

# WRITE NOW

## Write Now Flash Writing Contest 2023

### Honorable Mentions

	Genre	Character	Object
<b>Prompt A</b>	Historical Fiction	Dog Walker	Paper Clip
<b>Prompt B</b>	Romance	Auto Mechanic	Toaster

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**“Toasted” by Emily D., Iowa (Prompt B)**

Waiting. For minutes, for hours, for an eternity. For a bell to ring. Finally, the unfamiliar sound of the bell. I looked up from my desk and saw a beautiful teenage girl around my age. I grinned and said, “Hello, my name is Tyler. Can I help you?” She smiled sweetly and my palms began to sweat. “My toaster broke down a few minutes ago, I don’t know what happened to it. Could you take a look?” The girl asked, and I was a little bit confused.

“Uhm I’m sorry ma’am but this is an auto repair shop, and I only repair vehicles. I don’t think I can help you.” I tried to convince her that I didn’t work on toasters, but she kept insisting. I finally gave in and agreed to look at what was wrong. She gave a sigh of relief and thanked me before handing over the toaster.

After taking it apart, I realized the problem and started fixing it. To my surprise, the girl sat down and waited. A few hours passed by, and I was finally done. I showed her the toaster, and she beamed and squealed with delight. I found it quite confusing on how a teenage girl was so excited about something that wasn’t makeup or clothes. I found myself staring at her and once she was done admiring the piece of metal, she turned to me and smiled.

“I’m so glad that you were able to fix it! Thank you so much! What’s your number? I must repay you for saving my precious little toaster!” She smiled and I was left with my jaw dropped to the ground and my mind invaded by questions and flabbergasted about what had happened. I felt nervous while we exchanged numbers and when she left, I realized I was still smiling.

At home, I was still thinking about that weird toaster girl. The next day, she texted that her name was Harper and she wanted to meet me at a coffee shop. I was ecstatic and agreed immediately.

When I got there, Harper was waiting for me at one of the tables. She grinned and waved to me. I sat down across from her, and we started chatting. “So, uhm you seem very attached to your toaster. Uh any reason for that?” I asked, “Oh, I just love my toaster so much! Don’t you think it’s nice too?” Harper replied happily, before I could say anything, I was interrupted by our order number.

“Tyler Jackson, with two lattes? Order 1567!” The barista announced before escaping behind the kitchen curtain. After taking the drinks back to our table, I couldn’t help but notice how pretty Harper’s eyes were. We joked and laughed and when we were done, I dropped her off at her house. I still thought about her.

A few months passed by, and I started to hang out with Harper more often. I decided to meet Harper at the coffee shop one more time, and after rehearsing my speech over and over, I decided that I was ready. I texted her the time and I arrived early and told the barista the order. She seemed happy to do it and I paid ahead of time.

Finally, Harper arrived and when she saw me, she smiled and came over. We chatted for a while, and our order was called once more. I skipped to the counter and put the cups on a tray. I picked up the tray and took it to our table. I passed Harper her cup and fidgeted with my new jacket. I was anxious to know her answer. Harper looked inside, and she shot up like a bullet and shrieked as happily as she did when I fixed her toaster.

Inside of the cup, spelled out in frothy white liquid, was the word, “Date?” I smiled and asked, “Harper, I fell in love with you, since the first day I saw you. Will you go on a date with me?”

Harper jumped toward me, and I pulled her in for a hug. “Yes, yes of course!” She squealed and Harper broke out into tears. I was quite taken aback by her reaction. The whole café was staring at us like they saw a ghost, but I didn’t really care.

Harper and I got engaged and soon, we were married. We ended up having one adorable little child. “And that’s how I met your mom.” I grinned and said. Alice, my daughter started jumping up and down and Harper, who was now my wife smiled. She laughed and pointed out, “You look just like me when I got my toaster fixed!” Alice laughed and held up the rusty old toaster. We had kept it ever since, and the rest is a slightly toasted history.

**“A Day in the Past” by Kaitlyn S., Illinois (Prompt A)**

“I’m going to go walk the dogs now!” Mia shouted as the door banged shut.

Mia was a ten-year-old dog walker who walks dogs after school. She went to all her neighbors’ houses to pick up their dogs. She was in the middle of walking when she came across a huge black hole on the sidewalk. She stepped into it with the dogs she was walking and then suddenly everything went black. Mia found herself sitting in the dirt in the middle of nowhere. She looked around and all she found were teepees. Curious, she walked over to one and peeked in. She saw a family of Native Americans sitting inside by the fire.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you.” She said kindly and went off to build her own teepee.

She gathered some sticks and built the base. She took tons of leaves and tried to stick them together with sap, but it didn’t turn out well. *How did they make theirs look so good!?! Mia thought to herself.* She gave in and asked one of the families how they made their teepees. All they did was shoo her away. She tried building it again and succeeded. Mia gathered even more sticks for a fire. She sat down in the teepee and made herself comfortable with the dogs she was walking. They all snuggled by the fire. Warm and cozy, they fell asleep. It was only 5:00, but where they were, the time was 3 hours later than in the present day. Mia figured that out because she looked at her watch just before she stepped in, and it was 4:45.

When she woke up, she got up, put the dogs’ leashes on and took them for a walk. She looked around, and found a little stand made of sticks with the words “Trading” on a piece of wood written in mud. She walked over and said hello. The girl that looked to be ten also, held out a bag and said, “Ilanaaq?” That means “friend.”

“Ilanaaq.” Mia said. The girl at the stand smiled and handed her a bag of Wampum and asked Mia if she wanted some. Mia dug in her pockets to find money or something to trade so she’s not just taking things. All Mia found was a paper clip. She held it out to the girl, and she took it with lots of interest. Mia took the small bag of wampum and couldn’t wait to show her friends when she went back home.

The girl came out from behind the stand and gave Mia a big hug. Mia asked what the girl’s name was.

“Amka.” The girl said. Mia couldn’t believe it. She already had a best friend and she only got there the day before! Amka led Mia to her teepee and let her stay there for the night. After that they went off to play together. Amka loved the dogs. She played with them a lot and promised to help take care of them.

Mia slept next to Amka that night. She wondered if she could bring Amka home with her. The next morning, she had to leave. She said goodbye to Amka and thanked her for letting her stay in her teepee.

At the last minute, before she stepped into the portal back home, Amka ran next to Mia and held her hand. They jumped into the portal at the same time with the dogs at their sides. They appeared on the sidewalk right in front of Mia’s house. Her mom ran out and hugged Mia.

“We were so worried about you!” Her mom said. “Who are you?” She asked Amka.

“Amka, Mia’s Ilanaaq!” Mia’s mom was very confused.

“Her name is Amka, and she’s my new best friend.” Mia explained. Mia asked her mom if Amka could live with her, and she said yes. Mia and Amka squealed with joy and excitement. They returned the dogs to their owners and went back home. Amka was surprised to see the inside of her house. The beds and couches were the best part to Amka.

Later, Amka became Mia’s adopted sister. They do share a room, but neither of them mind. Now, they all live a happy life together.

## “Toaster Car” by Emily H., Iowa (Prompt B)

Bob is an auto mechanic who lives in Illinois. He has green eyes and brown hair, and is thirty-six years old. One day, he got up to go eat breakfast. He ate eggs and toast, and then he packed his backpack. He got into his white pickup truck, because his other car was broken. When he got to work, he saw someone new, and he instantly thought she was cute and fell in love. She had pretty brown eyes, dirty blonde hair, and hot pink nails.

“Hello, I am Bob, who are you?” he asked.

“I am Lily. I applied for this job because I just moved here from Florida and I had the same job there,” said Lily.

“I think it’s a good place to work. I hope you like it here. Would you like to go out with me? I know a really good restaurant,” said Bob.

“Sure, why not,” Lily replied.

That day, Lily fixed two cars, one dark green Jeep Wrangler that had a gas leak and one light blue convertible that had a broken brake pedal. Bob fixed two cars, too. One car was a Yukon with a popped tire, and the other car was a Civic with a broken door. Later that evening, they went to the restaurant, Orchard Green. They went to the lounge and ordered mussels for them to share.

“Do you like it here, Lily?” Bob asked.

“Yes, I do. I’m glad you brought me here. I love you!” said Lily.

“I love you, too!” said Bob. Then they kissed. When Bob got home, he started fixing his broken car, which was a red Jeep Wrangler. But he didn’t just fix it, he also added a built-in toaster. First, it didn’t work, so he kept trying until he got it correct. When he got it right, Bob was so excited. He fixed the car for Lily, then he drove it over to her house. When he got to her house, he knocked on the door, and Lily opened it.

“Hi. Why are you here?” asked Lily.

“To give you this car. It even has a built-in toaster,” Bob said excitedly.

“Thank you, but why did you give it to me?” asked Lily.

“Because I love you.” Then he got down on his knees and asked, “Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” Then they started kissing. “Let’s get married in July!” Lily shouted.

“Yes, I’d love to,” Bob replied.

Six months and nine days later

“Bob Sherman, do you take Lily Peters as your wife?” asked Andrew the minister.

“I do,” said Bob.

“Lily Peters, do you take Bob Sherman as your husband?” asked Andrew

“I do,” said Lily.

“I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss,” said Andrew. Then they kissed.

After their wedding, they got into Lily’s toaster car and drove to Santa Barbara for their honeymoon. When they got there, they went to bed. The next morning, they wanted to go to the beach, but unfortunately it got crowded fast.

“It is a good thing we brought the toaster car, so we can bring toast and have it on the way,” said Lily.

“Yup, it is. Do you want me to grab toast and a bagel for lunch too?” Bob asked.

“I think that would be good, so we don’t have to lose our spot to get lunch.” They got into their car and drove to the beach. Lily said, “It’s warm out here.” Then they started to set up. First, they read on the beach, and then they got in the water and swam around. They ate a bagel and toast for lunch and then swam around some more. When they got home, it was dinner time, so they ate their food and then went to bed.

A week later

They started driving home. “That was a great honeymoon,” said Bob.

“It was, and that beach was the best,” said Lily.

“So was the food, especially the toast,” said Bob. When they got home, they kissed and then went to bed.

The End

**“The Magical Toaster” by Phoebe L., Iowa (Prompt B)**

One day there was an auto mechanic named Newt Karat and he had a problem. He was in love with his toaster oven. The only thing he ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner was toast and every night when he went to sleep the only thing he would dream about was toast. But that night when he got into bed he heard someone say his name and he was curious because no one lived with him so he ignored it and finished his daily night routine. But right when he was about to get into bed he heard it again and he was so curious that he went downstairs to try and figure out what it was. Then he heard it again and it was coming from the toaster so he went over and said to it, “Why do you keep saying my name?”

The toaster replied with, “Because I know you love me and I have always loved you back. I have not always been a toaster. I was once a princess until evil sister was too scared to have me become queen that she took my mothers wand and turned me into this toaster and the only way to break the enchantment is if you go out and find a heart shaped leaf and put inside of me just like you would toast.”

Newt was one of the kindest people ever so he went upstairs to grab his coat and flashlight and he searched and searched until finally he found the perfect heart leaf. He ran back inside to the toaster and as he put the leaf inside her there was a blinding light and when the light cleared there stood the princess tall and beautiful. Newt was speechless.

The princess said, “Oh Newt, you freed me. I could never thank you enough.”

Newt finally said, “Will you be going back to living in the castle or would you... maybe... you know... want to live with me?”

The princess said without hesitation, “I would much rather live with you. My sister may turn me into a bird this time.” They both laughed until the princess said, “we should get some rest. After all it is three in the morning.” Newt agreed.

The next day Newt took the princess to the clothing shop to get some new clothes. As they were looking, Newt said, “I forgot to ask what is your name?” The princess replied with “Ella.”

“Oh such a beautiful name,” Newt said smiling at her. An hour later Newt asked, “What is one food you have never eaten that you would like to try?”

Ella had to think for a second but finally said, “Sushi.”

“Well would you like to try some sushi?” asked Newt.

