

**The Writing Center @ PVCC's**

**English 111**

**Personal Essay**

**Contest**

**2018**



The Writing Center is pleased to share with you the winners of our first English 111 Personal Essay Contest. We've included in this booklet our four winners and five additional essays that made it our final round. We had many wonderful entries and selecting even these finalists was challenging. The eventual winners won us over through inventive form, lyrical use of language, moving story, and distinctive voice; they also represent the college's diverse student body. They appear here as they were submitted to us, unedited, and reflect the work of developing writers. We hope you enjoy them.

**Winners:**

"Home" -- Lillian Birchfield

"The Arrival" -- Shebri Stacy Dillon

"My Miracle Life" -- Hope Matkins

"Glasses in the Air to My Fashion and Hair" -- Micara Ellis

**Finalists:**

"A Moment in my Arms, Forever in my Heart" --  
Teenya Bennett

"Uprooted" -- Desraeli McBride

"The Chicken Mini Crisis" -- Esther Otis

"Swiss Bound" -- Nicholas Van Epp

"Life and Learning to Survive" -- Kyla Ziegenhagen

# Home Lillian Birchfield

*Lillian Birchfield's essay, "Home," wowed us with its lyrical quality and its bold, creative form. Birchfield's essay is structured as a series of vignette about places and people in her life that have felt like home. Her writing is filled with details and vivid language, like her description of a sunset as "blue melting into a million shades of cotton candy pink, wispy and endless." While the vignettes present readers with small slivers of the author's life—a painted bedroom wall, a car on top of a hill—Birchfield manages to pack an entire world into these snippets; each is rich with emotion and tenderness. It is easy to be moved by Birchfield's honest and poetic piece, which reads like a love letter and leaves readers thinking about the many forms home can take.*

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## My Room:

I had to make it mine in order for it to be mine. The white walls screamed at me and made my head hurt louder than before, so I bought blue and spent the day making the walls ocean waves. You and I bought National Geographic magazines and spent hours cutting out photos rather than our arms and taped them to the walls. My room was no longer one place; it became the Grand Canyon, Machu Picchu, the Redwood Forest, the Great Barrier Reef. I was not alone, I had portraits of people I've stared at on those walls so many times I know them like family. And of course, I had you. You were in the letters you wrote to me, tucked away safely on my bookshelf. You were in the random clothes thrown in with mine that did not belong to me. You were in my thoughts and my heart, that's what really made my room mine.

## Car:

My car became my mobile home. The backseat a bed, a laundry pile, a trash bin, a safe place. The first time I drove you home, 15 minutes out of the way, but an excuse to have more time. We drove to your cheating ex's house and screamed at the top of our lungs our anger until realizing the

windows to her room were open; we sped off laughing. We kept driving even though we passed my house because Coldplay came on and we couldn't leave it unfinished. That's when we discovered our love of car rides. Every night we drove with no end in sight and no destination. You would sit in the window and scream on the big hills and come back inside with happy tears streaming down your face from the wind. It didn't matter where we were, the car was our safe place and you felt like home.

#### Sunset Hill:

There is a stretch of road that sat up on a hill with a view of the small city for miles. We sat up there for hours, laying in the backseat, happy and on the border of falling into sleep. And the sky turned to watercolor. Blue melting into a million shades of cotton candy pink, wispy and endless. Violets and oranges danced in the sky until fading into dark navy blue. And there I was still loving you. One night it was pitch black and past my curfew, music was softly playing, and you were bobbing your head. Suddenly you burst out of the passenger seat, ran around my car, and opened my door. You grabbed my hand and I turned the stereo as loud as it could go. We spun and danced and twirled and the beat was pressing into my ears and your fingers were pressing into mine. I could feel your warmth and your smile and I changed my mind; home wasn't my room or my car, it was right here on the hill.

#### Your home:

I thought for sure I'd found it. Anywhere in your house I felt welcome and happy. Miki, small but feisty, always barked when I walked in. I told your brother, "When Miki stops barking at me, I'll know I'm part of the family." He replied "Miki still barks at me. You are." I felt this truth when your father told me to start coming in the side door, the side door was for family. I joined in on the after dinner games of bananagrams and cards, karaoke in the kitchen, pizza night on Friday. I slept better in your lap than in my bed. When you forced me to go home so I wouldn't be late I told you, "I am home." You laughed and kissed my head and pushed me

outside. We could've been doing anything and I was content as long as you were warm and smiling beside me.

