



MONSTERS, DARKNESS &
Cherry Blossom Trees

Monsters, Darkness, & Cherry Blossom Trees

9 Personal Essays by ACES Students
Spring 2021

A 2021 ACES Publication (Volume 10 in the series)
All selections copyrighted by the authors ©2021
Cover art by Tooba Khalid ©2021

Preface

When I cannot sleep at night, I wonder how life will be without monsters, darkness, and cherry blossom trees. Those three elements do not seem to have anything in common. However, they are all part of the same path. We face all of them in our daily lives: Monsters can be your deepest fears and insecurities; darkness can be the place you want to get out of every day, but some days it wins; cherry blossom trees remind you that life is more than just monsters and darkness. We are cherry blossoms in our journey: we all need to find the balance, just like a cherry tree finding the right temperature to flourish.

In those restless nights where my brain is my worst enemy, I also wonder if life will be a utopia without monsters and darkness. Will that be better than our current lives? Some of us go through life thinking that nothing will change. That our loved ones will never leave our side. The truth is that those uncertain things can happen and affect us profoundly, such as leaving your home for a new place, losing the person you love the most, finding a perfect book to cure your boredom, making friends, or even dealing with a mental illness. The most important thing is that we need to hold on to glimpses of happiness in those moments. Even when you think you are not doing anything right, remember someone knows you, and that's enough.

As human beings, we are always full of hope or just waiting for our perfect glimpse of happiness. We cannot go through life avoiding problems. We need to face them and find the roots of our poison ivies. I hope we never stop and that we keep going no matter the

circumstances. Because we are all capable of facing our monsters and darkness to find our unique cherry blossom tree. With these thoughts in mind, let us begin our ACES Reader 2021.

*Lilibeth Cordero '21
St. Joseph's College, Brooklyn
May 2021*

Table of Contents

Unexpected Happiness in the Unappealing by Kareem Bagato	6
Some Moments Are Unforgettable by Tenzin Choezom.....	10
The Secret Identity by Maribel Tale Rodriguez.....	13
My Crazy Experience with Contact Lenses by Jasmina Turdieva.....	20
Friendship Really Lasts by Eva Gallegos.....	25
In Sicily, Women Are More Dangerous Than Shotguns by Huy Nguyen.....	30
Nothing Is as Bad as It Looks by Gabriela Guzman.....	37
My Monster by Laura Rendon Albarracin.....	41
The Cherry Blossom Tree by Parizoda Axrorqulova.....	45



Unexpected Happiness in the Unappealing **by Kareem Bagato**

It all started on a stormy day. I was sitting on my bed, bored out of my mind; I could hear the wind blowing through the leaves outside, the occasional branch being carried away by the wind and falling on the street. I could also hear the rain hitting the pavement with such force that if I was a Greek during the 8th century, I would have thought that Zeus was very angry today—the lightning didn't help with my theory, either. Gods being angry aside, I was bored: exceedingly, eminently, excessively bored. So bored in fact that I even thought of going outside and doing something—could you believe it? A teenager going outside in this day and age, and actually doing something? By Zeus, I am sure any boomer would have been unfathomably surprised. Since I couldn't go outside because of Zeus' temper tantrum, I had to think of something to do from the comfort of my home—or better yet, bed. I thought long and hard about what to do to satisfy

my boredom. I suddenly found myself finding an obscure, unknown book that would end up solving all my problems. While it is true that the book, or rather web novel, that I found is rather obscure, it wasn't something I discovered in that very moment; but rather something I knew about and even read the first chapter of many months ago, when I was not as bored as the day in question, and when Zeus was not throwing a temper tantrum.

The day I initially found this book it was a sunny day, full of sunburnt people, and annoying bees flying about. I was sitting outside on a bench, neither as bored as I was on the stormy day, nor was I feeling very adventurous. However, I was mildly bored, so I thought of something to satiate this feeling. The first thing I did, as any other person would do in this day and age, was go on YouTube and watch cat videos. Unfortunately, the almost godlike powers of cats didn't help me either and I was still left with a mild case of sunburn, annoyed by the constant buzzing of the bees, and still mildly bored. So I went to the internet seeking refuge from my mind, and I found a novel: not a very well-known one, but one that was famous enough to have its own subreddit. *Worm* was written by a guy called Wildbow. Honestly, the first thing that came to my mind when I read the title was, "Who calls their book *Worm*?" (I came to find out that it was a very accurate title, though I still think it wasn't a very well thought-out one.) Unfortunately, unlike the beautiful weather outside, sunburn and bees included, I learned that *Worm* was a grimdark story, a dystopian genre that my mildly bored, sunburnt, annoyed past self wasn't up to try out.

But back to Zeus and my boredom. Unlike my past sunburnt self, on that particular day where the weather was decisively the complete opposite of when I first discovered this book (oh the irony, reading a grimdark story with a thunderstorm going on outside), I was now sufficiently bored enough to read *Worm*, and oh boy was I surprised. From the very first click of my mouse to the second the dark themed web page loaded and the white text appeared, I just knew that I was in for a ride. Reading *Worm* was an experience, a roller coaster of emotions. I started out reading about how Taylor, the main character and our protagonist with a bunch of mental issues, daddy problems and teenage hormones packaged with superpowers, delivering you a sociopath with no delivery fee and no returns, was systematically bullied into oblivion to the point where powers manifested—which, I gotta say, is a very clichéd way for someone to get powers, but hey, at least she didn't wear tights and underwear on the outside (nothing can be worse than that), so I let it pass.

Except there was something worse than that: the way Taylor got her oh-so-magnificent powers (personally, I think her powers suck, but that's just me. Then again, she controls insects, and that includes spiders, so I am pretty sure I am not alone on that). I will spare you the details on how that happened exactly, however, I will give you this: let's just say that they locked someone (Taylor) in a locker and proceeded to fill said locker with fecal matter, toxic waste, and flesh-eating insects (hint on how she got her powers). Yeah grimdark, you get what you signed up for. Did a good job, too. I could almost smell what that locker must have smelled like whilst I was reading that scene; I could almost hear the

buzzing of the flies; and I could even imagine someone screaming if I tried hard enough and focused. The lighting outside helped with the dramatics of it all, I thought. Zeus was always a drama queen.