“That sounds fun,” replied Ella.

“Well let's go then,” said Newt. They both got the California roll and when they left Ella was so full she could not keep up with Newt. When they got home they cuddled so much they fell asleep and a year later they were a married couple.

**“Isolated Aim” by Ian M., Iowa (Prompt A)**

I’m Henry. I’m 15 and I live on Kelmer Street, in Toronto, Canada, and I walk dogs to make a little extra cash. I don’t have many friends, so people call me the Loner of Kelmer Street. What they don’t know is that I’m not sad, in fact I’m quite happy. Now, if you get called weird every day that might chip at your self worth, but for me, I preferred the term isolated.

People ask, “Why would a kid who has no friends need cash?” I need cash for books about the Holocaust, specifically the book *Dead Eye of the Americas*. You see, my grandfather served in the U.S. military while “Dead Eye” served. Dead Eye saved him from a Nazi who disarmed my grandfather. Dead Eye was a sniper for the Americas who had 602 kills confirmed against the Nazis. Dead Eye wasn’t your typical sniper. He would go to a rooftop, get 50 kills in an hour and go back to his base to rest.

After every sniper session, he counted how many people he killed by placing numbers on blood red paper clips. At the end of his military years, he showed the general his paper clip chain, and the general said it dropped from his shoulder to the floor.

I thought about Dead Eye a lot on my walks. Every day, when I got home from school, I gathered up all of the dogs I needed to walk and took them out. One day, the air was unusually calm, like the wind itself was afraid of something. About 5 minutes into the walk, I came across an elderly man. He had a huge scar across the bottom of his lip. But that wasn’t the strange thing about him. His eyes were gray, but not in color. It was like his soul was taken from him, making him look corpse-like. I didn’t want to look at his grim expression much longer, so I let him pass me. As he walked by I noticed something colorful on the concrete. I bent down and examined it further and realized that it was a blood red paper clip.

I shouldn’t have known right away it was Dead Eye, in all the articles and books, they described Dead Eye as having a huge scar on his lip from a Nazi who broke into his base and wanted to kill him. Luckily, Dead Eye’s bunk mate had a pistol at his ready and shot him. The books also said that Dead Eye had gray eyes because of all the lives he took.

When he dropped the paper clip, I immediately ran over to him and said “Sir, you’re Dead Eye of the Americas, I heard about the paper clips an-”

Dead Eye covered my mouth with his hand and yanked the paper clip out of my hand so hard, it left a gash on my palm.

“Listen kid, I was Dead Eye but now I’m trying to escape that life, so if you don’t mind, shut up and leave me alone,” he said. He started to trot off, but I caught up to him.

“Kid, what do you even want with me?” he asked. “I was dishonorably discharged so my autograph won’t mean squat.”

I blurted out, “I want you to teach me sir!” I was shocked that it came out of my mouth, but it was the truth. I wanted to be a sniper just like Dead Eye, but we had no recruiting offices even in Canada, and my parents didn’t have enough money to fly to the Americas to get me recruited.

“Do you really want this kid, because it's not all being a hero, it can consume you,” Dead Eye said with a fierce look.

“Sir, I have read every book about you, and I think you are amazing, I just want to live up to your legacy,” I said with an eager expression.

“You're not gonna give up on this are you?” he asked. “We'll meet me at Walmer Park at 10 a.m. tomorrow, and if you aren't there, I'm not going to teach you anything.”

“I'll be there, sir,” I promised. I returned all the dogs to their owners and went back home eager to start training.

When I woke up at 8 a.m, I brushed my teeth, put on some clothes, and rode my bike to Walmer Park.” When I arrived, Dead Eye was already there.

“Wow, I'm impressed, I didn't think you had the guts,” Dead Eye said with a smirk.

He lined me up on a sniper gun where I noticed there was a target. I was about to ask a million questions before Dead Eye stopped me and said, “Just let the trigger take you.”

He adjusted my trigger hand a little bit and told me to shoot. My heart was racing fast but I decided to just look ahead and pull. I could hear the impact of the bullet. Dead Eye brought over the target for me to look at. It was about an inch from the center, and I was amazed I could shoot that well.

“Nice work kid, I think you're gonna be good at this,” he said.

We practiced like that five days a week for 10 years. Dead Eye taught me so well, eventually I could outshoot him. Dead Eye got cancer at the end of our 10 years together and the last thing he did was book a flight for me to go to a sniper recruit center. The director of the camp said I was the best he had ever seen and I was soon the highest rank a sniper could be. I was later deployed to Iraq in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. In the years I served, I had 724 confirmed kills.

I always kept my thoughts to myself, which is how I earned the name the Isolated Aim of the Gulf War.

## “Equality Matters” by Oakley S., Iowa (Prompt A)

Lilian and her dog, Auggie, were taking a nice walk in the breezy hours of the afternoon in Eugene, Oregon. Lilian was a veterinarian, so her love for Auggie and all the other animals that she treated was very significant. Auggie was a Border Collie. She had black, brown and white patches all over her furry body. Auggie loved Lilian just as much as Lilian loved her. It was the late 1900s, and life was hard. Segregation and unfair justice to black people had been going on for too long. Although Lilian was white, she did not believe in treating black people unfairly. “It’s just so silly,” She thought, stopping to press the crosswalk button. “Just because of what color skin people have, they are mistreated and have to be separated from whites.” Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t see the walk sign turn on at the other end of the road. Auggie barked, and Lilian looked up, startled. Then they crossed the street and made their way home. When they got there, Lilian slumped on the couch, exhausted from a long week of treating animals. “I suppose we could see what’s on, huh, Auggie?” Auggie yipped in excitement and leaped onto the couch.

Lilian grabbed the TV remotes and pressed the power button. “...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” “Hey, look, Auggie! It’s Dr. Martin Luther King Junior!” Lilian had always been a fan of King and his peaceful protests to end segregation. She turned up the volume. “...and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” Just then, Lilian’s phone started buzzing on the counter. “Ah, come on,” Lilian groaned, turning the TV off and hauling herself off the couch. Auggie whimpered, seeing that she was disturbed. Lilian answered the phone. Her face went from tired to *very* grumpy. “Ugggh,” Lilian started to get her shoes on. “I love animals, but *why*, just *why* does there have to be one today!!” It was a Wednesday, and usually Lilian could respond to emails or do paperwork at home on Wednesdays. But, unfortunately, today she had to take care of a bunny with an emergency.

When she had finished up with the bunny and all the paperwork, she headed home as fast as she could. She was welcomed by Auggie, who started to lick Lilian with her slobbery tongue as soon as she stepped into the house. “Hurry, Auggie! Let’s see if King is still on!” Lilian raced towards the couch and turned the TV on. “Now, let’s get the butter and mix it in real-” “Dang it! He probably already finished talking.” Lilian sighed, disappointed. “Too bad we couldn’t go to it, huh, puppy?” Auggie rested her head on Lilian’s lap. “We better put you little fella to bed. It’s 8:00!” Lilian carried her over to her bed and laid her down. She fell asleep the second she hit the pillow. “Now I just have to get to bed,” Lilian thought.

The next day was very busy for Lilian. She woke up at 6 to take Auggie on a walk before her work. After that, she had lots of appointments and had to calm down lots of worried owners. She picked up Auggie from Doggy Daycare at 7:45 and drove home. She did lots of paperwork and scheduled appointments. She didn’t get to bed till 11:30. She had started to organize her desk, and somehow, trying to organize her desk turned into trying to organize her whole room. “Where are the rest of my paper clips??” Lilian exclaimed, frustrated. She had only found 4 of her who-knows-where-the-rest-are paper clips, and if you have a lot of paperwork, you have to have a lot of paper clips.

A few days later, Lilian’s car was having some tire troubles, so she decided to take it to the mechanic. She was going to take the bus to her work, but then she remembered something. People had stopped riding the bus because of protests and segregation. Lilian had to be at work by 7. It was 6:50. “Oh, Auggie, I don’t know what to do!” Lilian had to make a decision quickly. Then she remembered King. “...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” If she didn’t ride the bus, King’s dream just might come true. “Alright, Auggie,” Lilian said, putting her hands on her hips. “I’m going to have to walk, even if it kills me.” Auggie tilted his head as if asking, “What about me?” Lilian smiled. “Oh, I’ll just walk you to daycare. Sound good?” Auggie barked, excited at the idea of more time to stretch his legs and play.

Lilian got to work at 7:15, and let's just say that neither her boss or patients were very happy about it. "So you're saying I woke up at 6:30 just to wait for 15 minutes here?! This appointment was supposed to start at 7! It could be over by now!!" The patient took his pet and stomped off. "Patricia, I'm really sorr-" "Lilian, you're going to reschedule that appointment, you know," Lilian's boss walked off without another word. "Well, I'm not going to let them make me feel bad about what I did," Lilian crossed her arms. "Everyone should be treated equally."

After the years went by, Lilian decided to study to be a teacher. When she became one, she made sure that every child in her class, black, white, purple, green, blue-she didn't care-had the same rights as the other. When she had grown old, she tried hard to encourage and help anyone who felt left out or was being treated unfairly. Even if it is hard, you should always try to treat everyone equally or help someone get up just like Lilian did.

**“Caleb and the Civil Rights Movement” by Gaurika S., Iowa (Prompt A)**

12 year old Caleb sat in his room fidgeting with a paperclip, he was supposed to be writing a poem for school but instead he sat on his bed thinking about his community and its segregation laws. How it seemed like life for people of color was so much worse than life for lighter skinned people. Instead of going to a good school with proper desks, 5 days a week, he and his friends went to a “school” which was really just a farmhouse twice a week. The rest of the days they walked dogs for the rich people to bring some money to their homes and food to their tables. Just then his mom called him for dinner. Today was Tuesday so his dad was home early - his dad was a sanitation worker and only worked late on garbage day as many parents of color did. Dinner today was carrot stew with rolls, pretty soon they were all finished eating. “That was a great dinner” Caleb said, as he started back to his room to sleep.

The next day his family got onto a crowded train and went to Washington. Like many families they wanted to go and hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. give his, later to be famous, “I have a dream” speech. The train was an overnight journey. As they headed to the back of the train, Caleb's little sister Rosie asked if they could sit at the front of the train. At this time Rosie did not know about the bus and train segregation rules. Both of Caleb's parents gave Rosie a sharp “no”. During the course of their journey, they had a quiet lunch and dinner on the train and went to sleep on the cold and hard mattresses.

Tomorrow was a big day after all. That afternoon they heard wonderful words and dreams that really inspired Caleb. When Caleb returned back home he had so much inspiration for his poem that he wrote not one but two pages of poetry. These were the words he wrote:

“They make the United States Of America seem so peaceful and perfect, like life for everyone is amazing but that's not how it works. That's not how life works. Nothing is perfect, especially not for people of color. There are protests everyday but the government does nothing about it. WE NEED CHANGE!” Pretty soon Caleb's poem started spreading like wildfire. It won District, then State. After that the regionals and it didn't stop until everyone in the USA knew it. Caleb was glad his poem brought together so many people of different races and ethnicities. He had made a change!

## “1940” by Whitney B., Illinois (Prompt A)

It's hard to walk dogs in the middle of summer. The dogs pull on their leashes, the sun scorches you to a crisp, and you see the white kids playing in the pool. Oh, how Ann wished she could play in the pool. Every summer she would longingly watch the kids splash in the water. But as Ma always said, “There's no sense in daydreamin’.”

Just then one of the dogs yanked her forward and she started walking again. When Ann finally got to Ms. Smith’s house she was burning hot.

“Where have you been?”

Startled by her tone, Ann sputtered “I--I was walkin’ your dogs, Ma’am.

“Well, you’re twelve minutes late! I don't have time for this.” She said, storming into the living room.

“Ma’am,” Ann said carefully. “You haven’t yet paid me.”

“Paid you? Paid you? I do not tolerate tardiness! I will not pay you for a month!” Ms. Smith was practically yelling now, and looked far too proper to yell.

