilly

*Cameron Ignizio is currently attending Monroe Community College and is working to achieve a creative writing degree and will be finishing his associates in Spring of 2025. He enjoys writing stories that are typically dialogue heavy, since he enjoys building characters through dialogue and finding their voice.*

**Katherine M. Reilly:** A lot of pieces are very dialogue heavy, do your characters have distinct voices? What is your process for choosing the voice for your characters?

**Cameron Ignizio:** Yes, they do. Each character's voice typically comes from either an actor, celebrity, etc. who's voice is very distinct, and I try my best to emulate their cadence as best as possible. When choosing the voice, I find the best match actor voice for whoever I'm envisioning. This actor typically has a similar mannerism to whoever I'm writing. Once I've got it, I write their lines based on however that actor would speak. It's a solid process that hasn't failed me yet.

**Katherine:** In your workshop statement for 'Firefighter' you mention that the piece originally started as an assignment, did you like changing the piece from an assignment to what it is today?

**Cameron:** It felt very satisfying to actually capture the complete story that I was going for. The original was just a simple story that breadcrumbed some sort of a conflict/resolution, but being able to fully expand upon it and explain everything was incredibly fun.

**Katherine:** What would you cut from 'Firefighter' if it was supposed to be shorter from?

**Cameron:** That's like chopping up my child! But if an amputation was necessary, probably the beginning leading up to where the original poem started. From there, I could tell the story much quicker.

**Katherine:** You obviously write in several different genres (flash fiction, longer fiction, and plays), what is your favorite genre? What is your favorite piece from each genre and why?

**Cameron:** My favorite genre to write in is longer fiction. Sometimes I have a lot to say, and a play format can be a bit restrictive. If I have a story I want to tell, I'd want as much space to do so as possible, without feeling as if there are restrictions holding me back. My favorite play I've done so far is Dead Body Trademarked, since it has some of the funniest jokes I've ever written. In terms of flash fiction, Ballad of the Cats is a story I'm massively proud of, and my favorite longer story might be a tossup between my Break in Story and Firefighter, since they each have so much stuff.

**Katherine:** Would you ever consider writing a collection of stories that one of your stories 'Break in' or 'Firefighter' would be in? Which one would you choose and why?

**Cameron:** That is how some writers "make it", isn't it. I'd definitely include my Break in Story and Firefighter, along with Ballad of the Cats, and some of my plays as well. Probably Dead Body Trademarked and Assassinate your Struggles. Also, the Wild West play as well!

*Katherine Reilly is a Creative Writing Student at MCC who plans on graduating in May 2025 along with Cameron.*

## Author Bios

*Diana Rose Crispino* is a writer of short fiction, poetry, and plays. Originally from a STEM background, she returned to school to study the art of storytelling and is set to graduate from Monroe Community College's Creative Writing program in the spring of 2025. Her play "Witch of the Bod" was a winner of the Sixth Act Playwriting Contest, which marks her literary debut. She would like to thank her friends Peter, Nathan, Austin, Ally, and Gwen for their endless support, encouragement, and inspiration.

*Zoe Gemignani* is a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College. She will finish her degree at MCC in 2026. Zoe's passion is folk tales and fantasy. Her writing can be rich and it can be spare. Zoe's words lift you up in their lush beauty as her driven, powerful, frequently-female characters sweep (or are swept) to their fate. She can find hidden truths in stories that you thought you knew. As a homeschooled person on the spectrum, Zoe has traveled the world, enjoys speaking German and moderating online writers' forums.

*Franky Pwynn* is an MCC student, with a major in Creative Writing. He recently featured his play "Witches Chant: A Chosen Family" in the 24-Hour Bakeoff at MCC. He enjoys saying the word chrysanthemum and getting down to boogie. Franky loves all things fantasy.

*Cameron Ignizio* is a current Monroe Community College student. While he is currently working towards his Creative Writing Associates Degree, he is still unsure of what his future might be. Cameron enjoys writing stories that involve a lot of humor and heartbreak, as he believes that the two are intertwined. His writing style tends to lead towards more dialogue centric stories, as he enjoys finding the voices of his characters. Cameron is a lover of nature and enjoys long walks to clear his mind and envision potential story ideas. When he isn't, he enjoys reading books and watching TV shows, mostly to see how other writers create and present their stories. He is always looking to grow his writing skills, and improve upon his previous work.

*Katherine Marie Reilly* is a Creative Writing major at MCC, and she will graduate in May 2025. She plans to continue learning about writing as a craft at SUNY Buff State comes Fall 2025. Katherine's favorite genre to write is fiction because the plot relies on the characters developing and learning about themselves and the world around them. She asks herself questions to fully understand the character that she is building for the piece that she is writing. Katherine would like to thank her parents and family for supporting her in her chosen major and not acting completely bored when she is ranting about her stories. She would like to thank her classmates for always be available to bounce ideas off of.

Special thanks to Maria Brandt from MCC, Megan Sullivan from Flower City Arts, and Chad Ellis from Bookeater.

## Circle Stories: An Exercise in Collaborative Writing

### ***Target Lock***

Kira walked down the center of the mag-train with her hands in her pockets, gripping her laser gun. Its cool metal felt familiar in her trained hands, she sought to finally silence her past.

“Your target is an older, balding man who’s visiting his daughter’s wedding.”

“I know,” Kira muttered. That’s the 1,428<sup>th</sup> time you told me, she thought.

She tried to remember the face from the briefing, the hair black like her own, her hands balling in her skirts.

When she spotted him at the end of the train car, his identity unmistakable, she pulled out her laser gun and froze.

### ***Reality***

The ginger cat sat on the fence, listening to the city bustline. The city was Miami and the fence he was sitting on was to the Hard Rock Café Stadium. His name was Mike.

Mike wanted nothing more than to play for the Miami Dolphins as a quarterback. He figured, “I’m already orange! Joining the team should be easy!”

But, alas, it was not. Mike’s dreams were squashed when he found out he was allergic to footballs. His depression subsumed him. He had hardly any appetite even for the kibbles and bits that dotted his bowl like tea leaves waiting to be divined.

### ***Magic Tutu***

Once upon a time, there was a ballerina named Valerie. She was very good at ballet thanks to her magic tutu. Its magic shone through as a pair of matching slippers elevating her ballet to an almost divine form.

Valerie pirouetted through the hall, dreaming of being prima ballerina in *The Nutcracker*. She practiced with her magic tutu every day until people began to notice her dancing. The International Ballet Association was very impressed, and offered her a gig.

She was due to be Clara in *The Nutcracker* in the upcoming December.

But the show was canceled due to the dancer playing the Nutcracker being in an accident.

### ***Sour Peaches***

Once upon a time, in a land of hunger, a peach went sour in an empty room. The peach’s sourness permeated the air causing all who smelled it to pucker their lips. The people walked by every day, but none dared to enter for fear of angering the King.



Little did they know, the King had starved to death two days ago. He had recorded himself growling at the passersby so they'd all assume he was alive.

Even if he hadn't, though, it wouldn't have mattered.

They all had starved to death too.

And the peach went on rotting, alone.

## Class Photo



A photograph of four people sitting at a table. From left to right: Diana C., wearing a striped shirt; Zoe G., wearing a yellow top, glasses, and jewelry; Cameron I., wearing a white shirt and glasses. Katherine R.; wearing a floral top and jewelry. All four are smiling at the camera and posing.



A portrait-style photograph of Franky P. taken outside in front of a tree. Franky is wearing a black baseball cap, round blue-tinted sunglasses, and a black tank top.