

## Featured Stories

1. Love Endures by Ben Headlee
  2. Secrets at the Bottom of the Pool by Chase D. Cartwright
- 

### Love Endures

#### Ben Headlee

Hey mom. It's ten o'clock in the morning. I'm sitting in an uncomfortable beige hospital chair hoping that you'll read this letter when you wake up. I know it hasn't been easy for you lately. I also know that if you could speak right now you'd be reading me the riot act for not coming home to visit more often. It's probably a good thing that the doctors have you so hopped up on pain meds. You know that I've never been the superstitious type. It's been an odd few days at the farmhouse. What you're going to read might sound crazy, but right now I just need you to keep an open mind.

I came as soon as I got the call about your fall in the bathtub. After what happened to Dad last year... Well, let's just say the wound is still fresh. When I arrived at the hospital you were already asleep, so I decided to go back and check on the old farmhouse. Memories of Dad came flooding back to me while walking past the silos down to the lower field. I had just enough time to skip a few rocks in Salmon Creek before the sun went down. Luckily I still had my old key, so I figured I'd spend the night - for old time's sake. All through the night I could barely sleep on account of the scratching sound echoing throughout the house, like a few mice had settled inside the walls.

The next day I spent speaking with the insurance company about your slip. Two hours turned into eight, and before I knew it, it was dark out. Remembering the mice, I set a few peanut butter traps around the kitchen to catch those little vermin. And what did I find when I woke up? Every one of those traps had been set off, but not a lick of peanut butter was eaten! On top of that, four or five cabinets were hanging open, like some thieving lowlife had snuck in and gone through the place! I must have turned the house upside down looking for Dad's old baseball bat. I was determined to be ready for a fight.

That third night, right when it got dark out, I grabbed the bat and quietly waited in the pantry for the intruder. Then I heard it - a soft scratching followed by quiet footsteps. My heart thumped hard in my chest like a drum. I took a long, deep breath and rushed out to the kitchen like a wild hog. To my shock, there hunched over in front of me was Dad's ghost, frantically rummaging through the silverware drawer.

He looked just like I remembered him - same solid build with a balding head and white goatee, only now he was surrounded by a thick, blue haze. He paid me no mind and kept checking every

single drawer and cabinet in the kitchen. My whole body went cold. All I could even think to do was stand there with my mouth hanging wide open like an idiot.

He moved to the living room, which is kind of ironic if you think about it, and overturned every couch cushion, quietly drew back every curtain, and started sweeping his hands under the old green recliner. After a few minutes he continued his search through the sliding double doors to the guest bedroom, with me following behind, speechless. I stood there, still in dumb shock, and started taking deep breaths to calm my nerves. Of all the things I've wanted to say to him this past year, the only thing I could muster up was simple: I miss you, Dad. Mom misses you, too.

I remembered standing in front of his casket right after the funeral thinking of all the questions I still had for him - questions I didn't even think to ask until it was too late. What happened to him in the Great War? What were my grandparents like? How did you and him meet? Wouldn't you know it, as soon as I got the guts to try asking him anything he walked straight out of the room.

Within seconds of entering the bathroom he was on his hands and knees frantically reaching behind the tub. You remember that serious, determined look he gets. I'd only ever seen him like this a few times before, so I got down on all fours and started helping him look around. Something told me that I didn't need to know exactly what we were looking for - that I'd know it when I saw it. As the two of us scanned the floor, I couldn't hold it any longer - the words came pouring out of me. I told dad how hard the last year had been. How I hadn't been back home since the funeral. How I'd prayed that my young'un on the way would be a boy so he could share his grandpa's name. How his absence left a gaping hole in our hearts that, even a year later, had failed to heal.

Dad let out a deep sigh of relief and stood up in my peripheral vision. I looked over and, resting in his palm, was your gold wedding ring. That's when it hit me - you must have taken it off before getting into the bathtub, and I'd bet it got knocked off the counter when you slipped. Getting to see that proud smile of his one more time brought back all the tears I'd been holding onto this past year. He grinned wide as he stretched out his hand, dropped the golden ring in my palm, and vanished.