She was wearing a red dress that came down to her knees and had her blond hair pinned up in a tight bun. Ann walked Ms. Smith's dogs every afternoon for five cents a week. If her family didn't have that money tonight, they might not have rolls with their dinner.

“Ma’am, I need that money.”

“You are not getting it. Now get out of my house.”

Ann hurried out and sadly walked home.

When she got home, Ann went straight to her and Margaret's room. Margaret always knew what to do.

“Margaret, I need to talk to you.”

“What is it, Ann? Are you hurt?” Margaret said, sounding concerned.

“No, I'm fine, but Ms. Smith isn't payin’ me for a month.”

“Why not? Doesn't she know that's how we get bread?”

“Well...I was a little late, but only by twelve minutes.”

“She's cuttin’ your pay for twelve lousy minutes? Don't worry, Ann. I'll think’a somethin’ to tell Ma and Pa.”

While Margaret paced, Ann admired her older sister's beauty. Margaret was fifteen and had long, curly black hair. Her posture was perfect and her skin was glowing. Ann wished she looked like Margret.

Ann was eleven and her hair was short and frizzy. She often slumped, and her skin was ruff. Though she didn't look like Margaret, she was still very pretty.

“Dinner!” Ma interrupted Ann's thoughts.

Once they got washed up and to the table, Margaret started,

“Ma, Pa. Ann and I have somethin’ to tell you.”

“Go on then, What is it?” Her father was a strong man, but always very gentle.

“Well, today Ann was 12 minutes late after her dog walkin’, and now Ms. Smith won't her for a month. Don't go bein’ mad at Ann, cuttin’ her pay for 12 minutes is crazy.”

“Oh, that wicked lady. She's always been so bad to us.”

Ann was startled by her mother's hatred. Her mother was a kind-hearted lady, who never held anger for long. She always said “Never hold on to anger and hatred. It will eat you up inside, and it's doin’ nothin’ to the person your mad at. Just to you.”

“I'm glad she did.” Her father said.

“What?” They all said at the same time.

“I'm glad you don't have to work for that lady anymore. She was cruel. You'll find a different job.”

“Arthur, you know it ain't that easy for us. ‘specially not with us livin’ in Alabama. What would we do without Ann’s income?” Ma sounded really worried.

“The same thing we would do if she was cut a month's pay.” And with that, he pulled something out of his pocket.

It was so small, Ann had to strain her eyes to see it. She really needed glasses, but they were too expensive. After a few seconds, she could see the object. It was a paperclip, and held in the paperclip was a small wad of money.

“We’ve been savin’ for a while just in case this happened. There's enough here to buy bread for little over a month.

Now stop your starin’ and eat.”

“What's for dinner Ma?” Ann said with a smile.

“Mashed potatoes, casserole, and sweet tea.”

Casserole, yuck. Casserole was Ann's least favorite food, but money was tight, so she never protested.

The next morning Ann got up early so she could go job hunting. After a short breakfast, Ann was on the move.

The first job she saw an offering for was a dishwasher at The Diner. Ann had never been to The Diner. All she knew was that it was a new restaurant, and it was very popular amongst the white kids. She could get that job.

The moment she stepped through the door she knew it was a mistake. Ann saw the whites-only sign. She would have left, but the people must not have known that. They all at once started yelling at her to get out. Some people even threw food at her! Ann hurried out faster than light.

The next job up for grabs was babysitting. She could do that. Ann walked up to the door and rang the bell.

“Hello.” the lady at the door said.

“Hello, Ma’am. I'm lookin’ for a job and I saw your sign.”

“The job has already been filled, sorry.” She said, slamming the door.

What to do now? There were no jobs left, Ann thought as she passed the swimming pool. Suddenly she saw a sign asking for someone to wash the pool towels after closing. Ann was overjoyed! She ran to the pool entrance just as a lifeguard came out.

“We’re closed.”

“Can I have the job?” She shrieked.

“What? Oh, the towel cleaner? Sure.”

“Really?” It was unbelievable.

“It pays 5 cents a day.”

“A day?” Gaspd Ann. That’s enough for glasses!

“If you want you can swim when you're done. Just don't come here during the day.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” Ann ran and jumped into the pool. This is the best job ever!

**“Once Upon a Toaster” by Goldie G., Iowa (Prompt B)**

Once upon a time, there was a woman whose name was Valeria. She was a firefighter and she loved her job. She loved saving lives. One day the sirens went off at the fire station. A man named Andrew Colden's house was on fire. Valeria knew him. He was an auto mechanic and he had towed her car for her. Valeria threw on her gear and jumped in the fire truck. The sirens were wailing as Valeria and her team got to the house. It was encased with fire and smoke.

“Valeria, you get in the house and get anyone you see out,” the chief yelled.

When Valeria got in the house she found Andrew trapped under a piece of the roof. “Are you ok?” Valeria screamed loudly. “I will be as soon as I get out of here,” Andrew yelled back. Valeria pulled until she finally got the piece of the roof off of him. “Come on, we’ve got to go!” Valeria yelled. When they finally got out of the house. Andrew was rushed over to the paramedics.

As her team finished putting the last of the fire out, Valeria went to check on Andrew. He had a couple of burns on his arms and legs, but overall he was going to be ok. “How are you?” Valeria asked. “I’m ok, I guess. I just wonder how the fire started.” Andrew said. He looked sad and he looked at the ground. Valeria looked at Andrew. She thought about how hard this must be for him. She had fought a lot of fires. She loved the thrill of the fight. This was the first time she really thought about the people she was helping.

“The chief said it looked like your toaster caused an electrical fire,” Valeria said sadly. “Do you have any family nearby?” asked Valeria.

“No, all my family is Colorado or Wyoming,” said Andrew.

Valeria responded, “I know what that’s like. All my family is in New York or Pennsylvania. That’s why I had to call your garage to have my car towed last month.”

Now Andrew remembered her face. He had thought that she was a lovely person and had been happy to help her. “I remember you. I was hoping I would see you again.”

Valeria felt excited. “Maybe next time we meet, one of us won’t need help,” Andrew laughed. Andrew noticed the kindness and twinkle in Valeria’s eyes. He felt lost when he looked at his home, but when he looked at Valeria he felt a flicker of hope. Valeria realized that instead of being in a hurry to get back to the firehouse, she felt an urge to stay with Andrew.

“Mom! Stop with all the lovey dovey talk! I know this story is about how you and dad met,” said 10 year old Serena.

“What?” cried five year old Isabella. “I thought this was going to be a story about a princess.”

“No, this is the story about how mom and dad met,” said Serena.

Andrew and Valeria gave each other a quick kiss and Andrew said, “That’s why we always tell you that whenever you find sadness you should look for hope.”

“And always unplug your toaster after you use it,” Valeria said as she smiled and looked at her family with love.

**“I Have to Thank the Toaster” by Aahana G., Iowa (Prompt B)**

I was sipping my morning coffee when the toaster exploded.

It was a typical Tuesday morning, and the cafe was filled with students rushing to pick up their coffee before school and half-awake employees on their morning coffee run. I was staring out the window when I heard a loud boom followed by a faint sizzling sound. A piece of toast landed on my plate as the smell of burnt bread filled the cafe. I looked at the counter.

Standing in front of the broken toaster was a very frazzled looking girl. Her eyes were slowly filling with tears as she fumbled with the toaster, desperately trying to fix it despite the fact that she clearly didn't know how.

Now, I'm no toaster expert, but as an auto-mechanic I had experience fixing what seemed unfixable. The poor girl looked so lost, so I figured I should step in to help.

Ok, also she was kinda cute.

I set my coffee down and approached the counter.

“Hey, looks like you need some help. Mind if I take a look?” I asked.

She looked up at me, startled. “Do you think you could fix it?” she asked nervously.

“I can at least try. I'm actually an auto-mechanic, so I know how to fix things, although I've never had to fix a broken toaster before. But you know what they say--there's a first time for everything!” I said brightly.

Her eyes filled with relief. “Thank you so, so much. This is my first day at this job--I'd hate to lose it so soon.”

“Well, I certainly don't want that to happen. Let me see what I can do.” I rolled up my sleeves and tied my hair back. As I stepped around the corner, I could feel her watching me. The hair on my arm stood up, and I shivered.

*Be cool, I chided myself. Focus on your job.*

I studied the toaster. There seemed to be lots of food particles at the bottom of the toaster, which was a major fire hazard. The springs were also way too big, which was probably why her toast flew halfway across the cafe.

I turned back towards her. “So, I definitely found the issue.” I told her about the food particles and the springs.

“Can you fix it?” she asked anxiously.

“The food particle problem is an easy fix--you just need to clean out the toaster. But I'm not sure what to do about the springs.” I scratched my head. Suddenly an idea came to me. “Actually, I think I might have some replacement springs. How about you clean out the toaster while I check my bag?”

She nodded and picked up the toaster. I ran back to my seat and rummaged through my bags. No, no, no--yes! Hidden at the bottom of the bag were some tightly wound metal coils. I pulled them out and surveyed them.

“These will do,” I said. I grabbed some more tools and walked back to the counter, where she was waiting by the cleaned toaster. I held up the springs.

“It's your lucky day! I found some replacement springs.”

She sighed in relief. “That's great!”

“Yep! It should only take me about ten minutes to replace the old ones.” I told her. I dismantled the toaster and took out the old springs, replacing them with the new ones. I put it back together and presented her with the new toaster.

“Okay, it should be good to go! Just try to clean it out more often, and you'll be golden!”

“Okay!” she said brightly. Suddenly, she sprung forward and hugged me tight. “Thank you so, so much!” she exclaimed.

She stepped back, and my skin tingled where she touched me. “It's really my pleasure.” I said, my voice cracking. I cringed at myself.

“How can I repay you?”

“Really, don’t worry about it.” I said.

“I don’t think I ever got your name...”

“Oh, it’s Alex,”

“Alex,” she repeated slowly. “Are you sure there’s nothing I can do for you?” she asked. I took a deep breath.

*You have one shot, I remind myself. What if you never see her again? Don’t screw this up.*

“Um, actually, could I get your number?”

She blinked once, then blushed furiously. “Oh! Oh my gosh, of course!” She reached for a pen and her notepad and wrote her contact information on it. She tore off the sheet of paper, folded it and handed it to me.

“Um, I have to get back to work...but seriously, thank you so much! I’ll see you later, Alex.” She turned around and left before I could say anything else. I watched her go back to work. She caught me staring and smiled at me before turning back to serve a customer.

I pulled out my phone so I could put in her number. I checked the time--oh, crap! I was gonna be late! I grabbed my bag and sprinted out the door, but I couldn’t wipe the smile from my face.

**“All Because of a Toaster” by Maya J., Iowa (Prompt B)**

“Granny” Kaylee asked her grandmother, “how did you meet Grandpa?” She asked this question often because the story intrigued her and intriguing it was. “It all started with a 22 year old girl named Harper” Granny began. “She loved cars and had just graduated from Weber State University with an auto mechanic degree. Luckily for her she found a job near her apartment at a business called “Cassie’s Garage.” It was a place for only female mechanics to work because they weren't accepted at many other places.”

“But when does Grandpa come in?” Kaylee asked although she knew the story by heart. “Well” Granny began, “Harper’s favorite meal of the day was breakfast. She always made toast and over easy eggs when she woke up in the morning. Early one Tuesday morning Harper woke up ready to make her breakfast. To her astonishment-” “Wait what does that word mean, I am only six!” Kaylee exclaimed, confused. “It just means that she was surprised, sugar plum” Granny replied. “You mean YOU were surprised?” Kaylee teased, happy to catch her grandmother's errors. “Yes anyway,” Granny continued. “To her astonishment the toaster wouldn’t warm up when she put the bread in! She was so frustrated that she ran to her car and drove straight to the local repair store, “Fix-it Fine.”