I don't try new things often; hell, I almost always eat the same things when I order out, and I especially don't try new things when it seems unappealing at first. But this experience taught me something. It taught me that even though something looks unappealing at first, it can be a diamond in the rough and turn out to be something that you actually enjoy. *Worm* was that for me. It was a dark story with frantically ludicrous amounts of violence in which the main character is a sociopath; in which the line between being good and evil is virtually nonexistent. It takes the personalities of modern superheroes and throws them out of the window. It takes Captain America and Spiderman—almost saint-like personalities, personalities that are unrealistic—and shows us what someone with no moral compass or what an actual teenager would do with those powers. It shows us how even with powers, people would still be evil, selfish, and greedy, and that those superhero movies are unrealistic with their portrayal of what would happen if a normal person suddenly developed powers. And unexpectedly, I liked that. I experienced happiness from something that I at first found to be unappealing, something that I honestly thought would be too grimdark for me to actually enjoy. But enjoy it I did, and it made me rethink everything I found to be unappealing. Maybe I should think about trying some of those things, because I might experience unexpected happiness.



Some Moments Are Unforgettable by Tenzin Choezom

What would you do if you were ever stuck in a dangerous situation? It's really exhausting to feel like your life is in danger and your whole life might become miserable thinking about that terrible moment. It's important to stay safe while traveling because you can face many circumstances that will make your life difficult. Whenever I think of the word monster, I feel like it describes a terrifying feeling that you won't ever forget in your life. A few years ago, back in my country, I experienced such a terrifying feeling. I faced a difficult condition with my grandparents which impacted my life in quite a difficult way. The incident took place on an unsafe road in a small, and quiet village in Nepal.

In 2008, I was a 6-year-old girl. I grew up in a small town called Mustang. Mustang is located in a beautiful land surrounded by high mountains, different types of animals, greenish fields, and kind people. While I grew up in the countryside with

my grandparents, my family lived in the capital city called Kathmandu. One day, my grandparents told me that we had to go to the city. It was kind of weird because around that time, we usually had school, but my grandparents said it was important to go.

The transportation system in my village was always poor. We had the option to take an airplane or to take the bus. People who had taken airplanes in the past had frightening experiences, but at the same time, the road was very dangerous, too. But it was usually better to take the bus because it was more relaxing. So, one day in sunny hot weather, we left our home in Mustang and went to the city. It takes at least 2 days to reach the city from where I lived. I remember while I was on the bus, the road was so risky, and the bus was shaking a lot. The bus engine roared like an angry spirit.

I thought I was going to die that day. My grandpa held me tightly while we were on the tiny bus. I remember my grandma was doing our religious prayer. That day she told me, "If we pray, nothing will happen to us because god will always be there to protect us." Then the bus driver told us the bus couldn't move any further because the road was too dangerous to go over, so we had to walk on our own the rest of the way. Who would have known that we would be facing an even scarier path?

Everyone had to get off the bus. We had to carry our own stuff. My grandparents, my aunt and I were walking slowly compared to others. While walking on the dangerous road we encountered a lot of big rocks. So many rocks were on top of each other, so it was difficult to walk on these big rocks since we

were not that strong. In my mind, I was hearing loud noises because of the rocks falling down quickly. We soon realized that all the rocks were on the ground because they fell from the mountains. While we were walking, a huge rock almost dropped near us with a loud noise! Suddenly everyone screamed a lot, especially the babies. People would have died if they weren't being careful. After seeing all these horrifying experiences, I thought I wasn't going to make it to the city to see my parents. I remember I was crying a lot because I was so hungry and there were no restaurants to be found nearby. It was hard to go at a fast pace because my grandmother's legs were always hurting since she had had a leg surgery in the past.

After we managed to get past the terrifying rocks falling, we continued to walk until we reached a bus station that would take us to Kathmandu. Although we eventually made it to see my parents, that journey was horrifying. No child deserves to face the situation that I went through. I felt like a monster was chasing me because of that experience. I was so scared, just like how people are when they encounter monsters. That feeling was surreal because in my life, I have never faced a more dangerous experience than this one.



The Secret Identity by Maribel Tale Rodriguez

My family is indigenous. I grew up in a small village where it's quiet and surrounded by mountains full of trees, rivers; everything was so green. I was told that my ancestors are the Mayans, and we still have some of the same beliefs as them. One that has always been interesting to me is the idea that when the moon dies, then we all have to cheer for it to come back to life again. I always asked myself what the reason was that we did that. Later on, I learned about the darkness, the home of the evil, where all you are able to see is the shadow. The darkness wants to win the souls of innocent people. It will cover your soul with darkness and sometimes you won't be able to get out of it. It was hard to know if the darkness was coming for you because you never know who has so much hate and darkness in their soul to send the darkness to look for you. Life will bring you the worst shadow that you never expected to become your worst fear. All

you have left is your faith and the people that will forever love you, to fight it. As much as the darkness wants to take control of your soul, it would vanish in the face of your soul because your soul is stronger.

My family used to gather around and sit in my grandparents' kitchen, surrounding the fire and staring at the wood burning. My family members would tell stories of how darkness had destroyed people's lives. Kids were told these stories because they needed to be careful and to be close to God because he was the one who could protect them. Kids were not allowed to go out at night alone. The village did not have lights outside—the only little light that we had was the moonlight. At night you could hear the wind making a “buzzzzz” sound and the cornfield moving. If the moon was covered by clouds, you had to take a flashlight with you when you went out. I remember when I used to visit my grandparents and when it would get late, one of them had to take me home. I was not able to go alone, even though their house was just one block away from my house.

When my father died, we had a fluffy beautiful cat. I have always had cats because they are such good friends. On the day of the death of my father, this cat was in the living room. People said that the cat peed on top of someone. They had the belief that if this happens, it means that the animal was possessed by evil. They took the cat and killed him. I was not told about this until a year later because my family knew that I would have not allowed something so cruel. People said the evil was looking for us and it was coming for us. My mom, siblings, and I did not believe that an innocent cat had something wrong with him; he was part of our family. We never thought that our family was followed by darkness. We did not know that this

was a sign of what was coming for us until we heard its steps on top of our house going in circles.

People in my village usually eat dinner very early, when the sun is still up. This is because they need to lock their doors before it gets dark outside. This is why people in my village get so scared of when the moon dies: it's because of the moon and stars that they have any light at night. In some way, the moon and stars are our protectors. My family also ate dinner early. We all slept in the same room: we had our altar at the center of the room with candles on it, a cross, and a piece of fabric that had a picture of the last meal of Jesus and his disciples. One night we went to our room, and it was very dark outside and we had our bedroom light on. We heard something walking on top of our roof. It was directly on top of our bedroom, and we were very scared. I was told that evil was able to possess cats, and my mother told us that it could be a monster cat. We could hear it very clearly because the roof of our house was covered with big things that are metal and thin. It stayed there for a very long time and all we did the whole time was to ask God to protect us from whatever was trying to hurt us. When it left, we couldn't sleep anymore.