I've given it some thought, and it finally makes sense to me. It's like that old cross stitch on the mantle with the verse from Corinthians - Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I believe Dad was watching out for you - making sure that, wherever you were, you had your wedding ring. The last thing he'd want is for some other fella making moves on his gal. I've gone to spend some time at his grave this morning, and then I'll be back at the hospital this afternoon to get that ring on your finger where it belongs. It's what Dad would have wanted. Love you, mom

A-----

## **Secrets at the Bottom of the Pool**

**Chase D. Cartwright**

I never knew how to live, but I was inquisitive, and I thought that that must be as good a way as any. When I was seven years old, my brother ran away from home. He was a product of my mom's first marriage and therefore considerably older than myself. The last thing I heard from my brother was a phone call. I called him to see where he was. He just told me, "I can't stay in that place anymore. I was suffocating." When I asked him why, he just said he didn't know how to be happy there, and we never heard from him again.

When I thought of that conversation, I thought of the times we played in the public pool splashing each other and laughing our heads off. I thought of the time that David Stradler pushed me off the slide, and my brother came to my rescue. I thought of the times that he would buy me ice cream after school or make fun of Mrs. Eisner's lisp. I thought of all these times and wondered how my brother could have never felt happy, how all of those times were just lies.

After he left, my parents started fighting more. They tried to hide their fights from me, but I could hear the yells through our walls. My mom would always check on me after their arguments to make sure that I was asleep, but I always just closed my eyes so she wouldn't know the difference. She'd sneak into my room and tuck my blankets under me, being extra careful not to wake me.

One night, when I had the flu, she came into my room with a tray of chicken noodle soup, a can of Sprite, and a packet of Pop-Rocks. She gave me this meal every time I was sick and said, "The Soup and Sprite will make you feel better. The Pop-Rocks are just for fun." She said, everyone deserves to have fun at least once a day. Before she left, I asked, "How do you be happy?" She paused stupefied for an answer. With a sigh, she said, "Just take it one day at a time." She finished tucking me in and left.

That was her advice, so I listened to it. I went to school and focused on just one day at a time. I tried not thinking about tomorrow or anything else, just what was immediately ahead. Life started feeling a little easier, but after a while I started worrying about what would happen at night. Would I hear my parents fighting again? Would I think of my brother? Then I worried about what would happen at lunch. I started worrying about the next hour. Soon, the minutes started choking me, and I felt trapped again.

Again I asked the question, "How do I be happy?" This time I asked my dad.

He said, "You gotta fight. Fight no matter how hard it gets. Then fight some more."

So I fought. When Susie Stouffer made fun of me for wearing glasses, I punched her in the nose. I got a detention, and the principal talked to me for 45 minutes about how I couldn't solve my problems with violence. So I asked the principal, "How do I be happy?" She said, "Try as hard as you can, and be the best person you can be."

So I tried. I worked hard in school. I joined the volleyball team. I made friends with the lonely kids who hung out behind the bleachers. And, I kept asking the question, "How do I be happy." I started asking everyone I met. I'd ask and write their responses on post-it notes that I kept in my

pocket. Then when I'd go home I'd take out the post-it notes and write everything down in a small notebook that I kept at the bottom of my desk.

My best friend told me to follow my heart. A high school senior told me to get rich. My math teacher told me to get married and raise a family with a white picket fence. My guidance counselor told me to do whatever makes me feel energized. My grandma told me food is the key to anyone's heart. My Sunday school teacher told me to think, 'What would Jesus do?' I tried listening to everyone as much as possible.

Asking people became a compulsion of mine. I felt such joy in asking people. Their responses felt like I was learning a deep secret of the world. Not only that, but when I asked people, they seemed so fascinated. It was like I was the first person to talk to them in their whole lives. They wanted to share their secrets. Somehow it seemed to validate everything they had become. I filled the first page of my notebook with these maxims in no time and started on another.

I started dating a boy my sophomore year of high school. His name was Stewart Harper. He was on the chess team and had wavy blonde hair that I liked to touch. I was scared to ask him the question. We dated for two years before I asked him. He told me, "We should get as far away from this place as possible." We lived in a small town in Iowa, and he was always complaining about how there was nothing to do. He said he wanted to go to New York were the city never slept.