You:

I realized then that my special place was not my room or my car. I did not feel at home in my bed, on Sunset Hill, or even in your home. As long as you were there, I was whole. I did not need to question myself or my thoughts or my feelings until Mom did. She did not forget to remind me that girls do not like girls and in this almighty book that controlled us all, girls liked boys and boys liked girls and that was the only way it could be. It is hard to be told your feelings and your thoughts and your life is invalid, while you know that your feelings are real, your thoughts are you, and you hope your life means more to her than a verse in a book. It was not always good, but with you it was lovely. And it was lovely to feel lovely to the one I loved.

We were spinning and spinning and dancing on top of the world; all I could see was your smile and the sun hiding behind the trees, replacing my vision with an array of sunset colors. All I could hear was your laugh, and the light music fading off into the dusk, and my thoughts, loud and valid shouting, "This is love, this is love, this is not evil, this is love."

# The Arrival

Shebri Stacy Dillon

*In her narrative, "The Arrival," Shebri Stacy Dillon portrays her experience with the intake procedure at prison. Her focus on the vivid details of one event immerse the reader in her world and lets them walk through the procedure in the narrator's high-heeled shoes and corset dress. She evokes not just the terror and exhaustion of captivity, but also an incongruous hope as she expresses her gratitude for the rain on her face and the window in her cell. Her conviction that "a new day will dawn" encourages readers to face their own circumstances with the same certainty.*

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The rain was pouring down, soaking into my corset dress, and dripping from the chains draped around my waist. I was terrified, wet, and captive. The only thing that stood between me and the prison that would become my temporary residence was a tall chain-link gate. The shackles on my ankles clanked against my high-heels, serving as a reminder of the loss of my freedom and dignity. This moment should have been the worst of my life, but I was overcome by my thankfulness for the rain that fell on my skin. It had been so long since I had stood outside, been rained on, felt wind or even had fresh air not tainted by a thousand breaths. Despite the gripping fear of not knowing what was ahead of me, and a guard holding tightly to the chains that bound my wrists to my waist, I stood in awe with my face to the sky.

My moment of solace was interrupted by the screeching movement of the gate. I was asked to walk forward, led like a leashed animal to the point of entry. Walking through the prison doors, I was expected to know procedure for a place I had never been. The speech of the guards was harsh and demanding. Once the doors behind me were secure, my chains were removed and I was uncuffed. After a series of metal detectors, embarrassing strip searches and relentless paperwork, I was finally offered a tray of food. I was not even concerned with the quality of the food, as I was famished and welcomed any nourishment. The day had been more excitement than what I had seen in quite some time.

I was added to a small group of offenders, none of which I knew, all of us new to the facility. We were given the label “intakes” and given light blue scrubs to wear. Once dressed, we were put in a room to watch a series of orientation videos that they believed would be helpful in integrating our adjustment to the prison. The videos talked about the programs the prison offered and how to attempt to remain safe while incarcerated. I retained very little, as I was exhausted, my ankles were bruised and raw from the rubbing of the metal, and I hadn’t slept more than two hours the previous night.

Once the process was complete, we were issued 2 boxes to keep personal items in, along with state clothing, and moved into a large living area referred to as a wing. This wing resembled nothing I had seen on television and was not what I had expected. It had 2 levels with rooms lining the walls. On each door was a painted number. The cell number I had been given was 207. I carried my boxes up the green metal stairs to the room that had been assigned for me to live in as I navigated the process of becoming a prison inmate.

Walking into the room, the cold metal bunk-bed stared back at me. The toilet in the corner lacked privacy from my cellmate and barely avoided the sight of the doorway. The small narrow window was located behind the bed, but afforded a view of the sunshine, the sky, and at night, the moon. I was starved for the sight of all of them, having only seen cinderblock and concrete for months. I placed my boxes under my bed, and crawled onto the top bunk with my sheets and blanket in tow. After making my bed, I crawled into it, knowing that tackling the days ahead would require rest. I was ineffective at this point and physically spent. I drifted off to sleep, thankful that it was over and this was not something I would ever have to repeat. My arrival to prison was complete, and a new day would dawn.