It happened a couple of times. My mom decided to tell my grandparents because they are religious and they would be able to help us. My grandfather knew how to protect our house so that the monster would not enter it. My grandparents came to our house every evening to do a small ritual. It lasted about 15 to 20 minutes: my grandfather first spread the salt at the corners of the house, and then he started praying. My grandfather would tell us to pray with him. He would kneel

in front of the altar in our bedroom and put his hat on the floor. He would light the candle and the incense in front of the wooden cross. The smell of the candle and incense gave me the feeling of freedom and peace. I would look at my grandfather's face: his eyes were closed, his hands together, and I would do the same thing that he was doing. I admired him. His faith was stronger than anything. I did not know very well how to talk to God but all I was repeating in my thoughts was *chu'ja to kaq' cajau' chi'r utz' ca petatchi' ri sub'unel*, which means, God help us so the monster doesn't come back. We did this for a couple of weeks and every time we did, my family's faith was stronger.

Weeks passed and we did not hear the creature stepping on our roof again. One night later on that month, we ate early and went to our room and closed the doors. It was around 8 pm and we heard something that was running around our house. The sound of its steps was just like as if a cow or a horse was running. It was another creature, and its steps were so loud that it created so much fear in us again. One of my older sisters was very brave and she wanted to go out to see what the creature was. We begged her not to go and she saw that we started crying. She decided not to go. We finally slept after hearing that the monster had left. The next morning, my mom talked about it with my other family members and they said that they heard it as well. One of them actually saw it because their house was really close to ours. he was not able to see it clearly, but with the moon and star light, she saw it was a big, dark thing. She described the creature as having a body that looked like a cow, but as big as a bear. We went around our house to find clues about what

the monster was. We found the steps of the monster and it was just how my aunt described it. Its footprint was like a cow.

A week passed by, and we heard the monster again. Its steps were even louder. This time my sister could not handle it and she went out. She said, "I will go see what it is, you guys stay here." She slowly opened the door and she took a piece of wood with her. We stayed in the room with my mom. When my sister came back to the room she told us that she saw it. She saw the monster. It was not clear because it was really dark and all she could see was a big shadow. She only saw it a few seconds and then the monster left. One of the most important things that my grandfather taught us was the importance of having hope and faith. We had faith that the creature would soon go away. My grandfather would lead this ritual and we would follow him. He would hold the holy water and the salt and leave a small amount at the corners of the house. The time passed and we stopped hearing the horrible sounds of the creature but we were emotionally impacted by this experience and none of us stayed home alone.

The theory of the people in my village was that these things were happening because someone sent the monsters. The person that was sending the monster felt envy towards my father and towards my family. My dad had to deal with this monster, too. I was told about his story by my sister. He went through so much pain; there were people that wanted to help him but he was cursed. He was strong enough to break the curse but then there was something stronger coming for him. I was told that the reason that people in our community did this to him was because of how successful he and his parents were and. After my father was

gone, my family suffered from many things. Since my dad died, we were the ones who were left and that person who had cursed him was still feeling hate.

But eventually, with the rituals of my grandfather, the monsters stopped visiting us at our house, and my family had been blessed and we moved to the United States. We thought that monsters were out of our life. But a couple of years ago, we lived in an apartment that was on the third floor, which was the top floor. Once again, we heard something walking on our roof. It was weird how we were still able to hear it because here the roof was supposed to be stronger. We had faith that nothing would happen to us and to just trust God. We stopped hearing the sound after a couple of times.

It's been years that we haven't heard or talked about monsters. We never got to prove if someone was actually sending the monsters. It is really hard to believe that a human being could cause so much pain but if this is true, I only hope that this person reflects on what he or she has done. We don't know if the darkness is still following us but if it is, we are stronger now. We won't let anything hurt us. We will rise every time and even stronger because God will always be there to give us a hand to help us keep moving on. My grandfather just took his last breath two months ago. His last words that I heard over the phone were *kin bisoni' nan*, which means, I am worried my darling. He was not able to say what the reason was that he was worried. I might find out later, or maybe not, but he has prepared me very well for whatever is coming and I now know how powerful my faith can be. The only thing that he did not prepare me for is how to live without him. He became our guide to the path to God; he became our dad after my dad left; he did everything to

protect us. I will never forget those two people that have left my life. We will always remember how my dad and grandfather were two amazing warriors, just like the rest of us. We will never forget them: they will always be in our hearts, and with the experience that I had with the darkness, it has marked my life and it has taught me to always be on the side of the light.



My Crazy Experience with Contact Lenses

by Jasmina Turdieva

This is a notice for those who have a phobia about trying something new: Do not be afraid. Take the first step, make a move. You do not have to stay in front of the problem, you have to try to solve it, even if you think that it is impossible!

Before I came to the United States, I did not wear glasses all the time. I wore them only when I sat in the back desk. However, when I came here, my vision really changed and I couldn't see without my glasses. In September 2018, my first year of school here, I joined the tennis team. I love tennis and I can't imagine my life without tennis practices and competitions. I am always trying to be number one on a team. I used to practice really hard. When I ran during practice, my glasses were always falling down my nose and that really bothered me. Also, during the practice, I often broke my glasses. The first time I broke the frame of my glasses, my mom

didn't take it too seriously because I fixed them with the pin from my old glasses. However, when I broke my glasses the second time, my mom began to worry because the glass was falling out from the frame. I fixed them with Gorilla superglue, but it was really uncomfortable, and it looked very bad. The third time, my mom said that it would be better if we bought contact lenses for me. At that time, I did not know that much about contact lenses. I was calm, but when my mom told me about the sanitation of contact lenses, I became scared. I was thinking, "What? How? This foreign body will be inside my eyes? Is it safe?" I asked myself so many questions and didn't find any answers. After that, I was scared of the idea of wearing contact lenses. It became for me something new and scary.

The next two years, we all forgot about the contact lenses—until I broke my expensive and favorite glasses. It happened in gym class. In our gym class, we had a lot of students and it was too small for four volleyball nets. I played volleyball with my friends; we enjoyed playing together. A few minutes into a game, our ball rolled away to the other side and I wanted to pick it up. However, I did not see a ball flying straight into my face! Uh, that hurt. I broke my glasses. I could not see anything; everything was blurred and I asked my mom to drive me home. I remember I also had a table tennis practice that day and I was doubly sad because of my glasses. When my mom came to drive me home, she asked what happened. I told her what happened, and she started to say, "You have to be careful! Why you didn't look around you? If we bought you contact lenses, then your glasses could be safe!" After her words I understood that she was right, but I was scared of lenses. How could I

wear them? After a couple weeks my mom asked, “Did you make an appointment with your eye doctor?”