When he told me to get as far from here as possible, I broke up with him on the spot. I moved to New York and went to Humboldt State University and worked part-time in the customer service department of a large grocery store.

I kept asking the question. My college advisor told me to major in whatever I was naturally good in. Someone on the bus told me to find someone who loves me for being me. A cafeteria worker told me to avoid the cottage cheese. I had completed my first notebook by this time and put it in a milk crate.

I liked studying the patterns in people's answers. Old women seemed to have the best advice. College students liked to make jokes out of it. Kids usually gave simple answers like, "Eat ice cream."

Not all the advice was good. The president of my sorority told me to streak through a hotel. When I did, I was arrested for public indecency. I felt so stupid sitting in the back of the officer's squad car. He could tell I was embarrassed by the experience so he tried comforting me by saying that when he was my age, he got drunk and rode his motorcycle into a police officer's parked car. The cop was so nice, it made him want to join the force. I told him about my notebook and asked him the question. "Do whatever gives you the best story... Even if you get arrested for it," he winked.

I spent the next two hours in a holding cell at the police station. There were two other people in the cell with me. One was a drunk lady singing to herself, so I asked her. In a voice so the whole station could hear she said, "I don't give a damn about nothing." The other person in the jail

turned to me and said, “By that, she means don’t do drugs.” The president of my sorority posted my bail, and I was released. I went straight home and wrote down everything.

An old man in a retirement home said, “Don’t listen to anyone’s advice.” The singer of my favorite band said, “You are your own authority.” My doctor told me to stay healthy and come in for regular check-ups. Everything went into the notebooks.

Sometimes the advice contradicted each other. For instance, a tired looking mom at the grocery store said, “Don’t have kids”, but a mom at the park said, “Kids give the best joy.” One of my sociology teachers said people need communities to survive, but my marketing teacher said you’ve got to do everything on your own. I learned to compromise in these occasions.

As I asked more and more people, the world started to look more vibrant. I marveled at all the interesting people and the unique lives that they had led and would lead. My mind raced at the thought of all the connections of these people. I wondered if they talked about me with each other. Or maybe it made them think about asking other people for their secrets. Or if my question made them reevaluate what was actually important to them.

I soon remembered what sorrow felt like when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. I spent every moment I could with her. She never liked talking about how she was doing, so I would tell her about class or my job. I’d tell her about my notebooks and what advice I liked the most. She always told me to be careful trusting so many strangers.

We’d watch bad movies at the hospital while she had her chemotherapy. I brought her pop rocks and Sprite every time I visited, and we’d laugh our heads off as we tried to find the dumbest movies on the TV.

She died at the age of 53 and left me a note saying that no matter how hard her life was, she wouldn’t change a thing because she got to be my mother. I wept at the side of her coffin until my father and his wife carried me away to the car. This was the only day since I was seven that I didn’t ask at least one person the question. It was hard to keep asking when everything seemed to inevitably fail. Each day, the memory of my mom slowly faded more and more. She was always there, but she was just a little quieter each day as if to tell me to live my life.

One of my favorite pieces of advice came shortly after her death. It was from my favorite professor, Dr. Laramie. He was a literature professor and had a habit of telling stories with everything he said. He told me his grandfather recited this story to him when he was a teenager. “There was an old farmer who decided to kill himself. He went out to his tool shed, grabbed an axe and planned on sticking the axe through his skull. But, he thought he would go to his favorite spot: a hill under an oak tree that looked over his whole farm.

His rationale was that if he saw something beautiful, it might remind him why life would be worth living. So, he walked to the end of his farm and stood under this tree. He looked out and saw the most beautiful sunset over the tree line. The wind blew through the endless perfectly straight lines of corn. The air was warm against his skin. He looked out at this marvelous sight and felt... nothing.

He was devastated. The most gorgeous sight he ever beheld was nothing more than trees and corn. So he lifted the axe over his head, ready to bring it down into his skull. Right before he could put it through his eye though, a wasp landed on his ear and stung him on the ear drum. It was the most painful thing he ever experienced. His ear swelled up instantly, and the pain was so excruciating that he dropped the axe, went to the doctor, and forgot about everything.”

My professor then said, “If you want to be happy, remember that we get to where we are because of our pain. Not in spite of it.”