# My Miracle Life Hope Matkins

*From the very beginning of Hope Matkins' "My Miracle Life," the reader is grounded in a world of sharply observed detail as a young child recalls the spinning tires and shattered glass of a terrible car accident. The narrative voice is so pure and authentic that when two mysterious children arrive, bathed in "glowing light," to comfort her in the accident's aftermath, we share in her wonder at their presence and rejoice with her in the lasting gift they bestow.*

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I was surrounded by grey skies, shattered glass, my grandma's limp body, and snow covered trees; nobody was in sight. On the inside of the smashed car, I began to shiver. My heart was racing, but I couldn't move or think about anything. I was panicking on the inside, but my face showed no emotion. My sweaty palms were the only thing to say I was uneasy.

It all started one winter morning in 2004. My "Mamaw" was driving me to preschool. I was strapped in my car seat staring into my grandma's black, curly hair. I was wearing my favorite brown boots and a white flower shirt. Although time was moving fast, everything seemed so slow that day. My thoughts were jumping from playing on the playground to my show-and-tell items (a few toy horses). It had recently snowed, which left the melted snow to freeze overnight. I always enjoyed preschool, which is why I was being driven there in the not-so-good conditions. My Mamaw had been on the phone with my Aunt Amy while we were on the way. They discussed "black ice," something I had never heard of before.

We were coming around a corner, and that is when the car started to spin tires and glide sideways. My Mamaw hollered, "Hold on!" Those were the last words she ever said to me. The car was heading straight for a giant tree, and we collided with it. All of the glass windows shattered around us. The car had been folded and reformed. I immediately got sick to my stomach and my body was shaking, but I couldn't speak, I couldn't move, and I couldn't see very well as my eyes started to blur. My grandma slumped over, and her upper body was laying in the passenger seat. I



said, "Mamaw," but I got no response... not even an "I love you." I was breathing heavily, panicking.

I sat there for less than a minute when they appeared one at a time. First a boy, wearing a blue shirt with medium length, jet black hair. The boy looked to have had a ray of sunshine gleaming around him. He calmly said, "It's going to be all right." I didn't even notice he had left when a girl appeared. She had the same glowing light lit up around her. Her face looked to be fake, and it was so pale and perfect; there were no imperfections, not even a scratch. She said, "It's going to be all right Hope." I never had a chance to reply. I wondered how the girl knew my name, but no words could reach my tongue. The screaming sirens grew louder and louder. The paramedics rushed to my grandma, cut her shirt off, and determined her dead. The firefighter said, "Hope you are very brave. Now it's time for me to get you out." He tried to stay calm and positive, but I could sense the panic in his voice. The way the words rolled off his tongue wasn't smooth; his voice shook. The car seat was jammed as well as the car door on my side. The tree had pushed the front end of the car into the back end. My grandma was smashed as were my legs. The firefighter lightly removed a blanket from my legs. He sighed in relief as if he thought I had lost them. Even after being ripped out of the car I never cried, not once.

My mother recently told me that the person who called in the accident was the trash man across the street, and no one else had been there. That sparked my interest in the two kids with an angel-like glow surrounding them. Based on my faith, I knew exactly who and what they were.

God was watching over me. He sent me two angels that day to keep me safe. It was my grandma's time to go, but my lord and savior had another plan for me. I should've died that day, along with my Mamaw. My faith in God will remain as he not only saved my life that day, but he stayed with me. I know why there was no pain. I know why I can remember all of it. I was only four, but I wasn't alone.

# Glasses in the Air to

## My Fashion and Hair

Micara Ellis

*In her bold and original narrative essay "Glasses in the Air to My Fashion and Hair," Micara Ellis tells the story of her personal journey as a woman growing both confident and proud of who she is, as she is. Readers cannot help but sit up and pay attention to a writer who begins her essay with this authoritative claim: "Today I am going to give you a piece of the untold truth about hair and fashion." When Ellis informs us, "I was born with Undeniable Uniqueness," readers have already been convinced by the distinctive voice and memorable style of her writing. Micara Ellis also warmly encourages other women to recognize and celebrate their own uniqueness, writing, "The woman in the mirror is exactly who you are, so embrace her to the fullest."*

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Today I'm going to give you a piece of the untold truth about hair and fashion. If you are as interested in those two worlds as I am then we're about to embark on a journey that's as fancy as it can get.

When I was a young girl growing up in Killen, TX, all I ever heard was "if your hair aint popping you are a lame." Everyone was so obsessed with hair extensions and hair color in the south. My mother never would allow me to get hair color performed on my hair, so would you like to know what I did? I bought BUNDLES, expensive bundles off of the internet. What are bundles? Hair!!