“Of course!” I stopped and took a deep breath. I knew that if I lied to her that wouldn’t save me; however, I also knew that if I told her the truth, that wouldn’t save me either. Consequently, I lied to her but after lying, my conscience said to me that I had to tell her the truth no matter what would happen next. So, I closed my eyes for a second, took some breaths and said, “NO.” After saying the truth, I didn’t care what would happen next. I felt okay. I was glad that I told my mom the truth.

“Why? Why did you not do what I said?” My mom got angry. I worried that she wouldn’t talk to me for some weeks. I worried that she was disappointed. But I was calm because I had told her the truth.

After that I didn’t know what to say. My head became empty and I couldn’t even say one word but then the speakers in the car started to play my favorite song which always calms me: “The Trust Untold” by BTS. I answered my mom, “I told you that I am afraid! I can’t do that! I don’t have the courage to try it. I am a weak person, you know.”

After that my mom talked with me. She told me about her own experience with contact lenses. She said that it was okay that I was afraid. She told me that nothing comes easily to you. After listening to her calming lessons, I made an appointment while she was near me. She smiled and praised me. I felt sad and happy because my mom rarely calls me “my child” in our mother tongue, but she called me so then. My heart melted and I started to feel weird; I started to feel there was something in my throat and I wanted to cry. I love my mom so much; whenever

she calls me “my child” I become emotional—I have no idea why. But I was happy because my mom smiled. My favorite song filled my heart with warm blood, as did my mom’s smile. We listened to music together and finally we were at home.

A week passed and it was my appointment day. My mom went with me because she thought that I would not go and that I would return home with nothing. I was sitting with my mom and waiting for a doctor. While we waited, I looked up contact lens sanitation on the internet. I understood that it would be really hard because I am an irresponsible person and I can forget about lens care. I say that I am an irresponsible person because when my mom asks me to do at least five things, out of those five I will do two and I will forget the other three. I was afraid because I know myself better than anybody else: I know my weaknesses and my limitations; I know my positive and negative sides.

Finally, the doctor called us. I was sitting in a special chair and my doctor took a look at my eyes. She took something like a syringe but longer and held it right in front of my eyes. I was afraid that she would put that stuff into my eyes. At that moment, my phobia increased: I started to get scared and nervous, and I began to scratch my hand. The doctor noticed and took away her crazy stuff. After that, she forced me to wash my hands with soap and dry them. She gave me a pair of lenses and said to try wearing them. I tried to wear them at least eleven times and finally on the twelfth time, I actually wore them; they were in my eyes. I felt uncomfortable and nervous because I was afraid that they could fall out when I was outside. After that we went home. I was getting used to wearing them, but my left eye still felt uncomfortable. When nighttime came, I had to take them off, and it was

really hard for me as it was the first time doing this. Additionally, I remember that I forgot to wash my hands and I started to panic. After that, I could not sleep the whole night; each hour I woke up and checked my eyes to see that everything was okay. Fortunately, my eyes were okay, my panic stopped, and I calmed. After two weeks, I got used to using them and felt comfortable. My phobia left me, and I use my contact lenses every day.

“Ha-ha how does it feel to wear contact lenses, huh?” My mom asked with a sly smile on her face.

“Not bad, I got used to wearing them. Now I am wearing them all the time!” I was happy when I said that. I was able to play tennis more easily and with no problems, I was able to wear sunglasses and see everything clearly.

Now my mom is happy when she sees me wearing contact lenses; she tells me that without glasses I am more beautiful; however, I think that I look better with glasses. I tell myself I will try not to avoid problems again. I learned that sometimes the problems which we are avoiding may not be problems, but actually something that could be helpful for us. We have to try to solve our problems and look at problems with our own eyes, but also, we do not have to be afraid to ask for help. My mother’s calming lecture was really helpful for me. This was a really good lesson for me. And now I promise myself to try not to avoid problems and just solve them. After wearing contact lenses, I feel much better and more confident. I feel like my perfect vision came back and I can do whatever I want, jumping, running, playing, and going on my way to my dreams!



Friendship Really Lasts by Eva Gallegos

I have moved out of a lot of places in my life. I've moved from small rooms where the walls were in bad condition to big apartments where the word "fancy" was stuck to the walls. We were five, moving around the city of Lima, Peru. It was me, my mom and my three older brothers. My dad has lived in the U.S.A. since I was born. My childhood consisted of the same thing over and over again. Friendships were difficult to maintain. I would even dare to say that no friendship lasted more than two years since I was always moving around the city and between schools. Building our life anew from the foundation was my family's specialty.

When I was twelve years old, my parents finally bought a piece of land so they could build the house we always wanted. After almost two years of not moving—with no changes of address nor of school—and just when I thought we had settled down for good, the opportunity of taking my first flight out of the

country arose. I had dreamed of it my entire life. I was going to fly to the United States so I could be with my dad and so that I could also study. At fourteen, I was at the beginning of my teenage years, and everything seemed to excite me; everything new looked out of orbit for me. Of course, I did not hesitate to accept the offer my dad gave me and my siblings. I have to admit, the desire to travel started when I was a child, and it finally came to be when I was fourteen. Of course I took it! I knew that this time was definitely different: No more cities, nor districts within the country. Based on what my dad used to tell me, the people, the streets, obviously the language, the education and everything was different from Peru. I tried to imagine the difference.

Later, I realized I would have to travel eight long hours to get to my destination. An explosion of feelings hit my mind the day of the news. I remember it so clearly. Enthusiasm, euphoria, nervousness, impatience: all of them together made me feel as if I were drowning. I had red ears and I was bouncing on my feet with an ecstatic smile on my face that I couldn't take off even after a couple minutes. It took me a while to realize my ritual of starting my life again was not done yet and I had to leave behind my best friend, Vicky, who I had known for two years at that point.

As I said before, having friends did not last long for me. I wanted to experience a friendship that could last for years, one where you could visit and stay at each other's homes, one where your friend's entire family knew you, where your friend comes to your house out of the blue and no member of the family seems to be bothered by their unexpected visit. I wanted a friend that provided me with

unconditional love, trust and support. If I left for the United States, I felt like my friends and especially my best friend would completely forget me. Who was I to them, anyway? A friend who just passed through their lives like a thunderbolt. Most of them had been practically raised together since they met when they were four years old at school. I felt like our friendships was not as strong as theirs were because of the years they had known each other.