And so the questions continued. A transvestite told me to never let the bastards get me down. A comedian told me to never use small talk. A nurse told me to do something different every day. Into the notebook everything went until the crate was full of notebooks with these words of wisdom.

Sometimes when I asked, people would just give simple one word responses like respect, fear, love, resiliency, loyalty, friendship, independence, justice, God, faith, trust. I liked these answers. They were simple yet so profound. They didn’t help, but they were interesting.

When I graduated from college, I didn’t feel compelled to do anything. I knew that I was supposed to find a job, but whenever I thought of working, I felt suffocated. When I asked my dean about this, he said that I should do something that no one else could offer. He then told me that I was a born student, always asking questions, enjoying the search for knowledge more than the knowledge itself. He said that I should continue to ask questions. “Learn about the world,” he said.

So, I gathered what little money I could find and set off. I found an old suitcase in my grandfather’s attic. I filled it with a few pairs of clothes and squeezed as many of my notebooks in as I could. I then threw away anything I owned that didn’t bring me any kind of joy (a tip from a tv show host). Everything I kept went into storage. First, I took a bus to Alaska and hiked through the snow-covered forests. I then went south and swam in the beaches of Chile. I drank coffee in the cafés of France. I watched the animals run in Madagascar. I climbed mountains in New Zealand. I ate with the street vendors in Japan. I marched in protests in Russia.

I saw rivers run through the lands like arteries pumping life into the cities. I saw jungles waving a thousand hands in the wind. Mountains stood tall above the world. I saw the still beating heart of life itself. I learned new languages and talked with new people. Each had their own stories to tell. They told me fables and jokes. They made me their favorite foods and told me everything they said was worth knowing.

The thought of my brother popped in my head, and I wondered if this is what he did when he left. Is this what he found? It was a feeling of such closeness.

I kept filling my notebooks, more now than ever. A farmer in Indonesia told me that happiness is acceptance. A librarian in England told me everything you need to know is in books. A hostel owner in Sweden said sharing was the secret of happiness.

Sometimes people would not tell me anything when I asked them the question. They would just hand me something and tell me that was the secret. I collected these things and made notes about them. I was handed a copy of *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Odyssey*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Kama Sutra*, *The Bhagavad Gita*. Someone just handed me a Queen piece from a chess set. Someone handed me a fistful of dirt. Someone just played me a song on a guitar. Someone handed me a copy of the dictionary and said, "Everything one can know is in this book, you just need to know how to arrange the words."

In my travels, I found my way to the Vatican where I talked with a priest who told me that to find happiness, one must only listen to the Lord, and he will answer. So I read the Bible. I listened to pastors, reverends, preachers, imams, monks, rabbis, and any other religious scholars I could find. I hung on to every word they said. They told me about salvation and forgiveness and promised lands. I went to bed thinking of these things, marveling at the glory of their strength within the world. I'd go to bed looking at the heavens almost seeing God himself in the stars and the blossoming flowers around me. I began reading more. I read the Torah, the Quran, the Vedas. Anything I could get my hands on, I tried to consume until I could see God in everything I did.

During this time, I had never felt better, but pain still followed me. I spent many nights hungry begging for a meal or a home to sleep in. Sometimes I was scared, and I worried about what the future would bring. But, I read my notebooks when I was scared. They gave me strength to hold on for that extra second I needed. I found that people were generally kind hearted and willing to help at least a little. My faith in these people got me through the hard nights when my ribs poked against my skin and I barely had the strength to walk. I always found hope in people.

A Buddhist Monk told me to get rid of any notions of desire. A fisherman told me that anger is the sign of a weak person. A hitchhiker told me, "You should always focus on your senses when you do something. What do you see, smell, feel, taste, hear? Answer those questions every few minutes, and then you will find happiness."