My natural hair was burnt out of my head at the tender age of 4, my grandmother put a kiddy relaxer in my hair and 20 minutes later I was suffering from third degree burns. When you're young you don't realize that at times when you're scarred it follows you for the rest of your life. Ever since that happened, my hair only grows to a certain length and then, in come the bundles.

At the age of 14 my braces were removed and I turned to fashion, along with my new set of pearly whites. STYLE honey, I had it. Now I have long luscious waves in my hair, Beautiful teeth, and a sassy style that no one in my age group could compete with. I would say that when it came to being confident I was there, so I thought. However, I was faking it until I made it. My mom always said "baby girl you got this" but little did she know I only "had it" when I was dolled up. I wouldn't say that I thought less of myself because I didn't, but I did feel that I wasn't the chosen one out of the bunch.

Anytime that I was bare so to speak, I felt vulnerable as if the world could look into my eyes and see all that I was really struggling with. I would get fully dressed on Saturday mornings take pictures of myself, then post them on Facebook, and Instagram just to see how many likes I would get. Every time I always broke at least 100 likes, but I still couldn't see what everyone else saw. All I could see was the girl that always got picked on for having a baldhead, big lips, and big teeth and was overweight compared to all the other girls.

One day I received an anonymous email from someone that I still to this day don't know who it was. The email read, "Micara you're beautiful, you have so much potential and you are going to be great. With a little bit of training you're going to be a phenomenal woman. I can tell that you are insecure about certain things, but that too shall pass. Maybe you need to get an Icon, someone that you look up to that has had as interesting past as yours. Whenever you start to feel down I want you to tell yourself I WAS BORN WITH IT." I read that email 100 times a day, and I asked myself a thousand times, born with what?

Finally I figured out what it was that I was born with at the age of 18. I was born with Undeniable Uniqueness. I'm me, day and night and nobody can take that from me. The older I get, the more impressed I am by women who seem ageless (Gabrielle Union, Kerry Washington, Kelly Rowland, Tina Turner), who remain beautiful, chic, vital, active and have style. I also realized that "Every human being is born out of the body of a woman" and women are meant to be praised. Were made to attract the eyes of others, that's what makes us unique. We don't try we just seem to do it.

Women need to be braver about stepping outside of the box, what you see on the television is not what you're supposed to look like. There isn't a handbook on what a strong woman is supposed to be. Every day that you wake up, Feel your mood out, if you feel like wearing a face full of makeup with only a robe on, by all means do that.

I would like to end this by simply letting every young girl in the world know that if it fits you do not be afraid to do it. We ourselves are our own worst critic. Kim Kardashian is not what you're supposed to look like. The woman in the mirror is exactly who you are, so embrace her to the fullest. Whenever you get around to trying on that new wig, there still won't be anything wrong if you decide to call yourself "Sasha Fierce" because however, having an alter ego only boosts our confidence. Kisses!!!! XOXO.

# Finalists

# A Moment in My Arms, Forever in My Heart

Teenya Bennett

The quote is written in messy, tear stained hand writing in my scrapbook, next to a photo of me holding my birth daughter for the last few moments she was simply my daughter. When I try to explain how my life had changed from that point onward, I am at a complete loss. Some experiences are so incredible, even transcendent, that words become burdensome. This is my attempt to use words to explain how two pink lines on a pregnancy test taught me who I am, and who I am striving to be.

Those lines taught me that I was not the center of the universe. That does not take from my importance, but makes me part of a vast cosmos of humanity, interacting to create something bigger than me. I was the only one who could bring this child into the world at this time and this place, and that is nothing short of a miracle. I carried in my body another life, and that is an experience to special for words. However, because of my circumstances, I could not give that tiny human a life that I wished for her. However, I found someone that could and they gave not only her, but also me, the comfort of knowing that she would have all the things I had dreamed of for her.

She is a shining star in our lives. We came together to give her the world she deserves. The love baby Aliyah's adoptive parents have for me encompasses me and lifts me during my darkest hours when the pain of loss becomes almost too heavy to bear. I feel such a strong connection to them, and even the birth parents of their other children. It feels like the stars aligned and here we are a constellation that would not be complete without anyone of us.

My open adoption has taught me that there is a purpose for everything, even if it is deeply painful in the moment. I was hurt and angry, and felt the world was conspiring against me. And just maybe it was. But my misfortune and my grief made me strong enough to overcome even the worse of times. This level of sorrow and triumph have added new dimensions to my world. I may never be simply carefree again. But I will know the richness of a life that knows true love, and the joy of knowing I have added to a family and changed their lives forever.