“I will text you every day and you better reply to me and do not dare forget me!” said my best friend, Vicky.

“I feel sad you are leaving us but I am happy for you,” said Katherine, one of my other girlfriends.

“So you are finally leaving us after some years of bragging about it,” said chubby Lucas, another friend.

I smiled at them, not so convinced they were really happy for me or that they were going to miss me at all. I consider myself an annoying person but able to make you laugh in your dark moments. I try to live up to a quote that touched me: “Do not live for your presence to be felt, live for your absence to be noticed.” I believe this is how people never die. Their presence remains in the air of your memories, flying around like butterflies waiting for you to be heedful at their wings. This is what I was worried about: that I would die in my friends’ minds.

Close to five months after I left, I kept talking to some of my friends through calls and text messages. They wrote to tell me what I was missing at school, gossip mostly. A year passed and I felt like I was refusing to adapt to the new setting of this new country and people. I was tired of moving around, adapting to new places.

Besides, the people at my new school were different nationalities and coming to an agreement on anything was really a challenge. Adding to that, a lot of friends stopped texting me back, and so did I. Our friendship got weak and communication was no longer there. My best friend was the only one left keeping the conversations updated on a daily basis.

The graduation year for my class in Peru came. If I'd stayed, I would have graduated with them by my sixteenth birthday. Two years had passed since I left and I could say that I stopped missing people as much. My experiences had proven to me that missing people would never make them come back to me when I wished them to. That sadness and nostalgia would not go away unless I accepted the idea of them being far from me, living their lives as I was mine. I had grown up indifferent to the fact of missing people, even my own parents due to their travels. Therefore, I realized it was hard for me to easily attach myself emotionally to a person.

On graduation day, I happened to be texting with my old friend, Pamela, and she was talking about the ceremony for their graduation. She filled me up with every detail of the night. I was feeling nostalgic, then angry because that was where I was supposed to be, right next to them. But I also sensed joy inside me; they had made it and a lot of them were going to excellent schools. I felt like a bomb was building inside of me and it was ticking more and more as past memories invaded my mind. There was a knot stuck in my throat.

A new screen popped up on my phone. My friend was requesting a video call. I accepted it. I was all bewildered for the sudden call. The first image I recognized was the giant front yard and a lot of chairs for the students. My eyes went blurry, the

well of feelings exploding inside of me, and I could not take it anymore. Tears started to flow down my cheeks. I was crying. But I was not sad. Not at all. Not even a little bit. I felt enthusiasm at the fullest; my friends had not forgotten about me. Then, with my blurry sight, I could notice some pictures of us together, the old glorious times we had lived together: in class, events, lunches, and trips. Each and every one of my friends took the phone to say hi to me, even some teachers, all of this happening in the middle of the graduation ceremony. I felt like I was there graduating with them. I experienced an unexpected happiness like never before.

After experiencing that moment in my life, I realized I had to travel miles away to understand what friendship means. You can have a friend for a lifetime without keeping in contact all the time. I can now say that every time I go back to my country, my friends will welcome me with open arms, ready for the fun to happen. Friendship does not end when you leave physically. Leaving can even make your friendship stronger because you know your friends will still be there for you. I've mistaken friendship with physical closeness rather than paying attention to the emotional aspects and I think that is what makes a friendship last longer.



In Sicily, Women Are More Dangerous Than Shotguns

by Huy Nguyen

When you think of monsters, what comes to your mind? Maybe some notable monsters that can only be found in some science fiction works like novels or movies. Some people will immediately think of Dracula or Frankenstein, but there's one thing I can assure you of: these monsters are not real—or at least they won't be any time soon. When you look up the definition of monster on Google, it says that a monster is an imaginary creature that is typically large, ugly, and frightening. However, the question is: "Is that a true definition of monsters, or is it just what we associate them with, culturally?" One way or another, let me tell you about my own encounter with a monster, which I believe would be worthy for Google to change the definition.

Just like the beginning of any other monster movie or novel, my day started out pleasantly. The weather outside was not that hot like the summer, but also not that cold and windy like the winter and fall. The sun was shining to warm everything up after a cold and rainy night, the birds were chirping as if they were singing and celebrating the end of a long and tiring week, and the wind was blowing gently to cool down the heat from those sunbeams that were coming down. Everything was in harmony to create a perfect atmosphere for a flawless and gorgeous Friday morning. I got to school at 8 am and because it was a Friday, for most of my classes, I didn't have much work to do. I went through seven periods without having to touch my pen or my notebook. Most of my teachers were sympathetic: they never gave us any work during the weekends, unless there were projects that we had to do. I would say that my senior year of high school was the easiest, most relaxed school year I'd ever had before college. That's why I loved my classes and my teachers so much—except for one class, Mrs. Bianchi's Finance class. Mrs. Bianchi was the type of teacher that all of us have had before, the type of teacher that would always give us homework almost every day without acknowledging the fact that her class was not the only class that her students had to take. The bell rang, signaling that we had to move to our 8th period class, our last class of the day, which was supposed to be a relaxed and enjoyable period—but not with Mrs. Bianchi's class. I walked to her class, hoping that time would pass, and eventually I'd be out of there, but as soon as I stepped into the hallway that led to her classroom, I saw from afar that Mrs. Bianchi was collecting some papers from my classmates. That's when I realized I was in big trouble.

Most of us have been through high school, so we all know what happens if we don't hand in our homework: we'd definitely get a zero, unless your teachers are so sympathetic and understanding that they would let you turn in your homework late and deduct a few points. Unfortunately for me, Mrs. Bianchi was not like any of my other teachers, who would let me redo an assignment without even taking away any points; Mrs. Bianchi was the type of teacher that would straight up give you a zero, a detention, and a fifteen-minute speech before class, talking about how homework is so important that it could reverse global warming or end world hunger. I'm going to try my best right now to describe Mrs. Bianchi to you, although I highly recommend you come to my school to see and meet her with your own eyes, because like many wise people have said before, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Mrs. Bianchi never told any of us how old she was, but I could tell that she was in her mid-fifties. She had a short haircut that almost looked like a Pixie haircut and her hair was dyed red at the time. She wore thick black glasses that covered two-thirds of her face. Looking at her from my perch in the hallway where I was delaying entering class, I was reminded of a lady whom I saw at a Starbucks two weeks prior. I'm not sure if this lady was actually Mrs. Bianchi or not because I was not paying close attention to her appearance, but this lady was so frustrated about her drink that she told the cashier that she wouldn't leave the store unless she could talk to the manager first.