Sometimes people would recite quotes to me. "In the desert, no one tells you not to drink the rocks." "Find your gold, and sit on it." "The only thing you have to fear is fear itself." "The line dividing good and evil cuts through the center of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

When I was 30, I found myself in a beach in Greece. I met a man named Aalee Mohamed. He told me he was the director of a nearby refugee camp. When I asked him the question, he refused to answer it. Instead, he asked me what I thought. I told him the secret to happiness is just asking for it. He said, "Then that's what it is." Aalee and I talked for hours. He told me that his family had been killed in a bombing. He even showed me pictures of his home which was only rubble. He showed me pictures of his mom and dad and his three sisters. All of them died in the bombing. "Everyone in the camp was escaping the same history," Aalee said. "They all lost someone and were fighting to hold on to whatever little they still had left."

When I asked him how he was able to move on with his life, he told me to look out at the horizon. He said, “Look at the horizon. Do you see a line between the sky and the water?” I nodded. “That’s an illusion. There is no line there. There is only the sky and the water.

This moment right now does not exist. Just like the horizon, it’s an illusion. Everything is past and future. There is no present. There are things that happened and things that will happen. No matter what seems to be happening in the moment, it is already over. There is only the future ahead.” He said that was why he worked at the camp. People in the camp have nothing, yet they fight. They fight because they think the future will hold something great for them. That is the only place I would ever want to work.

Aalee took me to the camp and told me about everyone there. The camp was in an abandoned soccer stadium. Concession stands were converted into offices for the managers. Tents lined the field and the hallways. Each person’s bed was just a pile of blankets on the hard cement floor. There were thousands of people pushing past each other, each with his or her own agenda and purpose. Most were emaciated from malnutrition. There were only a few medical personnel and even less medical equipment. Children’s shoes were tired and falling apart. Each citizen was advised to avoid going into the city to prevent any issues with the local citizens. Heat often failed in the showers and electricity was always blacking out.

He told me that there were camps like this all over the country in abandoned sport stadiums and hotels. At night, he said working was the hardest. You could hear a thousand crying voices with no one to answer them.

Everyone here was trying to get asylum papers to go to other countries where they could start new lives. Aalee’s job consisted of about everything. I saw him counsel mothers who were suicidal. He entertained the children. He advised fathers how to get asylum papers signed quicker. He provided hygiene supplies. He made repairs to the stadium. He sent letters to other countries pleading for assistance. He never seemed to stop working. His optimism was inspiring.

I soon got a job helping at the camp in any way I could. In exchange, I was able to sleep in a small office and got two meals a day. It wasn’t much, but I felt like this was a place I needed to be.

I kept asking the question. Someone told me you need to keep dreaming. Someone told me no matter what you do, make sure it’s for someone else. He said you can’t be happy if you only serve yourself. Someone else told me, “Never forget where you come from.”

I sort of felt embarrassed asking about happiness in a place like this. I felt like I didn’t deserve to be happy. After all, why did I deserve anything more than these poor souls? In my life I had so many opportunities to do great things, and yet, we all ended up in the same spot. These people had nothing and had no choice in what was given to them. But, asking the question was part of who I was at this point, and I couldn’t just stop.

Aalee and I started spending more and more time with each other. We started dating; although, we never had much time alone. Most of his time was spent working for the refugees. We

communicated mostly through telepathic looks. When he smiled, we were making jokes with each other. When his eyes fell to the ground, I consoled him with just a subtle nod.

When we finally did get a break, we met each other in our small dorms and we'd hold each other as we talked about our day. We were always careful not to talk about the hard parts. It was too difficult to rehash bad memories. The most we said about them was, "I'm glad I had you to come home to."

At this point, I had a pile of notebooks at the back of my room, and I always had a trash can full of used post-it notes. People told me, "Ignorance is bliss." "Appreciate the little things." "Money is just paper."

One night, Aalee held me in our dorm. He asked me to marry him. In a fit of ecstatic tears, I yelled, "Yes." But, he told me, he didn't want to get married at the camp. He said I deserved a nice wedding. I told him I didn't care. I would get married anywhere, anytime as long as I was with him. He refused to listen to me, and we flew back to the U.S. We got married in a church near my home town. It was small but nice. I told my family all about everything I had done, and they marveled at my stories and repeatedly exclaimed how brave I must have been.

Aalee and I honeymooned in a small island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean called Ponta Delgada. The staff that worked in our hotel told me the secret to happiness was treating yourself. A neighboring vacationer told us to drink to celebrate, drink to regret, and drink to have a story worth telling. A citizen of the island said, "Make your own happiness."