Because of adoption, the baby I carried for months was a heavy burden both physically and emotionally. Now that has not to say I do not love my child and didn't cherish my pregnancy, but being faced with the end every day. The word adoption haunted me all 9 months. That is a heavy load that I wanted to trade in a heartbeat. I can remember how tiring it was thinking of the moment after delivery when I had to hand my baby over to another mother.

When leaving the hospital, physically I weigh less. Emotionally, I carried more weight than I ever had before. I was carrying a load that many withstand and few ever choose. I chose this knowing it was going to be painful.

Undoubtedly, I chose this because I have intense love for my child and deep down I knew I had the strength inside of me to conquer the pain. Now, my arms empty I had to remember and find the strength inside of me again.

Our flesh sometimes gets us into situations that may lead us to adoption. That is exactly how it happened for me. I allowed my flesh to run my life until that point. I felt that God wasn't big enough to help me get control over my desires. Because my flesh was weak, it also weakened my heart. It broke my heart into tiny shards because I had to tell my little girl goodbye in an effort to give her more. At that point, all I could do was look to God.

Right then I realized all I could really rely on was his strength. My arms were empty; my body expected the cries from a baby wanting to nurse... and yet there was nothing. This feeling caused me to want to run. Not physically run, but get rid of the pain. However, it is especially not going to go away if you run and don't allow yourself to deal with the emotions. Therefore, I had to allow myself to feel it. Feeling the pain of not being able to hold my baby, the pain of not being able to look into her eyes, or hear all of the little noise and cries she would make.

A journal excerpt from my time in pain says, "I hate everything right now. I feel like I am going to drown and even though I don't want to, I don't have the strength to fight it anymore. I am tired. Please someone

carry me, I'm begging you." This was my prayer, it was a desperate one. That prayer give me a visual of a woman on her knees at the end of her rope, a woman at the end of herself, a woman willing to do anything to survive. This is what I was seeing with my earthly eyes.

There are times when I look into Aliyah's eyes and it hurts me that she has no idea of the depth of the connection between her and I. I just think about the future because of her being adopted. Ultimately, my main desire is that we will see one another in heaven... and I will be reconciled to the child of my womb for eternity. Then, although there is so much I want to tell her, however one thing I will never tell her again is goodbye.

Many people still ask me why I chose adoption even though I knew it would be painful. My answer is so simple... I was incarcerated at the time of Aliyah's birth with a sentence of 13 years and I felt forced into this adoption. Feeling of no hope of a release or sentence reduction, and not having the family support due to racial issues, and deep in my heart I knew this was the best thing for me and my daughter.

This feeling stays with you forever!

# Uprooted

Desraeli McBride

We packed our belongings away into a storage unit and left our home with nothing but the hope that we could find somewhere to stay. Even from the backseat, I could see the worry lines on my parents' faces. There was a similar tightness in my older brother's jaw while my younger brother sat idly, not noticing the stress around him. The radio was quiet and seemed far away. Chilly autumn wind from the open windows stung my face but it didn't compare to the pain of missing my home. I felt uprooted, leaving behind memories of a sun-soaked childhood and the place I knew I would always be safe. Sometimes you can only sit and watch as "always" comes crashing down around you. When I was twelve, a complicated situation left my family without a home. As a lower income family of five, finding an affordable house that could fit us was difficult at the time. The struggles that came with that year contributed to shaping me into the person I am today.

In the fall of 2013, we moved into the upstairs apartment of a family friend's house. The term "apartment" is generous given that it was two bedrooms and a bathroom. Stepping into the room I shared with both of my brothers was a shock. I could feel tensions in the cramped space rising like hairs on my arms. From the unfinished hallway, a persistent chill filled every corner, ensuring I would never feel completely comfortable. My nose was also hit with a musty smell that made me imagine I was living in an attic. It was as if my life transformed in a day. Feeling like you can't truly trust the ground under your feet can be a huge stress on a middle schooler. Adjusting to such an important change in my life was very difficult at first. I wanted nothing more than to leave. However, I soon realized that we might be there for a while so I focused my energy on decorating my side of the room to make it more like home. I also dutifully kept up with my schoolwork to maintain normalcy. I had to learn how to be adaptable and make the best out of every situation.