As soon as she walked into that store the first thing she noticed was the man at the front desk. She just knew it was love at first sight. Harper walked up to him and said “there is something wrong with my toaster.” He looked at her and answered “Why can’t you fix it? I have seen you before fixing cars in the garage a couple blocks down.” “Sir” she exclaimed “I am an auto mechanic, not a toaster mechanic.” “ Well let me take a look at it,” he said, walking the toaster to the back workroom. A few minutes later he returned to the front with a handsome smile and said “I don’t think I ever got your name.” “It’s Harper” she answered grinning, “and you?” Ignoring the question he replied, “Well Harper I will fix it tonight. Come back tomorrow and ask for Alex.”

Granny continued, “Well, the second Harper got home she took her television and cut two of the cords in the back so when she came back the next day he would have something else to fix overnight. She woke up the next morning, popped the television in her car, and drove right to the repair store. “Is Alex available?” she asked the man at the front desk. “Sure thing let me go get him,” he smiled as he walked to the back. Alex came out with her toaster new and improved in his hand. “Thank you,” she exclaimed! “How much do I owe you?”

“One date to the cafe will do it, ” he replied with a grin. Harper broke into the biggest smile and said “does that mean the broken television in my trunk equals two dates?” she giggled.

“I guess so, it must be my lucky day!” he teased , wiggling his eyebrows with that funny little smile.

That night they went on a date to Erika’s Diner and realized they had so much in common! They both loved to fix things, they loved animals, and best of all they loved each other. So one year later they had a spectacular wedding and a cake with a broken toaster on top. They swore to never let each other down and about 10 months later Harper was pregnant with your mommy! They raised her to love fixing things and have an open mind to anything. When she grew up she met a man named Luke who made her the happiest woman in the world. Their wedding was beautiful and just like Harper and Alex about 10 months later your mommy gave birth to a beautiful little girl named Kaylee!” “That's me!” Kaylee squealed, grinning. “That is you sugar plum. And that is also how I met your grandpa.” “I love that story,” Kaylee yawned. “Me too” granny whispered, slowly tip-toeing out of her room and closing her door with a gentle *click*.

## “Roses” by Genevieve P., Iowa (Prompt A)

I don't really know why we moved to the city. When we left Woodstock for this enormous area, I didn't really expect what was coming. Woodstock is a safe place, a small town. My roommate, Brynn, and I came to New York City last week. Brynn was offered a job in an office in the north tower of the World Trade Center. Our apartment here is much smaller than our last one, but Brynn says that her new job pays well, and we should only be here for a year or so. Then we can buy a larger apartment.

While Brynn has gotten an amazing job here, I'm struggling a bit. I just finished making a poster to photocopy and post around our block. "*Dog walker for hire. Contact Greta for more details.*" Am I proud that the only job I've managed to get is dog walking? No. But our dog Sammy loves walks and other dogs. I got the idea to do this one day when I was walking Sam around the block and another dog and owner came up to us. The owner asked me to hold onto her dog Levi while she took a phone call. Sammy and Levi immediately became best friends. So here I am, putting up posters for my dog walking service.

I'm walking into the kitchen to make us both breakfast when I step on something sharp. I look down and when I see what it is I roll my eyes.

"Brynn! Can you try to be more careful about where you decide to leave WFDs in the kitchen?" WFDs are what I've called paper clips ever since I stepped on the first one. Weapons of Foot Destruction.

Brynn has a weird obsession with red paper clips. They're all over her room, used for hanging up pictures and notes. She even makes little sculptures out of them. I don't mind this until I step on one.

"Sorry about that, G," she called from her bedroom. It's Monday morning and she is getting ready for work. Today is my first day of dog walking. Including Sam, I have four dogs to take. After Brynn left, I got Sammy on her leash and left our apartment to pick up the three other dogs. Sammy was very excited to learn that Levi was coming with us. The other two dogs were Gunther, a yellow lab, and June, a husky. Sam's a pointer and Levi's a German Shepherd. Our walk was around an hour and a half, and when we got back to the apartment, I counted what I had earned. \$270. I guess it's a good thing that dog walkers are expensive here.

I spent the rest of the day unpacking boxes until Brynn got home. We were both exhausted from what felt like a week without sleep. We made supper at 7:30, and after we cleaned up, both went to bed.

The next morning, I woke up to Brynn singing in the shower. She knows she can't sing and does so just for that reason. As I was getting ready for another walk, I turned on the news.

"Today is September 11<sup>th</sup>, and our story today is one of fur and friendliness," the reporter said, standing in an animal shelter. "This no-kill shelter is trying to make room for more animals. So today, all dogs and cats are just \$25. If you've been looking for the perfect pet, come down to the shelter to find an affordable furball."

Today I decided to take a different route than yesterday so I could walk by Brynn's building. She works on the 79<sup>th</sup> floor of the north tower. She claimed it had the best view in all of NYC. I picked up the last dog, June, at around eight. We walked for half an hour, until we got to the tower. We spent about ten minutes looking at it. It was much taller than I imagined. As we were walking away, I noticed all four dogs started acting strange. That's when I saw the plane. It looked very close to the tower, but I figured that it was just because it was so tall. Then I heard the crash. The plane had flown directly into the tower. I heard ear-piercing screams and sirens. I knew I had to get the dogs back to their owners. I ran with them as quickly as I could back to their homes. I dropped off Gunther last, around 20 minutes after the collision. Gunther's owner John shoved me inside his apartment as soon as he opened the door. I stopped when I saw the news. The south tower had just been struck by a second plane, sending debris falling all over the streets. The

north tower was already being evacuated, and police and firefighters were working on the south tower.

“Greta, tell me Brynn wasn’t at work today,” he said slowly, but with panic in his voice. Brynn, John, and I had been friends for years. He was very excited to learn we were moving to the city.

“She was,” I told him, with a growing feeling of dread. I was so focused on getting the dogs home that I forgot she was there.

I spent the night on John’s couch. We got a call the next morning saying Brynn had been found in the rubble and identified by her ID. They told us she had died. We called Brynn’s parents and told them what happened. When her mother picked up the phone, her voice told us she had prepared herself for the news.

A week later, we had her funeral. Since John and I both knew how much she loved red paper clips, we made her roses out of her collection for her grave. We made so many roses, and we hung them up everywhere.

Every year, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, John and I each make a new rose out of her red paper clips to place on her grave.

**“Sparks” by Ella S., Iowa (Prompt B) – Honorable Mention**

“Carol! I’m leaving in five minutes, so if you want a ride, get down here!”

“I’m coming!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. It seemed I had already yelled this at least five times. Dust flew into the air as I thundered down the stairs as fast as I could. I threw a couple of Pop Tarts into the toaster as I hopped through the kitchen, trying to put my shoes on.

“Carol, I’m gonna be late for work. We have to leave now.”

“Ok, ok.” As I reached for my Pop Tarts, I realized they were still cold. I frowned, reaching to turn on the toaster. It didn’t work. “Dad, I think this is broken, it’s not turning on.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to fix it. Why don’t you eat an apple or something?”

I did, but I also grabbed the faulty old appliance before I got into my dad’s car.

“And you brought that because?”

“Dad, how many times do I have to tell you that James is good with machines. His dad’s a mechanic, and he learns things from him. Turn left up here.”

“I think I know my way to his house now – yep, here it is. I’ll be back after work, which means I’ll be here at-”

“5:30, I know,” I said as I rolled my eyes.

“If you keep doing that, your eyes will get stuck in the back of your head.”

“That *might* be a problem if I keep hanging around you,” I said grinning. “See you later.”

James, my best friend of six years lived in Northwell Falls, which was across town from my house. We had decided to hang out since we had no school today. Now might also be a good time to point out that I have had a crush on him for the past three years.

“Hey,” I said as he opened the door.

“Hi. Um, is that a toaster?”

“Yes, in fact it is, and this is why I have come to you, my free mechanical help person.”

James closed his eyes and shook his head, but smiled all the same. “So, what’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t know, it just won’t turn on.”

“Ok, do you want me to work on it now or later?”

“Later is fine.”

“Good,” James said excitedly. “I’ve been working on something else, and I want to show you. So, you know when someone comes into your room for like, a minute and then leaves, *and leaves the door open.*”

“Yeah.”

“Well I created this arm thing that shuts the door for you when you press this button.” He held up a plain white button that was the size of a dollar coin.

“I need this. I actually need this so bad.”

“James smiled. “Well, I’m trying it out for the first time today, so we need to see if it works first. Ok, three, two, one.”

There was a shower of sparks, a plume a black colored smoke, and James and I looked at each other before there was a boom and the mechanical arm exploded. Fire was tasting the air, slowly exploring parts of James’s room.

“Carol, I need you to run to the kitchen, and under the sink there is a fire extinguisher. I need to stay up here and keep it contained.”

“Are y- “

“Hurry!”

I nearly ripped off the cupboard door as I frantically searched for the fire extinguisher. It seemed like ages before I found it, and when I did, I sprinted back to James’s room.

I sprayed to foam over the fire when I got back, breathing heavily. James and I just looked at each other in shock. Then I felt my mouth twitch as a grin slowly started to form. James couldn't keep a few snickers in, and soon we were laughing.

"This was certainly very interesting. We work well together.

"Yeah, we make a pretty good team," James said, ash coating his cheeks.

Those words warmed my heart. "Yeah, I said, we do."

**“Tangerine” by McKinley M., Illinois (Prompt B)**

He couldn't do anything but stare at her.

Really, there was no way a woman *that* beautiful should have ended up on his couch after a long day at the orchard, but here she was. Her long blonde hair fell in ringlets just past her shoulders, and she laughed with him as if she had seen his life in another time, as if she already knew everything there was to know about Harvey. Harvey, who tried to keep her from seeing the clutter of his auto shop downstairs; Harvey, who didn't particularly like oranges but liked her; Harvey, who could never seem to get much right but *God* did this feel right.

“C'mon!” she teased, pulling him closer to her shoulder. Alexandria possessed enough confidence for the two of them combined. “Are you hungry? I mean, we have all these oranges to go through, and all.”

“Alexandria, I—”

“Let me make you breakfast,” she said excitedly, even though they were edging up to midnight. “Call me Alex, by the way,” she continued, moving approximately ten feet to Harvey's kitchen. The apartment above his garage was barely big enough for him, but she moved around the small living area with all the grace of a ballerina. “Alexandria's too formal.”

“Oh. Okay,” he stammered, finding that he had limited access to his expansive vocabulary. Pretty girls did that to him.

He finally gathered the nerve to stand up and follow her to the kitchen, bumping into a side table on the way there. Her laughter flitted through the room like a butterfly on a warm summer day, like cherry blossoms through the air. He thought that she must have been either an angel or a government plant: who on earth would want to spend time with him unless they had either divine instruction or a reason to put him in jail?

Though she was unfamiliar with his apartment, she found exactly what she needed within seconds. Before he could protest any further, she had amassed a small army of pans on the stove (with the toaster on standby, locked and loaded with fresh bread) and had already begun brewing a pot of coffee. She hummed to herself as she cooked—“All You Need Is Love,” which sent Harvey spiraling—and he watched with amazement, barely thinking straight enough to play that song on vinyl for her.

“Harvey!” she squealed as the intro played, immediately forgetting her cooking and extending a hand to him. He took it nervously and twirled her under his arm, met by more of her glorious laughter as she danced with him, drawing closer together with each beat. The only light came from the stove, but she was still the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

“Do you think it’s true?” he asked, a breath away from her cheek. They locked eyes, blue on deep brown, and Harvey’s heart skipped several beats.

“What might that be?” she murmured, sweet and low.

“That love is all you need.”

“I do,” she agreed, either not noticing or ignoring the redness on Harvey’s cheeks. “I think that as long as you can say you love *something*—or someone—then life is beautiful. That’s really the only thing that matters, isn’t it?”