We returned to the United States and bought a home in Minnesota after hearing that it was supposed to be the happiest state. I remembered someone telling me once to raise a family in a house with a white picket fence. So, we bought a house we couldn't afford with a white picket fence. We had two children named Annabelle and Chafik. There was a pool in the back of the house where we swam in the summers as a family. We sat next to the pool holding our children and talking about the families we knew from camp and wondering where they went.

Aalee got a job as a history teacher at a local high school and I worked managing a homeless shelter. We struggled to pay bills. We occasionally fought over some banal thing. Sometimes we felt lonely or mad, but we always came back to holding each other in our bed.

I had built a bookshelf for all of my notebooks which now occupied a considerable portion of our bedroom wall. I still listened to more and more answers. People told me, "Live like it was your last day on Earth." People told me, "Try to learn something new every day." People told me to forgive whenever I could. I cherished every word.

When I was 47, there was a bad thunder storm. Aalee was working late so I started preparing dinner. I got a phone call from the Sheriff's department. An Officer Rollins told me that Aalee was hit by a drunk driver and was taken to the emergency room. He was already gone when I got to the hospital. I saw him in the hospital bed completely still, and I collapsed at his side in tears. I kept crying out, "You can't take him. You can't take him. Come back home to me." But he was

already gone. Again I felt the same feelings I had strived my whole life to avoid. I was alone, sad, angry, and helpless.

Annabelle and Chafik were too young to fully understand the situation. I tried to be strong for them, but I would constantly be hiding in the bathroom to cry until I could find the strength to keep going.

I looked at my bookshelf and ran my hand along the aluminum spiral bindings. Pulling out random books, I read through the notes: happiness is all about perception; friendship; love yourself; find something worth fighting for; remember where you come from; screw it all; there is no meaning; dance once a day; treat yourself; pray for the devil; have faith in God; God works in mysterious ways; raise a family; challenge yourself; just be; fight the power; don't be a part of the problem; you are not a shadow of someone else; fight war, not wars; be kind; coexist; practice, practice, practice; get a dog; eat ice cream; stand up for yourself; do the unexpected; listen to beautiful music; learn from your mistakes; do something that gives you a good story; don't let the bastards get you down; never be afraid to ask questions; do something worthwhile; never listen to advice; don't worry about what others think of you; be weird; remember that life goes on; don't be too hard on yourself; do unto others as you would have others do unto you; desire is the root of suffering; anger is weakness; forgive your enemies; appreciate the little things; time is an illusion; serve others; protect those who can't protect themselves; have big dreams; never look a gift horse in the mouth; birds of a feather flock together; the only constant in life is change; be beautiful; be open-minded; never smile at a crocodile; you control your own fate; ignorance is bliss; set goals for yourself; take time for yourself; dress for the job you want to have; watch the sunset; read; love; teach; do the best you can.

I read everything and felt suffocated once again. I threw the books on the ground and screamed in anger. I tipped the bookshelf over and watched the endless pages of advice taunting me. I collapsed in tears surrounded by a million pieces of advice and yet knowing that nothing held any truth.

I asked the question one last time to my baby girl, Annabelle, while we sat at the end of the pool. My feet dangled in the cool blue water, and I picked her tiny body up and through tear-filled eyes I said, "How do I be happy?" Annabelle looked at me with plump red cheeks and a quaff of hair drooping over her forehead. She reached for my nose with her pudgy fingers and let out a little giggle.

I sat her down in my lap and opened my notebook to fill the next line. My pencil froze just above the paper. I sighed and my eyes watered as a gust of wind blew. The notebook fell out of my hands and landed in the clear blue water of the pool.

The pages absorbed the water and turned a putrid shade of gray. The black ink sank to the bottom of the pool like an inverted plume of smoke. The answers all disappeared in the shimmering waves. I looked back down at Annabelle who smiled up at me. I clenched my teeth fighting the urge to break down into tears. I watched the notebook in the water for what seemed like hours.