My parents were also under a great deal of pressure that year. I could see the exhaustion in their eyes as they worked hard to save up for a house. The financial strain from those months of turmoil instilled a strong sense of motivation in me. I have poured myself wholeheartedly into school



work to achieve the best possible grades. Earning a degree and leading a successful career are very important to me because I want to have financial security and to avoid similar misfortune in the future. Developing flexibility at such a young age will also help me in my future as I pursue a career as a veterinarian. If I am going to be responsible for the lives of other beings, I need to be able to adjust to every setback or surprise. Sometimes surgeries go south or a dying animal is rushed in and being able to think on my feet could save a life. This ambition and adaptability are now some of my defining traits.

After seven months and three moves, we finally settled into a rental house. It felt like the first time that I could stop to take a breath and let my eyebrows uncrease. I am glad that my life could return to normal, but I know that the versatility and drive I developed will carry me through any trial yet to come.

# The Chicken Mini Crisis

Esther Otis

I rolled out of bed into the cool darkness. The air felt crisp in the dark morning as I pulled on my uniform and splashed cold water on my face to stay awake. The kitchen clock said 5:15 am as I looked in the fridge for something to eat. I woke up mom as the coffee brews. She needs the car later so I drive to work and she will drive it back; we listen to “Feeling Good” in Nina Simone’s rich voice on the way to stay awake. The stars are beautiful. Hearing my rap on the front window at Chick-fil-a, which is the universal way of being let in before the doors are unlocked and the restaurant is opened, Amber, drowsy, lets me in with a cheerful “good morning”.

It’s 7:00 am now, sometime between the man who buys the grilled sandwich and the half sweet- half unsweet tea and the creepy man who sits in the corner and smiles as he watches us work. Over in drive-through someone orders fresh chicken minis with extra honey butter; Those little minis are our most popular breakfast item. As Chick-fil-a says they are nuggets with “warm, mouth watering mini yeast rolls that are lightly coated with honey butter.” The most delicious combination. They do melt in your mouth. I wade through sleepy customers at the front counter buying steamy hot coffee, with the smell of hot buttery breakfast biscuits seeping from the kitchen. In the buzz of the busy morning the lady who asked for fresh biscuits pulls up to the window, her beat-up Volkswagen with dents in the door and peeling blue paint looks just as tired as her two kids.

“Is there extra honey butter?”

Opening the box of hot chicken minis she gives a disgusted look.

“These don’t have enough honey butter!”

My mind still continues to replay what happened next. I can still see in slow motion those chicken minis flying through the air back at Sariah. Her complete shock as they hit her and tumble, spilling to the to the floor, the anger and disbelief lighting in her eyes, and the flash of the customer’s eyes as she repeats “not enough honey butter” is still ingrained upon my memory.

We always do what the customer requests at Chick-fil-a, so Amber asks her to park, so that new chicken minis with extra honey butter can be made and brought out to her. As she angrily rolls away from the window I look at Saraih in disbelief, "Did she just throw those at you?" She half smiles in a my-life-sucks kinda way "yup."

The lady who ordered the chicken minis comes into the restaurant demanding her minis. She must be in a rush. It's been a few minutes due to communication problems cultivated by the language difference with the non-english speaking employees working in the back. An elderly customer in a pink sweater glanced at me with a surprised look when this lady begins yelling at us, "Chick-fil-a messes up my minis. I'm not ever coming back!" Don't then, lady.

She asks for the store phone number and Amber scrambles to get it. Shakily, I continue to work through customers. I hear Amber trying to explain something to her, but she rudely interrupts with, "You're not listening to me," and as Amber writes down the number for her, she grabs the pen from Amber's hand angrily writing l-i-s-t-e-n. After a few nasty words, she grabs the number and storms out. It was like the calm after the storm. Silence reigns.

In the busy hum that returned after her exit, the phone silently rings unnoticed. Moments later the "honey butter lady" storms back in, enraged, accusing Amber of giving her the wrong number. To prove it she calls the number, and the store phone rings. Everyone realizes she must not know the store number means the phone in the restaurant. I think how bewildered she would be if I answered the phone: "Hello this is Chick-fil-a. How may we serve you?" Once I zoned back in, I see Amber giving the brewing lady the correct number for corporate.

Looking back on that morning, it seems people having bad days go into stores and restaurants and treat people badly. They don't recognize that we are just people too, trying to get through that day. I don't fully understand why anyone would take out her bad day on anyone who happens in her path.