Although Mrs. Bianchi never told us much about herself, there's one thing we knew she was really proud of: she is Italian. When I say she's Italian, I do not mean

she's an American with Italian ancestry that was born here in America and grew up in Little Italy; what I mean is that she's an actual Italian, born and raised on the island of Sicily. She said she moved here eight years ago to live with her son who has a family over here. That's the reason why she has a thick Italian accent. Sometimes we even caught her mumbling Italian curses whenever we enraged her. Believe it or not, that is one of the few things, if not the only thing, that I love about her: she's a true Italian, "una italiana vera." I actually love the Italian culture. On that fateful day she was wearing a black maxi pencil skirt along with a white long sleeved office blouse, which was formally tucked in. As a matter of fact, she dressed like that every Friday. Apart from the fact that she's Italian, another thing all of us knew about her is that she had a set of clothes that she wore for each day of the week. She would dress in that same style every Friday, and wear a plain red tunic dress every Monday.

Believe me, my description of her thus far may make it seem like she's a kind-hearted Italian lady, but you have no idea: she's the real-life manifestation of a quote from the movie, *The Godfather*: "In Sicily, women are more dangerous than shotguns."

This was the first time in her class that I had forgotten my homework, but I was easily able to imagine what would happen to me since I'd seen her dealing with my friends who did not turn in their homework on time before. Mrs. Bianchi stopped me right in front of the room, raised her voice, with a serious and interrogative tone, and asked me with that thick Italian accent she had, "Antonio, have you done your homework?" At that moment, I knew I would be in big trouble,

but I had no choice but to answer honestly: “Mi dispiace, perdonami signora Bianchi, but I forgot that we had homework.” I actually answered her in Italian in my first sentence, hoping that she would be considerate and calm down a little because I could speak two sentences of Italian. But reality is often disappointing, and as soon as she heard my answer, she glared at me, shouted at me, raised her voice even more, and with a threatening tone, hurled at me: “You must have a bloody brain of a goldfish to forget such simple assignment that I asked from you!” Then she mumbled a series of sentences in Italian which I could not make out a single word of, but I knew they were less than nice. If those were actually Italian swear words, then she was legitimately insulting me, which you wouldn’t normally hear from a teacher. Her hand was holding a notebook, and she was swinging it back and forth like she was going to strike me with it. In her other hand, she was wielding a long and thick ruler—I would say about two feet long—and she was waving it in the air and pointing it close to my face. I told myself, “One way or another, it’s either the notebook or the ruler that is going to land on my face.” Her cheeks turned red, her forehead wrinkled down and a large vein in the center of it was visible. Her eyes were wide open and scowling down at me, and when I looked into them, it was like staring directly into hell. I stood there for more than a minute, listening to her insulting me, half of the time in English and the other half in Italian. I’d never seen nor experienced anything or anyone so close to being a monster before, but I knew, at that moment, she was my monster. Her facial expression, her gestures, her voice: they all made my skin turn pale.

I went through the last period feeling like I was in a prison. Never in my high school years had I felt that vulnerable. Because I was the only one who hadn't done the homework, she picked on me the whole time when she needed someone to answer questions, and when I couldn't answer a question, she used that as the cue to start hurling insults at me again. That last period felt longer than all my seven periods before combined. When it finally ended and I went home that day, I kept thinking about how she had embarrassed me in front of the whole class. She was raging like I had done something terribly bad, but all I did was not hand in a single homework assignment. The whole school feared her—not just our class, or me, specifically—and that's how she got the name, "Il Mostro."

Eventually, many students complained about her attitude and she got fired two months before I graduated from high school. I didn't know if I should be glad or sympathetic when I heard that news. Part of me believed she deserved to be fired, but another part was hoping that she would find another job and wishing her the best, because no matter how bad her attitude was, she was just trying to do her job and I had to admit that I respected that. Although I'm not in high school anymore, and my old memories of having her class are slowly fading away, giving space for new ones to come as I'm starting college, I often think about the infamous legend of Mrs. Bianchi, and am sure that this will live on and be passed down for generations to come at my old school.

From the story of Mrs. Bianchi, it's clear that Google's definition of "monster" is somewhat inaccurate. A monster doesn't have to be large, ugly, or terrifying. Any living thing can be a monster, in any degree, from tiny but

terrifying little insects, to wild predators, and to human beings. It all comes down to perspective: a person afraid of spiders would think they are monsters when seeing one, but to people who are not afraid, they might look like a harmless insect. Your own teacher or even your own mom can turn into a monster too, when you frustrate them or disobey them, but to your friend, who doesn't live your life or doesn't have the same teacher as you, he or she would never feel like that. In the end, it's perspective that determines our own definition of monster.



Nothing Is as Bad as It Looks by Gabriela Guzman

I knew that this change would be good for me, but I was not ready for it. A new start is hard for almost everyone, or that's what I think, because people are afraid to deal with the unknown. For me, a girl who grew up in a Caribbean country, where the weather and the people are always warm, where I had all my family and friends, it was hard to even think about meeting new people with different habits, different cultures, different slang, a new language and a new learning system. I was afraid of being alone and not being accepted by others in this new place. The thought of it was overwhelming. I know changes are not easy and most of the time while we are in this process of change, we focus on the worst that could happen, but we don't know what the reality is until we try. Sometimes this reality ends up being positive and surprising.

It was a cold autumn morning, the sunlight barely touching my face. I remember my mother waking me up. She was telling me, “Gabriela, wake up, you have to get ready, today we’re going to the Office of Education to find you a school.” While she was telling me that, I had a lot of memories of my old school: Every morning respectfully singing the National Anthem and raising the flag; each class had a classroom assigned, the professors changing classroom each class period, all students waiting for them with their materials on their tables—book, pencil, eraser, pen and notebook. Meanwhile, I was terrified about what kind of school I was about to get into. I had no idea if I could adapt to something unknown.

Later that morning, at the Office of Education, the person that was attending to us told me that the school that I was about to get into was good for me. I ended up at Pan American International High School at Monroe, a bilingual high school where all the students are Latinos. That was something that made me feel more comfortable because I was about to go to a place where there were more people like me.

The next day, I visited my new school. I had to take some evaluations and my parents had to fill out some documents. It was a new place for all of us. We didn't even know which was the principal entrance, so my stepfather talked to a small tan-skinned girl who was walking on the sidewalk of the school:

“Excuse me, do you study here?” he asked.

“Yes, I do, do you need help?” she said. With a smile on her face, immediately she helped him, guiding him to the main entrance. I was surprised by her kindness and hospitality that she demonstrated.