He thought about what she said as he stared into her eyes. To her, the most important thing in the world was love, being loved, and he thought he could give it to her. He’d take her to pick oranges every day for the rest of his life if it made her happy, he’d listen to this song until the rapture came if she wanted him to. He’d take her anywhere, do anything. He’d love her in San Diego, he’d love her in Sydney, he’d love her in Cairo. He’d love her next to a bonfire in Grand Teton, in a high-rise, in his small apartment above his garage. Anywhere for her. Anything for her and her tangerine dress.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said as the song ended.

Alex threw her head back and laughed, unfiltered. She reached a hand out to smooth his hair and let her fingertips trail down his best button-down to his waist, where they stayed for a moment before she returned to her cooking.

“I think, as long as you’re happy, it doesn’t matter what you do,” she continued. “Or who you’re with. Or what you think you are to other people.” He wanted to kiss her, but all he could come up with was *I agree*, which lapsed the conversation for a few moments. Only the popping oil and the percolating coffee were audible as a car drove down the desolate road outside, headlights illuminating the room for a brief second.

*There it goes, he thought. I’m done for. She hates me.*

Instead: “Harvey?”

“Alex,” he said, trying to remain calm.

“Would you ever run away with someone?” She turned to face him, eyebrows barely raised as if she was challenging him.

He had to play his cards the right way and he knew it. “If it made them happy,” he said.

The toaster finished and startled both of them, diverting both their eyes for a moment before they refocused on each other.

“I think that’s the right answer,” she whispered, pulling him in to kiss him. He froze, unable to process even when she finished.

“What about you?” he finally said, voice shaking.

“I would,” she agreed. “Do you want to?”

“*What?*”

She laughed again, relishing in his inability to formulate a coherent thought. He couldn’t believe this was really happening: how he managed to get her to go out with him in the first place was a miracle, but *this?* He couldn’t focus.

Eventually: “*Yes*, for the love of God, let’s get out of here.”

She kissed him again, and she tasted like oranges.

**“A Flower for a Mechanic” by Isabella M., Iowa (Prompt B)**

Peony stared at the toaster, at the smoke curling up from inside it.

“Well, crap.”

As she reached under the counter to grab the apartment’s fire extinguisher, the fire alarm in the small kitchen started to go off.

“Well, *crap*.”

The small fire in the toaster was out within a matter of seconds, and a quick Google search later determined that she didn’t need to alert the fire department. Peony sighed, pushing her hand through her hair as she tried to figure out what to do next. She still needed lunch and her next class started in less than an hour. She didn’t want to go to class hungry, knowing it’d be another three hours after that before she could eat, but she didn’t know what else to do. She didn’t have time to go anywhere. Peony was startled out of her thoughts as her apartment door opened.

“Hey Flower, I know you usually make your own lunch, but I figured that you wouldn’t mind if-”

Peony’s roommate, an electrical engineering student, her crush of about 16 months, the gorgeous blonde-haired Giacomina, stood in the doorway, staring at the toaster covered in foam on the kitchen counter.

“It was burning,” Peony said, gesturing slightly at the toaster, “I put it out. You said you had lunch?”

Gia shook her head slightly and then stepped into the apartment and held up a fast food bag. “I got some burgers.”

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“Okay, well it doesn’t look too bad. It just looks like the coils heated up too high and the bread caught on fire. It’s probably just a wiring issue.” Gia took a step back from the now-cleaned toaster sitting on the counter. “I’m sure there’s probably even somebody on campus that could fix it.”

“You can’t fix it?” Peony asked, slightly desperate, “Don’t you work with machines?”

Gia laughed slightly, glancing over her shoulder at Peony. “Sorry Flower, I deal with lighting systems. Toasters aren’t really my forte.”

“Crap,” Peony sighed, “I don’t have a lot of money on me. And I need this stupid toaster for lunch at least until March. God, I think I’d even pay with a date to get this thing fixed.” Gia stiffened slightly, and even though her back was to Peony, she caught the movement. *Hmm, now that’s an idea.* Maybe, if she couldn’t work up the courage to ask Gia out on a date herself, she could get the toaster to do it for her.

“Do you know anybody who would fix a toaster for a date?” Peony baited, praying that she was reading Gia’s body language right.

“I, um, think I might know a guy.” Gia was stuttering, that was a good sign, right?

“Oh, no, I don’t think I’d take a guy. How ‘bout a girl?” Gia was definitely blushing. She hadn’t turned around yet, but Peony could swear that her ears were turning red.

“I think I’ve got one of those too.” Peony smiled slightly as Gia picked up the toaster, waving as she walked out the door.

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The air was chilly as Peony walked down her street, breathing the cold into her lungs. It’d been about two days since Gia had walked out with the toaster, and she was starting to get antsy. She was an auto mechanic student, she had no clue how long it took to fix a toaster, but she had had a date in the works since the second Gia had left. It had been finalized the day before and she had just gone out with friends to pick out an outfit. She had a dress and some suitable jewelry at home, so all she had really bought was a new pair of kitten pumps. Her last ones had gotten completely worn out after years of use and she was excited for the chance to buy more. She was also really excited for this date. Which brought her all the way back around.

Peony let out a long-suffering sigh, throwing her head back as she approached her apartment complex. She shifted her shoe box into one hand as she pulled out her keys and her keycard, swiping her card through the scanner at the front door. She walked into the building, double checking that the door closed behind her as she made her way toward the stairs. She took them two at a time, jitters growing as she got closer to her apartment. She was so ready to assemble her outfit.

As she walked into the apartment, she heard Gia loudly cursing from the living room.

“You alright?” Peony called, kicking her shoes off at the door. She walked through the kitchen and came face to face with Gia and a disassembled toaster spread all over the hardwood in the living room. Peony’s eyebrows raised to her hairline as Gia’s face got steadily redder.

“I told you I wasn’t gonna be good with toasters,” Gia mumbled. She started to get up, but stopped as Peony let out a shy giggle.

“It’s alright Gia. I’m sure I’ll be able to make do without one.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point.” Was Gia pouting right now?

“Well,” Peony said, drawing out the word, “What was the point?”

Gia was silent for a few moments as Peony moved further into the room, only starting to talk as she settled on the floor next to her.

“Would you hate me if I said I really wanted that date?” Gia was looking away, out the window as her ears started to take on the color of her face.

Peony blushed softly, and she did her best to keep her voice from shaking as she replied. “Would you hate me if I said I really wanted it too?”

Gia looked up then, staring wide eyed at Peony’s slightly flushed face.

“So,” Peony started, “Are you still up for that date?”

## “Clipped in My Memory” by Matt S., Iowa (Prompt A)

The day began like any other: the morning perusal of the paper—typically depicting the carnage of German advances through Europe—followed by a quick stretch before walking Hero. I remember the sun was just creeping above the mountainous volcanoes of Oahu as we began our quotidian outing.

Hero’s lithe Belgian Malinois frame trotted steadily ahead of me, tugging loosely on the leash wrapped about my wrist. We ate up mile after mile of the scenic coast, the gentle sound of lapping waves filling our ears. My mind often drifted to the many other dogs I would have to walk on days like these, all just to keep me in college, but today my mind was peaceful, simply enjoying the calm of the morning air.

Hero picked up the sound earlier than I, breaking into a frenzy of barks as he snarled at the water. I still remember the droning hum of the planes as they appeared on the horizon, zipping over us like birds of prey as they dive-bombed the port of Pearl Harbor. From the moment I saw the billowing smoke rising into the air, I knew my life was about to change.

Hero and I were both drafted in October, joining a K-9 unit stationed in Great Britain. We both served out the war under Old Blood and Guts in Patton’s Third Army. Over the years of conflict, dogs were replaced and friends died, but the war raged on, ignorant of its casualties. Hero and I were there for it all, during the German air raid of Britain, to D-Day, and all the way through the Battle of the Bulge.

German forces were retreating across Europe, and the war seemed to be drawing to a close. But rumor spread that the Germans had created something, a weapon of mass destruction. I remember hearing the generals whisper about an infiltration of something called the Manhattan Project.

I didn’t understand its significance then, but when General Acaster assembled us, I knew something was up.

He spoke in his usual gruff tone. “If it were up to me, I’d leave you dog-toting clowns out of this and let real men bash through the German line. Unfortunately, I have orders from Patton himself to uncover what the Germans are up to.”

He kept us in the dark as to what we were specifically looking for, using vague terminology to describe the weapon.

“Your dogs have already been prepped on the scent and will lead you to the weapon upon detection. Since the Berlin bombings have leveled the city of any military or research facilities, we are most likely looking for an underground bunker of some kind. Trust your dogs. They are your only hope of locating the weapon. Good luck men.”

The next week was a blur, a spate of fake papers, identification cards, and rough German forced upon me. Together with my unit, we were smuggled into Berlin via the underground network, each of us assuming our aliases.

My eyes darted beneath black glasses as Hero led me down the desecrated streets of Berlin. Portraying a blind person wasn’t the safest thing to do in 1945 Berlin, considering thousands of them had been shipped to Hitler’s death camps over the years. Regardless, the cover was more probable than a dog walker going about a bombed city.

Hero's nose was a chorus of sniffs and snorts, tracing every scent that wafted from the ruined city. He stopped suddenly, a scent catching in the filter of his nose. A low growl rumbled through his throat as he took a sharp left, leading me towards a partially destroyed bar.

I suppressed my urge to address the bartender as he swept a pile of rubble against the blasted frame of a wall. He eventually took note of me, asking in gruff German what my business was.

Hero continued to sniff as I responded in broken German to the bartender's inquiry. His eyes narrowed dubiously as he slipped behind the wall of dark drinks, chatting idly. Hero's nose stopped sniffing, his ears perking as he leapt from my loose grip. Diving over the bar, Hero crashed into the man as gunshots rang out.

Rushing forward, I wrestled the gun from his hand, delivering two quick shots to his heart. Hero rolled off the dead German, licking a bullet graze on his side. Taking the gun, my eyes set on the back door of the bar.

It was reinforced, but only guarded by a small lock. Rushing to the bar, I rooted through the drawers, finding a paperclip holding a thin sheet of ledgers. Whipping it off, I rushed back to the door, untangling the paperclip and going to work on the lock. The click of the door brought a smile to my face as I swung it open, plunging into the dark corridors.

I mowed down unsuspecting guards and scientists, plowing deeper into the bunker. Entering into a massive room, I stared at the silvery frame of a bomb.

If I'd known I was staring at the world's first nuclear bomb, I may have taken greater caution. Paperclip in hand, I moved towards the bomb, undoing every screw I could. Finally forcing a panel open, I looked into the tangle of wires. Completely unprepared to disarm a bomb, I rushed back out of the bunker, grabbing as many drinks as I could.

Pouring them in a large pool at the bunker's mouth, I took the paperclip and the batteries from my portable radio, rubbing them together. Sparks slowly showered onto the alcohol before it alighted, beginning its slow descent into the bunker.

Grabbing Hero, I rushed out of the bar, praying I'd given myself enough time. Stealing a car, I floored the gas, zipping out of Berlin.

My grandchild stares up at me with an unhinged jaw, eyes twinkling. "Is that true Grandpa?" I smile, my hand moving idly to the lapel of my coat. Fingering the paperclip hanging there, I nod. "Every word."

**“soft mornings” by Linville McDonough, Maine (Prompt B)**

The mechanic blinked awake.

The sun was not yet peeking through the blinds, but the sky was orange. With his bleary eyes he could see the dust dance through the air. He rolled over and found the other side of the bed cold and empty, though there was a lingering scent of lavender. The mechanic sighed and got up after checking the clock.

4:00 a.m.

He flicked the lamp, but then remembered he needed to replace the bulb. He took two steps to the closet and pulled out his blue denim jumpsuit. The faded letters on the back were unreadable in the dim light. The mechanic checked the mirror, but why he bothered in the dim morning light he wasn't sure. Habit, maybe?

After a quick trip to the bathroom, the mechanic walked down the short hall to the second bedroom. He peeked his head into the light blue bedroom to find a boy sleeping on the twin bed, spooned by a woman. Though the woman looked tired even in her sleep, the way she held the boy was full of tenderness. The mechanic felt a burst of pride, when he saw the many toys the boy had scattered on the carpet.