There were a thousand voices in that notebook but now, suddenly, everything was quiet. It was absolutely silent. There was only the chirping of the grass hoppers in the rustling prairie grass. The birds were singing their chorus, and clouds were glowing orange against the sun that hovered just above the earth. I sat in the total stillness of everything. In that stillness, I felt God himself sitting next to me. So, I asked, "How do I be happy?"

Then I knew.

## Featured Poems

1. Broken Teeth by Dan Fox
  2. Accepting Less by Dan Fox
  3. Coming on Strong by Dan Fox
- 

### **Broken Teeth** **Dan Fox**

"I'm sorry" I scream when the truth's too hard

When sobriety is inopportune

And when your name's been erased

You never say what's in your heart

Only what's on your mind

I swear I want to hear the real you

And what you never mean

If you can't stop me from taking my shot

And I can't stop you from missing yours

If you won't look me in the eye but only below the waist

If I can't strike your smiling lips to break your teeth

Then stop this now before I lose too much

And leave me behind in your graveyard of forgotten fucks

---

**Coming On Strong**  
**Dan Fox**

Stupid thoughts and addled paranoia  
From neon signs of hallucinogenic lights  
Crippling and scary, but freeing in time  
And words that qualify as whispers  
Thank you for that and for just two more  
As weekend warriors become the just of friends  
Silly words and nonsense laughing  
And a shaky hand holding the air  
Let's rock 'n roll all night  
And listen to stumbling ghosts  
Read the same six lines before giving up  
And have sex with the memory of it all  
Hooray! Hooray! And like ashes we all fall down  
Willkommen weary traveler  
Rest your eyes, head, and throat  
For another day is coming on strong

**Accepting Less**

**Dan Fox**

Laughter falling from cracked tooth grins  
And off-key songs of unintelligible noise

Lifted spirits like sky high fireworks  
All so deliciously confusing  
Too fast, too soon, and always on time  
A heartbeat stutter-stepping a staccato beat  
Racing thoughts, strange dreams  
And the cutest smile to light a room  
Silly me for wanting more  
And stupid you for accepting less  
I'm grateful for the time and touches  
That never come, always come  
You're not you when you're with me  
And I've never been less myself  
Spin around, kiss me on the ground  
So our thoughts can vanish like feelings  
It's not quite 11 but too late all the same  
And the sun will crash in all too soon  
Be here now, just for a moment  
While I've never been less myself

---

# Featured Essays

## 1. Homecoming by Marc Bauer

---

### Homecoming

#### Marc Bauer

For my senior year homecoming dance, I took a girl I'm going to call Kim. Kim was a sophomore and I didn't know her that well. Looking back, I don't think I said two words to her before asking her to the dance. We had band class together, and we had mutual friends there, but that was about it.

About a month before homecoming, one of Kim's friends, Hailey, was helping Kim and their other friend, Maxine, hunt for dates. Hailey and Maxine both became "one of the guys" in my group of friends when we all played tennis together in the summer. Hailey was a chubby theater geek, who seemed to only talk about musicals, but I thought she was cool. She was more mature than her friends, and we shared the same life motto of, "Other people suck." Plus, she had this playful laugh that I could always get out of her, even when I wasn't trying. I would have gladly asked her to the dance, but she already had a date.

Instead, Hailey pushed hard for me to go with Maxine, but Maxine looked too much like a dude with her broad shoulders and large chin. She was also a loudmouth, one of those people that doubled over laughing at every little thing. And she wore sweatpants. A lot. Like every day a lot. I just told Hailey, "No thanks."

As uninterested as I was in taking Maxine, as the date of the dance approached, I couldn't help but wonder if I made a mistake. I had never had a girlfriend in my life, and the thought of even talking to girls, outside of class projects, terrified me. I was seventeen years old and had yet to even experience my first kiss.

But dances were different. It was one of the few places where *everyone* was pressured to bring a date. It was okay to hold a girl's hand and eat dinner with her and dance with her and take pictures with her, because *everyone* was doing it. The dance was two weeks away and I threw away a chance to go with a girl I knew would say "yes." So, at the time, sweatpants or not, rejecting Maxine seemed like a major misstep. But as Hailey reminded me the next day, I could still ask Kim.