When we were inside the building, I started to get nervous, my hands were cold, my nails became purple and the only thing that I could do while we were waiting for the secretary was to look at my mother and stepfather. Nowadays I still have the image of the secretary of Pan American walking down from the stairs with some paper in her hand and welcoming us when we were inside the school. She was Dominican too, and that helped me to be more familiarized with the people who were there. Aside from being near somebody that was from the same country as me, I was feeling more and more calm because she was friendly and respectful to us, giving us a pleasant atmosphere.

The next day was my first day of classes. I remember walking into my first-ever class, my math class. Everybody was staring at me at first, but my look was lost between all these new faces, and I couldn't even focus on one thing. The teacher, who was also Dominican, asked me to introduce myself, and I did. However, I still think that they barely heard what I said because I was shy. When I finished, some students introduced themselves to me.

A tall guy told me, "I think I've seen you before!"

"Yes, I think the same," I responded. We started to talk more about it and asked more questions.

"You are from La Vega, right?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I've seen you there."

"My name is Edward; I think we were in the same school."

I was moved. "Edward, you're the guy that always was sleepy in class."

Edward and I had gone to the same school and the same class when we were kids

for three years consecutively. At first, I was not recognizing him, because he had long hair, a big beard and he now looked like a grown man. In the moment, I did not show how excited I was feeling—maybe because I was lost in all the new things, such as the new people, the way that the classroom was divided by groups at each table, the wall full of colorful posters with math problems and rules on them. The good thing is that, since this happened, I knew that I was not that alone and that I could adapt easily to this huge change. I was extremely happy, and I couldn't wait to get home and tell my family and friends what happened at school. One of the hardest parts of this change was to always have a negative image of what could happen. However, in the process of adapting to this new school, I knew that I was not alone. The girl that guided us to the main entrance introduced me to her group of friends and never left me by myself; Edward was there for me when I needed him. I'm sure that being around kind people, some with similar backgrounds as me and meeting with an old friend made this change not that complicated and hard as I thought it would be.



My Monster by Laura Rendon Albarracin

What is a monster? Am I a monster? How do I accept and face the monster inside of me? A monster is usually associated with an outrageous and horrifying creature that frightens people. However, my monster had none of these characteristics. The monster I was dealing with used to take over after a bad day at any time without giving me a warning, making me feel lonely, unapproachable, and unworthy. It possessed my mind with harmful thoughts, caused tears to run down my cheeks, and gave me negative feelings about myself along with a voiceless attitude. Mental illnesses can affect anyone, regardless of religion, race, and age. Despite being a very common condition today, people are still reluctant to talk about their mental health due to fear of discrimination, shame, and misunderstanding.

I was depressed.

Having a mental illness, such as depression or anxiety, is considered a taboo and shrouds many stigmas in my home country, Colombia. “A person with depression just wants attention,” my mom once said to me. “It isn't actually a real illness.” A person who is mentally ill is often referred to as an “attention seeker” or “crazy.” Therefore, it took me a long time to realize and accept that I needed help to heal myself.

For a long time, there was a monster eating me up from the inside out. I was a “normal” teenager trying to get used to a new country, a new family, and a new life; I was making a huge effort to adjust to my new reality. However, I never realized that I wasn't dealing with my emotions properly until I had a mental health crisis, a breakdown. As I was walking on Junction Blvd & 37th St in Queens, NY, I suffered a nervous breakdown—tears were coming down my cheeks, my chest was pounding, my legs were suddenly weak, and I had shortness of breath. The clouds that had been white and wispy earlier turned thick and dark. The shining rays of the sunlight couldn't get through the clouds, making the winter afternoon look opaque and gloomy. As I was experiencing the longest minutes of my life, I lost consciousness and awareness of my surroundings, making me feel completely alone and in danger.

Many panic attacks came after that first one. Nervous breakdowns don't ask you permission; they may occur anywhere: while swimming in a lake, at school, and even at church. My monster started to possess my thoughts more frequently. My occasional anxiety was turning into an everyday thing. It became part of my daily life, making me feel depressed as the days progressed. I would go to school and

pretend I was the happiest girl alive but when 2:30 pm arrived, I would go home and feel exhausted from the monster I was coping with. I had no motivation to do anything. When I was alone, my monster used to take over my mind and talk to me.

"You don't deserve anything good in life, you just aren't good enough," the monster said at 3 am while I was trying to sleep, and tears were streaming down my cheeks.

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong." I looked at myself in the mirror and pointed my finger to my heart.

"You're just like her, you're broken!" the monster replied, with a penetrating and toneless voice as it referred to my mother.

The monster possessed my thoughts, making me worry about my future. It made me question if I was enough and worthy of affection. The worst part was to be surrounded by my family and friends and still feel lonely. I knew I needed help and I wanted to tell my family how I felt but I was ashamed to admit it.

As a result of my avoidant behavior, I engaged in many self-destructive practices to escape my feelings. Unhealthy relationships, such as toxic friendships and partners, became my monster's allies. They fed my monster, making it bigger and bigger as time passed. My mental health was out of balance. Therefore, I rushed things up with my partner as a way to fix myself. I thought keeping him happy was solving everything that was wrong with me, but my monster never went away. I was wrong. I couldn't understand how an eager beaver like me could be depressed. I used to question myself: *"What do I have to be depressed about? Am I too young to be depressed?"* I never found an actual answer. I was living in self-denial and wasn't

taking my mental health problems seriously. It was only when I spoke in private to my family that I realized that the monster I was quietly dealing with was real and it could affect anyone.

Mental illness is a taboo within Latin American culture. Depression and anxiety are monsters that can affect anyone regardless of age, race, and religion. Providing the proper resources to someone to work on their mental health issues can make a difference in improving their wellbeing. In my case, lifestyle changes—healthy friendships and partners, meditation, and workouts and counseling—have helped me to beat my monster and win my everyday battle with my worst enemy, my mental health issues.



The Cherry Blossom Tree by Parizoda Axrorqulova

Gazing at the Monday morning breeze looming in the sky, I pondered the first week of my sophomore year in high school. It had been one year since I entered high school and I missed my middle school friends. I asked myself, “A year has passed. Why haven't you built friendships?” I took friendships seriously, and I longed for a friend to whom I could offer joy and craziness and receive it back. I desired to let go of my feelings of isolation, and I queried how this year would go: Would I create new friendships? Would I undergo new experiences? I craved meeting new people; I desperately needed a friend.