As silently as he could, he peeled himself away from the dreamy sight, and entered the kitchen. He pulled out a slice of white bread from the plastic bag, and walked over to the toaster ready for him on the middle of the counter. He put the slice in and pushed the lever down.

The mechanic walked over to the coffee pot and grunted in annoyance. It hadn't started automatically again, and he needed to get to the shop. He couldn't afford to stop at the corner store on his way to work. And-

“Good morning.” whispered a soft voice.

Two arms wrapped around his already stressed body.

“Good morning, love.”

The toast popped up as he turned to face his tired, beautiful wife.

“Honey, start the coffee while I get the peanut butter.” she said, her brilliant smile wrinkling her eyes.

“Roger that, Captain.” he winked at her and she giggled.

His wife pulled out the peanut butter from a cabinet and a knife from the drawer, while he fiddled with the coffee maker. When he finally got the damn thing to work he turn back to the half piece of toast his wife offered him.

“No plate?” he asked.

“Don't feel like doing too many dishes before I take Johnny to preschool, and I go to school.” she said.

So, they ate there, bent over the toaster, exchanging soft glances and even softer words with their long day ahead of them.

**“Wade and Lauren” by Robin McCool, Iowa (Prompt B)**

“You should ask that young lady out, Wade. Even an old fool like me can see there’s a spark between the two of you,” Del said loudly as the side door scraped shut, Lauren barely out of earshot.

I shook my head, feeling the tops of my ears getting hot at the mere thought. Me, Wade Reed, auto mechanic and aspiring auto shop owner, asking out Lauren Mills, local special education teacher. “She isn’t going to fall for a mechanic, Boss.”

“Your days of calling me that are limited. You’ll be the boss soon. I can’t wait to get to spend my days with my dear Charlotte,” Del said with a slightly crooked smile and glimmer in his eye. “And that’s what Charlotte used to say about me, but look how I won her over. We celebrated 45 years together last July. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Exactly how did you win her over, Boss?” I asked as Del walked away, pulling up the first overhead door. I took his lack of response as my cue that the conversation was over and headed outside myself to pull Lauren’s sedan in for the oil change. She refused my offer to drop her off at the school just minutes ago, choosing instead to brave the cold early December air for the five blocks to the brick elementary building.

Part of the appeal of this small Midwest town I had moved to eight months ago was everything being so close, along with the lack of bumper-to-bumper traffic of bigger cities. While living in an older home in need of more than its fair share of renovations, many of which I had yet to start, my first priority was soaking in as much knowledge from Del as I could before assuming ownership of the shop, a day shy of four weeks from now. One of the disadvantages of being the new guy in town, taking over a well-established local business, was a slight lack of trust from the community, evidenced by the slight hesitation as Lauren dropped her car keys in my hand.

I looked down the road, seeing the ponytail peeking out of the bottom of Lauren’s stocking hat, swaying back and forth over the strap of her school bag. I heard a car horn honk and saw her lift her arm, lunch bag dangling precariously, in response. I imagined the greeting came from one of her co-workers or perhaps the parent of a student getting dropped off early for the before school program. When Lauren declined my offer, she reassured me she had plenty of time before the day officially began. One of the first things I wanted to do when I took over the business was to offer a loaner car. I was still amazed that such common conveniences weren’t available in this little burg; a simple fix that might even increase business. I opened the door to Lauren’s sedan and caught a whiff of her slightly floral perfume. It was going to be a long day...

“Hey, Lauren! I would have picked you up if I knew you needed a ride. What’s wrong with your car?” Stacey, the fifth grade teacher stuck her head into my classroom on her way down the hall.

“Nothing’s wrong. Just needed an oil change. I told the mechanic I’d pick it up in the morning on my way up here,” I said, pulling my arm out of the sleeve of my coat, “I would take you up on a ride home though.”

“You got it. Have a good day!” Stacey said as she turned to leave.

At least I would only have to walk the eight blocks to Del's Auto Repair once, tomorrow morning. I was going to school early to work on copying holiday Reader's Theater scripts before the town's ham and turkey drawing and toy giveaway for kids. I had offered to help the community club president hand out goodies to the kids after their visit with Santa. It was an oddly endearing town tradition that I learned about when I moved here eight years prior. Knowing most of the school age kids helped with crowd control, which was why I volunteered annually.

"Good morning, Miss Mills," Bailey sang out as she walked into the room. No more time to daydream about that ruggedly handsome mechanic, the thoughts of whom kept me warm on the brisk walk to school. I wondered if he felt that same spark I had noticed as I dropped my keys into his hands and hurried away. My cheeks burned at the thought of what else he was likely able to do with those hands...

"Good morning, Miss Mills! Sorry to keep you waiting. That's odd. Where's Del? I would have been here by now, but the water in my house decided to freeze up last night. Let me get the door unlocked," Wade gave a slightly embarrassed smile as he opened the side door. I wasn't sure if the shiver that ran down my spine was due to my five-minute wait in the cold or seeing him disheveled this early in the morning. I had imagined Del, the friendly owner, would have been here by now, or I wouldn't have arrived so early. I hitched my school bag further up on my shoulder.

"Call me Lauren. No worries, I had my cappuccino to keep me warm," I said as I showed him my Teachers Rule insulated mug. His teasing hint of a smile made me even warmer.

He pushed open the side door, with an "After you."

After two steps, he bumped into me from behind.

"Sorry" he said, as I breathed out, "What the..."

In front of the counter was a folding table with a remarkably clean-looking large size polishing cloth on it and two rickety wooden chairs, likely from the office area. Along with the usual coffeepot on the counter was a toaster, bagels, cream cheese, and a note written in shaky script, "This is how..."

**“Visitors” by Brandon Holtz, Missouri (Prompt B)**

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**“FALA” by Tom Gingerich, Iowa (Prompt A)**

Franklin’s dog was upset. Fala had always made it clear to the President that he preferred to be walked by agents close to the family— those few individuals who were assigned to safeguard them and make Hyde Park or Warm Springs or the White House secure whenever they were in residence. A divergence from those familiar contacts was unnerving for the little dog.

The knee-high Scotch Terrier had been a gift from a distant cousin in 1940. Franklin had officially named him *Murray the Outlaw of Falahill* after John Murray of Falahill, a famous Scottish ancestor. He later shortened it to Fala. The diminutive canine clearly became one of the President’s closest allies— a creature he could always trust to be faithful and loyal in any situation unlike many of his political acquaintances. But now the small bundle of energy was at odds with the new choice for walking him.

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His name was Walter Zimmerman and I had taken an instant dislike to him on our first walk around the White House grounds. There was just something about him that little dogs like me tune into immediately. Part of it was the pressure he exerted on my leash. It was far from gentle, and I always behave myself with my walkers if they treat me well. Another problem was the way he led me off the assigned route that the secret service had mapped. I knew it by heart and it upset me when we diverted from the normal path.

My instincts have always been keen and they were superbly aligned in relation to Zimmerman. In fact, I realized that I was the only one in the President’s confidence to suspect anything of him. I didn’t know what he was up to at the time. But I knew something was terribly wrong. The frightening reality was that this new dog walker was there for one specific purpose— to deprive the country of the one man who would be instrumental in winning the war against the fascist regimes that aimed to destroy it.

Diverging us from the assigned path had a singular purpose— to achieve the best vantage point from where a future gunshot could prove fatal for the President. I sensed that something was wrong when we lingered in out-of-the-way areas that were not visible from some vantage points. It bothered me. And I let the President know each time we were both in Zimmerman’s presence.

One afternoon, when a week had passed, we had just returned to the Oval Office from a walk. I put on a show— a low growl when he tugged on my leash. “He doesn’t seem to like you, Mister Zimmerman,” Franklin had remarked.

“I don’t understand it, Mr. President,” Walter had stammered, sensing that the President very much trusted my instincts.

“Never mind, Walter,” he muttered. “That’ll be all.” Zimmerman exited the room, and my best buddy looked down at me and smiled.

The President of the United States seated on a divan while doing paperwork, patted his lap and motioned me into it. I leaped up to be lovingly wrestled with before I finally settled down next to him as he worked.

He collected several documents and paperclipped them together, laying them aside, then grabbed another set, but dropped the paper clip to the floor. It was too far to reach so he grudgingly dismissed it. I knew all about his paralysis and I wished with all my heart that *he* could take me on my daily walks. It wasn’t fair. Franklin was my best friend. I would never call him Master. He wouldn’t want that. We were equals. That’s the way love works. It’s the way we treated each other. It’s the way it should be. His greatest desire was to continue to lead the nation and bring the war to a successful conclusion. I was determined to help him.

Zimmerman’s plan was in its final stages and he relayed that fact to his co-conspirators the very next week. The rifle (cleverly disguised as a wooden walking staff) had been smuggled in

without incident and had been incorporated into our walks. No one suspected it was anything other than a wooden staff. No one but me that is. I knew about guns. And the stick smelled of oil.-- just like the hunting weapons I had smelled while on various trips with the President. At that point, I began to realize what Zimmerman was planning.

On the evening in question, Zimmerman collected me for our final walk before retiring. Knowing the President's consistent routine, Walter walked me to a darkened corner of the compound with a clear view of a window and a desk where Franklin always finished the day's correspondence.

I realized we had never been this far removed from our usual course, and began exploring as far as the leash would allow while Zimmerman made strange clicking noises with the stick he was carrying. I realized it was time to act and sniffed the air-- began growling and pacing back and forth focusing on Zimmerman.

"Shut up, you mangy mutt!" he hissed at me. Then he focused on the window, and seeing movements inside, he raised the rifle into position.

That was the last straw! "MANGY mutt!" I'd never been mangy a day in my life! I began barking as loudly as I could. The alarm was sounded. Agents came running from all around alerted by the urgency of my yips and yaps. Zimmerman protested, but the rifle was discovered, and he was quickly escorted to a holding cell where he remained overnight to be dealt with the next morning. My best friend was safe.

Me... Murray the Outlaw of Falahill had saved the day!

## “Fix Me Up” by Erica Seifried, Georgia (Prompt B)

“What are we doing here?” an unfamiliar voice floats through the office doorway, and I put down my sandwich and step out into the shop.

“Getting your toaster fixed,” a familiar voice replies, and my friend Drew is standing there with another guy, smirking at me.

“At an auto repair shop?” the other guy asks. Sure enough, he’s got a simple two-slice toaster in his hands. He also looks extremely uncomfortable as Drew continues his Chesire cat grin, looking way too pleased with himself.

“I’m not fixing that,” I announce, and the guy’s eyes dart to me, surprised.

“This is Meg,” Drew introduces me, walking over and putting a hand on my shoulder, “She’ll help you. Meg, this is Lee.”

Before either of us can say anything, Drew adds, “I have to go. I’ll leave you two to it,” and then he all but sprints out of the shop.

Lee and I are left by ourselves, looking at each other. He’s young, probably around my age, and he’s cute. As soon as this thought pops into my head, I know exactly why Drew brought him in, and judging by Lee’s expression, he’s come to the same conclusion.

“I’m so sorry,” he says quickly, “I’ll go. I was just complaining to Drew that my toaster was broken and he said he knew someone who could fix it. I shouldn’t have believed him. I didn’t expect him to bring me here.”

*And for me to be a woman?* I hold the thought in, but the way he’s glancing around the shop, I can tell it’s running through his head.

“Here, let me do you a favor,” I tell him, holding out my hands until he reluctantly hands me the toaster.

I lift it like I’m trying to figure out what’s wrong with it, and then I toss it into the large trashcan next to me. It makes a horrific clang as it hits the bottom, and Lee gapes at me like I’ve grown a second head.

“That...my grandma gave me that,” he finally says, and my heart sinks.

“Really? I’m so sor-”

“Just kidding,” he laughs, and my hand flies to my chest in relief, but I’m laughing too.

“You do know toasters aren’t that expensive? Just buy a new one. Or better yet, upgrade and get a toaster oven.”