# Swiss Bound

Nicholas Van Epp

The clock struck 10:45 pm, just two minutes before our train to Munich, Germany, was due to depart; however, our train was still nowhere to be seen. After a day of walking the streets of Hamburg, Germany, with my Danish friend Christian and my new local friend Tom, whom Christian had introduced me to. Christian knew Tom from the exchange program that put Christian into the same German class as me last year. Tom had left us at our platform in the main train station just ten minutes earlier to catch his own train back to his home in the suburbs of Hamburg. Before Tom left, he reminded us to be attentive and safe. We said our farewells and watched his long curly hair bob and jiggle away as he climbed back up the stairs leaving us at the platform.

Our train pulled up on our platform promptly at 10:47 pm, exactly when it was due to depart, so we scurried to wagon eight and boarded through a door with a large white number one on its window.

Immediately, we noticed that this train was by far the fanciest train we had ever been on. The back of the train had rows upon rows of cars piled on it, resembling one of the monstrous trucks on the highways.

When aboard, we squeezed through the narrow hallways with our bulky backpacks past families upon family entering their rooms for the long eight-hour ride that laid ahead of us. We were getting excited now, because looking in each of the rooms we squished past we saw sets of bunk beds in each personal spacious room. Finally, we came to our room. We opened the door, and to our surprise, we found it already was occupied. We politely asked to see the now confused residents tickets, first in German then in English. They presented them to us showing the same wagon and seat numbers as our reservation; however, there was one notable difference. Their tickets were to Switzerland.

Quickly thanking them, we made a break for the door, once again squeezing past families and their luggage in the hallways. The tight aisles felt as if they were becoming increasingly narrow, as if to trap us. With a shortness of breath we reached the door. Looking out we saw the golden shining lamp post flick past us. In between our gasps for air we could hear

the swooshes of the light posts gradually increase in pitch as we increased in speed.

I looked over at Christian, and I began to smile uncontrollably because we originally didn't have time to go to the Swiss Alps, but it looked like we had just cleared our schedule. I couldn't wait. Having a ticket wasn't a problem because we had the global Eurorail pass that let us take any public train in Europe at any given time. The only thing that we would lose was a \$20 hostel reservation in Munich. Getting one in Switzerland wasn't a concern, because we had brought two miniature hammocks and stowed them in our bags for emergencies such as this.

Still standing in the hallway, we came across a conductor checking for tickets. Naturally he asked for our tickets and we presented him our euro-rail passes, but asked where we should sit explaining our little mishap. He took a step back, shaking his head, then politely explained to us, in his strong Swiss accent, "Your tickets are not valid on this train," he took a pause and continued "because this is a private first class night train."

This struck Christian with fear, for he knew the possible fines we could receive for boarding a private train without a ticket. I however, did not understand the consequences. The conductor told us, "Try to get comfortable and find a seat while I contact the driver, maybe he'll know what to do."

We saw nowhere to sit, so we shuffled a couple feet away for the other conductor. Christian instructed me to drop the smile, and began to explain the financial situation we had just walked in to, but before he could finish another conductor graced us with his presence.

Without blinking an eye, he started aggressively pointing out every single sign we had seen, but that our minds had chosen to ignore: the cars piled on the back, the first class number one on the train's doors, the actual beds, and lastly he ripped a paper sign off the wall to show us it read Hamburg to Switzerland.

We apologized, explaining it was our first time traveling alone, the good

ole dumb tourist card, and said we would be more careful in the future. The second conductor then said he was going to have the train stop at the closest station to “kick us off.” Now, a little more concerned as to where we would be sleeping, we stood waiting for the train to make a special stop for us, thus pushing the Swiss-bound train even further back on delays. The breaks begin to painfully squeal as the train came to a halt, that was not scheduled on its original itinerary. We thanked the conductors for their time and generosity. The polite conductor waved, chuckling to himself softly, while the second stomped off, as if defeated. Now at a platform unsure where to go we, glanced at the station’s indicator board to read that our train to Munich would be stopping at this exact platform in just 5 minutes.

# Life and Learning to Survive

Kyla Ziegenhagen

My magic trick when I was a kid was to be invisible. It wasn't your traditional 'abracadabra' sort of magic, but the staying out of sight, out of mind magic. If I wasn't being thought of then I couldn't get in trouble.