The second week of school started today. I reached towards my phone, turned off the alarm. “Today will be a boring day but a different day,” I said to myself, waking up from my bed to the sounds of the city noise. The sun rose and poured through the window. The noisiness of city traffic and construction would not let me sleep longer. Rising from my bed, I took three deep breaths as I made

my way to the shower. The shower was warm and relaxing. The temperature change was comforting, and my body began to awaken, allowing me to function for morning classes. I got ready and began my journey to school. Walking to school was lonesome, only me and my shadow.

Setting one foot in the school building, I sighed, because I realized I had forgotten my geometry homework. Such an unlucky day because Mr. Suh was a stringent teacher. He had brown, almond-shaped eyes; his face was always serious. His eyebrows revealed his temper. Students were not allowed to talk, chew gum during his geometry class, copy homework, or arrive late. I was imagining different embarrassing scenarios when Mr. Suh violently slammed open the door and entered the room. This was how he got his students' attention. I was under extreme stress because I despised dealing with equations and numbers. It was a day when I had to solve a problem on the board.

“Is Parizoda here?” Mr. Suh shouted.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Come up to the board, young lady, and solve number 5,” he ordered.

I got up fearfully. My hands were shaking and my paper was empty because I had forgotten my homework at home, in a hurry to get out the door. I noticed the girl sitting next to me was new to the table. Our eyes met, and she could see the fear in my eyes. It was almost as if she were inside my body. The seconds were ticking, and Mr. Suh was waiting impatiently. The new girl handed me her paper with a solved equation. I was confused and concerned. But I was also delighted to receive it. I did not have time to thank her in the moment. I held my head up high as I walked to the

front of the class proudly. Students sitting in brown chairs were looking at me with curious eyes, waiting for me to solve the problem. Suddenly, I was the center of attention in a big old classroom. Turning around, I grabbed the chalk with my tiny fingers and wrote the solution to the problem. Looking with intrigued eyes, Mr. Suh approved.

“You did a great job,” he replied with a happy tone.

I thanked him, and the students applauded. Walking back to my seat, I saw the new girl observing me with her hazel eyes. Her long hair shone like silver across the room. Putting on her glasses, she was waiting for me to hand back the paper with a genuine smile on her face. While smiling, the dimples in her cheeks appeared, and her mouth opened wide. The smile was so contagious, and I could not help but smile too. She was a genius at math—at least her work said so. Handing her paper back, I felt guilty as an untruthful soldier because I had used her work and passed it off as my own. I uncomfortably made small talk with her, asking her name and why I had never seen her in school. She looked at me instantaneously like a flash and started talking. She said her name was Gabriella and she never saw me around either. I realized it was because we never had any classes together. While talking, I could hear her accent. It was Spanish. Her voice was sweet and pleasant. I thanked her for the small kindness she offered me today.

“Thank you for letting me use your work. I feel like I used you for my advancement,” I said.

“It’s not a problem,” she replied, “I sensed you were in trouble by looking at your paper.”

“Let me make it up to you, say for lunch or after school?”

Abruptly, the bell rang, and we had to pack our stuff and head out to the next class. She did not give me any answer in a hurry, and I was left with no response. Walking to my history class, I kept thinking of how warmhearted Gabriella was to spread kindness. I was cheerful, and a big smile appeared on my face because I got an A in the geometry class. Pleased with joy and satisfaction, I felt fulfilled by meeting someone new and receiving help from them.

As I entered the classroom, the other students were already setting up to begin the lesson. Mr. Steven, the history teacher, began class by introducing new ideas or jokes to create a positive atmosphere for his class. He was in his mid-30's, elegant and impressive with teaching and with his lifestyle. However, he was mindful of attendance in class. Fifteen minutes into the class, Mr. Steven had to stop because someone knocked on the door. The room was silent, and I was surprised to see who it was. It was Gabriella.

“This is Gabriella. Her schedule changed to this class,” announced Mr. Steven.

“Hello, I am Gabriella. A handful of you here know me from other classes,” she replied.

“Take a seat at table five since one chair is free,” Mr. Steven said.

As lucky as I was today, I was cheerful because I was sitting at table five also. Gabriella walked slowly and carefully to the table. She glanced at me and was startled to see me. With a happy tone, she told me how fortunate we were to meet again. A look of puzzlement crossed my face, and shyness entered my soul. My brain

cells were out of focus; questions were dancing in my mind. I was doubting and criticizing myself. Inner me was avoiding taking this risk. I was dying to make a friend: this was my chance to make this happen. To be friendly. I came back to my consciousness and smiled back. I realized that since she was new to the class, I could let her use my notes and repay her kindness this way.

“Gabriella?” I said, facing her direction.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Since you provided aid to me in geometry, I thought...I could let you borrow my history notes.”

“You are generous. Thank you,” she said.

“I could not respond to you in last class; I was in a hurry,” she said.

“I noticed; I enjoy history class. Let me know if you need assistance,” I replied. I felt a surge of happiness because I also provided help for someone today. After the class was over, we chatted. We were astonished to learn we both shared the same interests. For example, we both took the same classes. We had both read *milk and honey* and were fans of Rupi Kaur's poetry. We both were responsible daughters. From this moment forward, we felt we could be best friends forever. My spirits filled with joy and my mood lightened. Since we both had the same lunchtime, we hung out at the student lunch. Our conversations never ended. We began with one topic in mind and ended up with totally different ideas by the end.

The last bell rang loudly with announcements from the principal. Seeing a smile at the end of the school day on students' faces was always exciting. After the school day was over, Gabriella and I walked home together. During our walk, we

admired how much we shared. From a distance, we could see the cherry blossoms on the trees. I said to Gabriella, "Ah, look at the cherry blossoms changing colors." It resembled a bit of white cloud, never too spread out, though. The blossom, white with a little powder, the powder with a touch of white, so delicate, so charming, similar to the infant's delicate face simply born. The pink-white blossoms were grouped together, as though talking about something, and like the mists in the sky, demonstrating their delightful movement. Some had begun to open up, similar to modest young ladies; some were completely unfurled, uncovering a brilliant yellow bloom at their center, and some were extravagant, resembling a light gold apple. These cherry blooms formed a kind of tableau, and it was wonderful to check whether one had a scent. Walking off with cherry blossoms in our hands, we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways. I was dying of happiness because I had woken up that morning with a negative perspective towards life. However, I was amazed by the friendship that I formed with a stranger I had never met before. I never felt more alive than that day I fell in love with the world. I grasped that I must treasure every moment in life because tomorrow is unexpected. Not a day passed without talking to Gabriella after our first encounter. Our friendship blossomed like a cherry tree, changed like the seasons.