“I think you owe me a toaster oven.”

“How about an oil change?”

“Do you have an undying love of cars?” he asks, looking sincerely intrigued.

“No, it’s a family business, and I’m the only child,” I explain. This is a common question when people come into the shop and meet me for the first time.

“Would you do this if it wasn’t?” he asks, surprising me. Most people don’t ask a follow up. They just accept my first answer and move on.

“Probably not, but I don’t mind it. Knowing your way around a car isn’t a bad thing.”

He nods, brown eyes serious as he takes in the shop again. It’s small, only two bays, so there’s not a lot to look at, but we have a steady stream of business most days.

Lee’s eyes drift back to me, and he says, “As much as I hate to ask, because Drew’s head is already big enough, but would you like to grab dinner with me sometime? We can go look at toaster ovens afterwards and you can give me your recommendations.”

“Do you take all your dates appliance shopping?” I can’t help but give him a little sass.

“When they break mine I do,” he gives it right back to me, and I can’t help the smile that creeps across my face.

“Okay, fine. But you have to actually buy the toaster oven I recommend.”

“I’m not making any promises,” he holds up his hands, and I laugh.

“Fine, you have to accept this then,” I tell him, holding up a finger. He frowns as I step back into the office and into the small kitchen area.

I grab the shop toaster and unplug it, carrying it back to where Lee’s waiting.

His eyes become saucers as he stares at an identical toaster to the one he brought.

“Where did you get that?” his voice is filled with awe.

“You’re not the only one whose grandma gifts them household appliances.”

He’s laughing as he accepts the toaster from me.

“Are you sure you want me to have this?” he asks, taking a step closer to the trash can to peer in at his old one, like he’s struggling to accept the fact that I really do have an identical toaster.

“Yeah, I’ve been pushing my dad to upgrade to a toaster oven for a while now.”

“You couldn’t convince him to get a new one without killing mine?”

“What was actually wrong with it?” I ask.

“The heating element wasn’t working.”

“Were you really going to fix it?”

“Probably not,” he admits. He tucks the toaster under his arm and adds, “So dinner and then appliance shopping for you? Do you want to hang on to this until you get a new one?”

“You can have it. And I was serious about the oil change too if you want.”

“Let’s start with dinner,” he tells me, and I nod, unable to stop smiling as we exchange numbers.

I watch as he walks out to his truck, and as he waves at me before he pulls out of the parking lot, a weird fluttery feeling takes root in my belly. It’s been so long since I’ve met a guy that’s interested me. But I’m actually really excited for dinner, and when my phone lights up with a text asking me for a date later this week, I’m hopeful that this could be the start of something real.

**“Reconstruction of the Heart” by Hannah Estabrook, Iowa (Prompt B)**

Shirley rolled over to slam her open palm against the blaring alarm clock. With a groan she turned to her back and looked across to the other side of the bed.

That side was perfectly made, as always. Her husband Keene never let his side of the bed go unkempt. He'd always been an organized man when it came to his things. His bed, his toolbox, his truck. Shirley lived more in the moment as evidenced by her bedside table covered in books, empty glasses, jars of lotion, and abandoned hair ties.

"Time to face the day." She muttered as she stood and stretched her arms above her head.

Downstairs in the kitchen she began brewing a pot of coffee and then grabbed two slices of bread from the bag on the counter. Both slices went in the toaster. The timer was set. And the lever was pulled.

Nothing.

The coils inside remained cold.

Shirley sighed and said, "Keene, I told you to fix this thing a while ago."

Aggravated, she unplugged the toaster and tore the slices from the slots to shove them back into the bag. "I'm going to have to fix this thing myself if I want it done." She said.

Keene was the kind of guy who tinkered and fixed things around their early 1900s home. An auto mechanic by trade, he knew more about the inner workings of machines than she ever would. However, this project had been put off for too long.

She grabbed the toaster off of the counter and slid on a pair of shoes before walking out to the garage where Keene kept his tools.

From the black and silver toolbox she opened a drawer labeled *screwdrivers* and took out one that looked like it would work to begin taking apart the toaster.

"Here we go."

An hour later the machine was gutted and stripped apart. Its parts strewn across the workbench like a disemboweled body.

Shirley sat down heavily on a nearby stool. "Now where do I begin with this?"

"Now you're going to see some metal 'pieces that look like they should slide down. Let me zoom in to show you. Now as a diy repairman..." The tinny voice that emitted from the video on her phone was gradually making Shirley livid. This had to be the third time that she had watched this video and she was nowhere closer to understanding how to put the toaster back together again. She had managed to screw the larger base pieces together, but the more intricate bits eluded her.

Cautiously she picked up a small screw and a piece of metal that looked like part of the heating element. "C'mon, go together. We can do this."

Deep in concentration, Shirley slowly put the toaster back together again with much trial and error. And finally, it was time to test if she had managed to fix the wiring related to the heating coils.

"Here goes nothing." She whispered as she plugged the toaster back in again, loaded two slices of bread, then pressed the lever.

And it popped right back up.

"What the?" She pressed the lever again. And again. And again. Each time it popped right back up. Shirley bit her lip in frustration and grabbed the toaster, one hand on each side, and ripped its cord out of the outlet and flung the offending machine across the white tile floor where it came apart in a shower of screws and flakes of metal.

Shirley sank to the floor; her back resting against the oak cabinets. She tried to blink away the tears at first, but it was to no avail. Large, rolling tears made their way down her cheeks and dripped to pool in the hollow of her throat. "Keene, I'm sorry. I couldn't do it." She sobbed.

"It was stupid to think that I could. You're the one who fixes things. But I'd asked you to fix this one thing a long time ago and I wanted toast and I...and I need you. I needed you to fix this."

Pulling out her phone, she stared at the lock screen image. It was her and Keene standing in front of the baby blue 1968 Ford Mustang that he had rebuilt. He had fully completed that project only two years ago. For a while she thought it'd never be done, but he pulled through and managed to win in the refurbished division at a local classic car convention. Now the car sat covered with a tarp in the garage. It was hard knowing that they'd never go to another car show again. That Keene would never fix anything again.

She swiped at her eyes with her sleeve. "I miss you Keene."

Later that day, long after the remains of the toaster had been swept up and thrown out, the nagging desire for toast hit once again. She couldn't fix a toaster, but she knew she could at least pick out a decent replacement.

In the home appliances aisle, Shirley scoured the shelves. At last she found one that was stainless steel, could hold up to four slices at a time and even had a bagel setting. It was perfect except for the fact that the only one left was high above on the top shelf.

She knew it wasn't the best idea. Why else would there be baby proofing tools to prevent this exact scenario? But she had climbed anyway. She had the toaster in hand when the shelf wobbled and she lost her balance, unfortunately landing on an employee who had rushed to help her.

"I'm so sorry! Here." She held out a hand.

"Uh, thanks." He said.

The employee wasn't not attractive with blonde hair, green eyes, and a smattering of light brown freckles over his nose.

"I'm Shirley."

"Marshall." He replied. "Good choice of toaster. I have the same one."

She couldn't help but smile at his nonchalance. She'd have to pick his brain about the bagel setting.

**“The Special Girl” by April Ammeter (85BA, 88JD) (Prompt B)**

Tony knew how to fix cars, not meals. But this girl was special. He was so smitten that before he could stop himself, he'd invited her to his apartment for dinner. She was too special to take to one of the hole-in-the-wall dumps and diners he frequented. And he didn't think he could afford the kind of place a girl like this deserved to go; one of those restaurants with too small portions at too high prices, serving “deconstructed” foods “infused” with unfamiliar but delicious flavors. Besides, Tony wanted her all to himself. He didn't want to run the risk of an overly attentive server or posh pack of diners stealing her attentions.

So here he was, in a mild state of panic.

Tony met Alyssa just three days earlier, but she was all he could think about. She'd driven her 2007 Camry into his repair shop six minutes before closing. He was dead tired and ready to yell “we're closed” to the driver but a girl sprang from the car apologetic, pathetic and utterly beautiful in a not too obvious way. “I know it's late,” she said, “but my car is making a horrible knocking sound and I'm afraid to drive it home. If you could PLEASE take a look, I'll love you forever,” she pleaded, hands clasped in hopeful prayer.

I'll love you forever. Tony turned the words over in his head. I'll love you forever. He knew she didn't literally mean it, but the way she said it was so endearing – and somehow genuine, not manipulative. Tony was undone. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and protect her for the rest of his life. “Uh, sure,” Tony stammered. “I'd be happy to take a look at it for you.” She squealed “oh THANK YOU!!” As she handed Tony the keys, he could have sworn she deliberately brushed her fingers across his palm. “My name is Alyssa, by the way.” Tony silently nodded and smiled.

Thirty minutes later, Tony emerged from the repair bay to inform Alyssa that her rod bearings were probably shot. He needed parts and it was a repair that couldn't be done that evening. She would need to leave her car for at least a day. Then he heard himself saying his name and impulsively offering her a ride home. Gah, he thought. Why did I do that? Most girls that looked like her would be wary. They would take one look at his truck with its hodgepodge of different colored panels, back away, and summon an Uber. Their eyes would drift to his hands with disdain for the grease they assumed was permanently imbedded in his cuticles and under his nails. They would be thinking to themselves the nerve of this guy. As if. Tony waited for a curt “no thank you” but instead, Alyssa grinned and enthusiastically said “that would be great, if it isn't too much trouble.”

She moved towards the truck that Tony's friends jokingly dubbed “The Headturner” and he watched in amazement as she easily pulled herself up and positioned her sandaled feet among the tools that lived in his passenger seat footwell. She was wearing a crisp white dress yet didn't even look at the seat to see if it was clean before she sat down. She looked directly at Tony, “you have a great smile.” This girl was special. And she was flirting with him.

Tony had been taking in every detail about Alyssa as she climbed in the truck. “I think you lost an earring,” he said. Alyssa's hands flew to her earlobes. She blushed, genuinely embarrassed. “No, they're both here. See -- this one is dangly but this one is a stud. It's a trend I thought I'd try,” she sheepishly admitted. “But to be honest, I'm more into football than fashion.” That was it. She wasn't just special, she just might be perfect.

So here was Tony, three days later, in a mild state of panic. The only thing he knew how to cook was steak. But the way he cooked it was unusual, to say the least. He used a toaster. Not a toaster oven, but a regular, albeit dedicated, pop up toaster. He called it “The Meat Toaster.” At one point he thought he could patent The Meat Toaster and make a fortune selling them to college dorm kids. But someone burst his bubble, opining that no university in its right mind would allow such a thing. Nevertheless, he swore by his Meat Toaster and frankly, had forgotten how to cook a steak any other way.

Looking at his Meat Toaster now, Tony slumped in shame. What would Alyssa think? Would she fake an illness or take a preplanned “emergency” call to extricate herself? Would he forever be known as “The Weird Meat Toaster Guy” when she and her friends shared bad date stories? As Tony considered these things, the doorbell rang. It was too late for a Plan B.

Tony straightened his shoulders. Meat Toaster steaks it would be. If Alyssa couldn’t appreciate the genius of the Meat Toaster, well then, maybe she wasn’t so special after all.

Tony answered the door and there she stood, beaming. His stomach fluttered. Why does she have to be so darn cute? He invited her in and offered her a drink. “I’ll just have a beer,” she replied. Of course, he thought, she’s special. Alyssa followed him into the kitchen and Tony knew he should offer her the carrots and Ranch he had planned to serve with drinks before dinner but he decided to just rip the Band Aid off. As he dropped two thin steaks into the Meat Toaster, he glanced sideways to gauge her reaction. Her eyes grew big and she flatly stated “Oh. My. God.” Here it comes, thought Tony. But Alyssa clapped her hands together in glee “I thought I invented The Meat Toaster!!!” Tony knew then that he would love her forever.

**“As Always” by Brian Strayer (81MBA, 81MS) (Prompt B)**

“Hey there Josh, how’s my best friend today?” Nick stood in the sunlit door of the small autoshop.