I was nine years old the first time I got pushed through a window. It was Christmas day and my brother and I were so excited to open gifts. We got up to find our father passed out (drunk) on the couch. On a normal day we would never dare to wake him, but since it was Christmas we just knew he would not mind. I should have known that he would be angry, but when you are nine years old you don't think things through. A couple of "Daddy wake ups" later and I got backhanded so hard that I stumbled over something on the floor and into the single pane window. Fourteen stitches later and I could officially say it was the worst Christmas of my life.

When you grow up in a household where Vodka is the focal point of happiness for the only parent you have around, you quickly learn how to take care of yourself. By the time I was in fourth grade I had taken on full responsibility of the household chores including, but not limited to, caring for my younger brother. My mom had already been in and out of our lives more times than I could count and even though I loved her, I lived in fear when she was around. I woke up countless times in the middle of the night to her screaming for help because my dad was beating her so badly. I always knew by morning she would be gone. Again. Even though I missed her it was better than bring terrified he was going to hurt her. I can still remember thinking that I would rather him hurt me than her. No child should ever have to be scared of increased volumes or just life in general. It was always the start of the inevitable and I hated that.

I was raised that a child should be seen and not heard. If my dad said no it meant no. There was no begging or bargaining with him. Talking back was not tolerated and unless you were a fan of having your face smashed into a corner, having your hair pulled while being dragged from one place to another, or being beaten so badly that you had bruises and couldn't sit down, you quietly bit your tongue and did what you were told. It was yes sir, no sir. It was please and thank you. You kept your elbows off of

the table and you didn't hold your fork like Fred Flinstone. You didn't chew with your mouth open or eat too quickly and you ate everything on your plate. Fear. That is what we lived in.

They say that kids are resilient. The years passed and I learned to duck and dodge. My brother went to live with my mom out of state, but I stayed because someone had to take care of my dad. Despite the abuse I loved him, lived for the good moments, and took as best care of him as I could. Despite the abuse I loved him and lived for the good moments.

When I turned eighteen I got a job in a nursing home as a certified nurse's assistant. Sometimes the job was messy, but the overall feeling I got when I went to sleep each night was one that could not be replaced. I was doing good deeds and I liked the way it felt. A couple of years later I started to volunteer at a battered women's shelter. God knew I owed my time to those kind of places because of the amount of times my mom took us to one when she had nowhere else to go. I quickly fell in love with that place no matter how hard it was to see some of the women go back to the life they came from. I was to fix all of the lives I came into contact with and when I couldn't it bothered me. I saw so much ugly growing up. All I wanted to do was make it beautiful for everyone else. The women eventually started to trust me and tell me about their lives. I would like to think that I helped some of them because if so then the hell I went through as a child made it seem almost worth it.

I had a baby boy when I was twenty four and got married when I was twenty five. My husband was in the military and when he got orders to Langley, AFB. In Hampton VA. We packed up and moved there from Arkansas. I said I would never be anything like my parents and I worked hard not to be. Statistically I had more of a chance to be an alcoholic or drug addict than the next. I beat the odds. My son was my only drug and my entire world revolved around him and my husband. When my daughter came along she joined them in the center of my universe.

As they got older I started volunteering at another shelter near where I lived. I took my kids with me because I wanted to humble them by seeing



that some people didn't have it as well as they did. I wanted them to see that there are good people in the world who want to make a difference.

The new shelter was for young mothers and their kids. Most of the girls were drug addicts. I went three days a week before I was incarcerated for an accidental second degree murder charge. Being here completely hindered my ability to be the type of mom I wanted to be, the type of person I wanted to be. I had given my time, my heart, my all. It is hard to define and reflect on what kind of person I am now. Instead of a happy heart, I have an angry, bitter one. I can honestly say I'm still a good person though. All of the pain I went through as a child gave me absolute clarity on life, but left me hungry for love. It taught me to nurture and be independent. It molded me into the "I'll fix it" type of person that I am. This was the first time I couldn't fix something despite all of the begging, pleading, and bargaining I tried to do with God. Being here is hard. Being here and trying to remain a good person is even harder. It makes it difficult to be what I never saw in anyone growing up, but I put forth the effort to maintain my good heart. Even though life took a turn I never expected, I'll always try to take this bad experience and turn it into a positive one. Just like I did my horrible childhood. You never really stop trying to survive no matter how old you get.





**Thanks to those who submitted essays to our contest. We will accept submissions from 2019 English 111s in Fall 2019. Students enrolled in English 111 at PVCC in the spring, summer or fall 2019 semesters are encouraged to submit their essays.**

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