Josh looked up from the engine compartment of the Camry he was working on and gave a knowing smirk. “I know all too well what that greeting means. What’s the problem this time?”

“Duh. Why do you think I’m here? All I can tell you is there’s a loud rubbing sound when I turn left”, said Nick.

“Ya know, Nick, a better solution than coming here is to ditch your pain in the rear Jaguar or become a mechanic yourself.”

Nick laughed and said, “Why would I do that when I get such a good deal here?”

Josh sighed, saying, “Don’t push it. Me making the mistake of saying ‘best friends for life’ thirty years ago in high school won’t stand up in court. Anyway, park it over by that green Lexus and I’ll take a look later today.”

“Thanks man. By the way, Alix says she’s going to stop by today.”

Josh perked up and asked, “Really? Do you know why?”

“She needs some sort of favor. Fixing something I think. Her husband certainly isn’t any help.”

Josh responded with what he knew to be the right words, even though they lacked any feeling. “Maybe you should ease up on your brother-in-law. Brad has treated Alix well.”

“Sure, but he’s just so ‘meh’ and everything has to be logical. Boring comes to mind. Anyway, I gotta run. You still up for some axe throwing at that new bar tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll pick you up at six and we’ll grab dinner first.”

Nick turned and stepped out of the wide garage door into the sunlight. Josh walked slowly toward the door to feel what little breeze there was. As the breeze refreshed him, he allowed himself to remember the first time Nick’s little sister, Alix, asked him for help so many years ago. He knew it was an excuse for her to see him, but being a high school senior and her being three years younger, he was just too damn cool to take notice, or so he thought. His attitude had certainly changed years later when they were both in their 20s. Damn, she was perfect in every way. Just the sight of her back then made him feel he could achieve anything. Everything was fun with her, even a trip to the dry cleaners.

But all too quickly, like clockwork, the regrets hit his thoughts. Her words from so long ago still burned. “It was time for me to get married, and you weren’t around.” He turned and stepped swiftly back to the Camry.

As the hours passed, Josh tried to focus on his work but couldn’t avoid looking towards the door whenever he heard the slightest sound. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t seen Alix dozens of times

this year alone, but the thought of her needing to see him kindled a spark that he struggled to suppress.

And then there she stood in the doorway, lighting up the room with a smile unmatched by the sunlight behind her. Wearing an oversized t-shirt and mom jeans she proved she could still look great wearing anything. Aging's touch had been soft.

"Hey", said Josh.

"Hey", she offered back. "I hope I didn't catch you in the middle of something, but I guess that's a dumb thing to say since you're the busiest mechanic in town."

"Flattery will get you everywhere", Josh replied quickly. But he then worried about his words. Flirting always came easy for him with Alix, so he worked hard not to do it. And yet again he wondered, does this whole 'need to move on' process take a frickin' lifetime?!

Josh saw she had a box in her hands and asked, "What have you got there?"

Alix walked to the workbench near Josh and set the box down. "I know this may be a waste of time, and overly sentimental, but I found my grandma's old toaster. It was probably ancient even when I was a kid, but it brings back memories of being in her kitchen. She was always baking and probably drank 20 cups of coffee a day as she held court. I loved that kitchen and it always seemed like Grand Central Station on holidays with cousins, uncles and aunts running in and out. This toaster got lots of use and I thought it was the coolest thing when the toast would sometimes pop right out of the top. It's funny what we love as kids. Anyway, I plugged it in but it wouldn't heat up. I should be thankful it didn't burn the house down. I asked Brad to take a look at it, but his only suggestion was to throw it out. I guess I can't blame him for not feeling sentimental for something like this."

Josh picked up the toaster and held it gently, looking it over with admiration. It was now special to him as well. "These toasters were built like tanks and can certainly be fixed. I may need to find a YouTube video to help me do it right, but I'm sure I can get it working like new."

Alix smiled, "I knew I could count on you." She paused a moment, then added quietly, "As always".

Josh held her gaze for a brief moment and knew he'd be thinking about that moment for the rest of the day. Thirty years ago that gaze could always lead to something magical for him, but now it was out of reach, like looking through a school yearbook.

Alix broke the spell by saying, "I'm sorry, but I've gotta run and pick up Naomi at gymnastics."

Josh managed a polite, "Your youngest is quite the athlete."

As Alix walked away, Josh whispered his old mantra, "I'm glad you found a good man to marry, Alix.", but the words were just mechanical, and lacked all emotion.

**“Warming” by Jan Bozman (63BA) (Prompt A)**

The toaster was right where she left it. He never moved it. He dropped two slices of bread into the toaster slots, pushed down on the press handle, and waited. He stared at the toaster and listened to the coils heating up. He touched the sides of the toaster to feel the warmth and gave thanks for his daily bread. What was it about that toaster? She had left him in the middle of a North Dakota winter. It was almost springtime now and there was still no sign of her return. He spent the days in his auto shop repairing jeeps, motorcycles, old pickups, dust-covered tanker trucks, and off-road vehicles. He was an auto mechanic, but there were few cars in that harsh, rough land, and he had become the go-to for every other kind of vehicle.

He had met her in late spring when she came to visit a cousin. The snow of winter had melted, and the prairie was lush with tall, green grass. They needed jackets for long walks, but the cold was gone and warm weather was on its way. He was at work in his auto shop by 6:00 each morning. Mid-mornings, she walked by but only waved; she could see how busy he was. His customers took note of the new girl in town; he smiled and basked in her beauty. By the end of June, she began bringing a basket lunch every day. His hands were always greasy and dirty, but he scrubbed them with hand cleaner and soap while she unpacked the food she had prepared and placed it on a picnic table.

They decided on a summer wedding. It was a simple outdoor ceremony under a bright blue, cloudless sky, and they celebrated in the warmth of the sun. His business was booming. After all, he was the only auto mechanic for miles around. All the while, she spent the summer gardening. She had planted flowers and vegetables, and they thrived in the warm summer sun. At the end of the day, they took long walks on paths through the vast tallgrass prairie that surrounded the town.

The weather started to cool off in autumn. They needed jackets again for their evening walks, and when she brought lunch, they ate inside at his desk. She harvested the vegetables from her garden. There were more than they could use, and they shared them with neighbors as well as with his customers.

Then, a cold winter blizzard blasted the town with frigid winds and blanketed the prairie and streets with a foot of snow. Versatile that he was, the auto mechanic had winterized regular vehicles and started repairing snowmobiles. There were days of sub-zero temperatures, and she began to feel as dead as the flowers she had dried on the three-season porch. Fierce winds created chilling temperatures that precluded any thoughts of taking walks. Trekking from their house to the auto shop in the harsh, howling wind was overwhelming. Once she had tried it, and they walked home together. Upon entering the kitchen, she had walked to the toaster, depressed the handle, held her hands on the sides of the toaster, and warmed her fingers. The next day she was gone when the auto mechanic came home. He learned that she had taken the Greyhound bus at 10 that morning—the same Greyhound he had repaired the day before.

Each morning, as he makes his breakfast, he studies the toaster. He welcomes its warmth, remembers hers, and wonders if she will return. Patiently, he waits for the toast to pop up, hoping that one day the kitchen door will pop open, but her return is doubtful. The climate is one thing he cannot fix. However, he plans to keep all Greyhounds in good repair just in case.

**“Under Repair” by John Doetkott (12BA) (Prompt B)**

"I know I can fix it. I just need a little time to figure out how."

"You've been messing with that thing every night this week. Just let it go, Marv."

"Hey, if I can put a brand new Hemi in a '57 Thunderbird, I think I can fix a damn toaster."

"Oh, are they similar?" Sheryl needled. "Besides, when's the last time you put anything in anything?"

Marvin shot her a look. He sat with the toaster in front of him, his tools spread across the kitchen table as Sheryl stood by the sink, looking blankly out the window towards the driveway. He picked up a screwdriver as she gripped her cup of afternoon tea. This was the most interest she'd shown him in months, he thought.

"Why is it so important for you to fix that thing anyway? It's gotta be at least 20 years old and the only time you have toast is with a BLT—and you know your doctor said you shouldn't eat bacon anymore."

"I just want to fix it, okay?"

"I don't understand." Sheryl said, getting slightly more exasperated. "You can get a nice one at Target for like 25 bucks. Let's just buy a new one."

"I can't do that."

"Well, why not?!"

"Damn it!" Marvin shouted suddenly, smacking the table with his palm.

Sheryl whirled around in surprise. As he gathered himself, she saw something in his eyes she hadn't noticed before.

"Don't you remember when we got this?" he asked, almost pleading.

As she looked down at the toaster he held in his hands, she was surprised to see Marvin was wearing his wedding ring. He always took it off at the shop because he didn't want to get grease on it; an old mechanic's habit he usually kept up when working around the house. But today, there it was. The band as golden as ever.

As she stared at it, Sheryl remembered.

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The big day was still more than a month away when she found the gift box tucked inside the porch of their rundown duplex.

"Someone dropped off our first wedding present!" Sheryl exclaimed as she burst through the door.

They opened it together at the kitchen table and beamed at their shiny new silver toaster.

"I guess we're a real married couple now," Marvin said, taking Sheryl into his arms. They held each other close, both giddy with anticipation for their life ahead.

The toaster would follow them to their next apartment, closer to the lake, and then their first home.

It was the only thing on the kitchen counter the day they brought their baby boy home from the hospital. They named him Joshua.

The first thing Josh learned to cook was "Marvin's Famous PB&J," which was only famous for being toasted and nothing more. It was Josh's favorite.

The day he left for college, Sheryl asked Josh if he wanted to take it with him, but he declined. Apparently, toasters weren't allowed in the dorms.

It wouldn't even be a year before those haunting red and blue lights came up the driveway and through the kitchen window, dancing devilishly across the toaster's dulling silver surface. The young officer explained that Josh had been in an accident and wouldn't be coming home.

For weeks, Sheryl stayed in bed weeping. Marvin would bring her whole wheat toast with just a dab of butter. It was all she could keep down.

Eventually, they sold the house and moved to the next town over for a fresh start, though it never felt like they got it.

There were many nights Sheryl sat at the kitchen table staring at that toaster until 4 a.m., waiting for Marvin to come home from the bar. Or wherever he was.

It still had the dent from when he threw it across the room, furious to discover Paul from Sheryl's office had become more than a friend. On at least one occasion.

And yet, here it still was. Their toaster. A little worse for wear, perhaps. But not beyond repair.

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"Oh, yes," Sheryl said quietly. "I remember now."

As she looked into Marvin's eyes, she finally saw the quiet desperation of a man clinging to the only hope and love he had left.

"I can't just throw it away, Sher. Not after all this time," Marvin said. "I want to fix it. I want it to work."

Sheryl sighed, and then she smiled.

"Here," she said, sitting down next to him. "Let me help."

Sheryl gently took the toaster from his hands and picked up a screwdriver.

Marvin held back a tear as he watched her fiddle and poke at nothing in particular. It was clear she had no idea what she was doing, but god he loved her for trying. He loved her with his whole heart.

After a moment, Sheryl asked, "Do you remember when Josh burned his hand on this thing?"

"I told that boy a million times not to play around in the kitchen, but did he listen?"

"Did he *ever* listen?" Sheryl chuckled.

"No, he did not," Marvin said, shaking his head and cracking a small smile. "Do you remember the time he tried making you breakfast in bed?"

"Mother's Day. He was six," Sheryl said promptly. "I spent the rest of the day cleaning the kitchen and washing orange juice out of our sheets."

"Well, I did teach him how to treat a lady."

Sheryl laughed.

As they talked, they soon forgot about the project in front of them. They talked like they hadn't in years, sitting there all afternoon and long into the evening, recalling favorite stories and filling in each other's memories. They talked about life and everything that makes it worth living.

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The next morning, Sheryl awoke to the sounds of Marv fumbling around the kitchen as the distinct smell of bacon, eggs, and freshly made toast wafted through the air.