I found her at her locker on my way to band, and for the first time, I really saw her. Her face was kind of mousey, and her blonde hair was stringy, but she had these angelic, icy-blue eyes that drew me in. She was barely five feet tall, and for some odd reason, that did it for me, too. Maybe it was disarming, because I ditched my usual insecure manner, and marched right over.

I leaned on the locker next to hers. “Kim?”

Her eyes darted up, and her shoulders drew back. Only then did I realize how menacing I must have been, a guy she barely talked to, towering a foot above her.

“Do you have a date to homecoming?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

I grinned, “Well, do you want to go with me?”

She looked down and away. “I don’t...Can I get back to you?”

My face dropped and my confidence shattered. I managed to nod and said, “Yeah, sure.”

I drifted off, my stomach churning, wondering, *What the hell just happened?* I was at the mercy of a five-foot, ninety-pound, fifteen-year-old girl.

Kim must have felt the need to run my proposal by her friends first, because a group of half-pint Barbies gathered around Kim at the front of the band room. I probably should have felt flattered, having half-a-dozen girls talking about me, but I wasn’t. Seeing them all huddled, whispering, snickering, it was the same reaction I got from my family when I was seven and I asked my thirteen year old cousin if she’d marry me. Suddenly, I was a child again, being *cute* and *adorable* for asking something ridiculous. When they dispersed, Hailey came over to me as some sort of representative.

“She said she’ll go with you.” Hailey said.

It was very middle school of Kim. I forced a smile to Hailey and spaced out in my seat in the back of the room. Yes, I finally had a date to homecoming, but I had a pit in my stomach that left me feeling cheated.

*It’ll be fun*, I told myself. *At least the hard part’s over.*

I didn’t hear from Kim the rest of the week, which didn’t really bother me because our paths never crossed, and we were going to the dance just as friends. But my mom was nagging that homecoming was a week away, and we had yet to discuss the minutia of: outfit colors, flower colors, picture locations or dinner plans.

We had band practice on the football field that Friday. I always found field practices to be surreal. During the game, with a whole rowdy crowd dressed in blue and gold, the stadium would be full of adrenaline, tradition, and community. But in practices, we were marching on an empty field and playing to an empty set of stands, and it felt so lackluster.

I found where Kim was on the field, and I made it a point to stand by her. I turned and opened my mouth to needle her about our plans, when she beat me to the punch.

“We should probably figure that stuff out,” she giggled. “Are you excited?”

“Of course!” I said.

It was the first time she seemingly enjoyed talking to me. I chuckled back and gave her my phone number.

We texted back and forth that night, mostly talking about band, our favorite songs, and what our other classes were like. She enjoyed my cracks about how our conductor’s paunch made him look pregnant, and how our terrible drumline should march themselves down a ravine. It was fun and went smoothly, especially since neither of us really knew the other, but when I asked about her dress color, Kim stopped responding. I wasn’t all that worried because we both needed to get ready for band, and I knew I would see her at the game.

Except I didn’t see her. I looked, and asked around, but no one knew where she was. Hailey told me she was texting Kim before the game, too, and just like with me, Kim stopped responding. It waned on me. Was it possible that this was an elaborate Turing test to prove my humanity, or that at any moment Rod Serling was going to chime in with an on-the-nose narration straight out of the *Twilight Zone*? I hoped so, because at least that would explain it. I couldn’t help but wonder, *Who was this girl, really?*

I spent my Saturday calling Kim. I left her four voicemails, but I didn’t get so much as a text back. My mom had her own desperation that didn’t help.

She walked in every hour and asked, “Well, did you hear anything?”

“No, nothing!” I said.

She called Kim’s mom, badgering her to call us back about Kim’s dress color, and who was going to pick up the flowers. I couldn’t care less about that. I wanted to hear from Kim.

Sunday, I drove around with my friend Cody. He didn’t seem too thrilled about homecoming plans with his girlfriend, either.

“Mine’s not allowed to go,” he said. “Her mom bitched her out, or she bitched her mom out. I don’t know. Either way, I’m not going.”

“Yeah, I can’t even get ahold of Kim. I think she died or something,” I said.

He laughed. “Well, that would suck.”

Feeling the same pit in my stomach, I forced a laugh back, not sure what else to do.

*It’ll be okay, I told myself. I’ll see her in school on Monday and it’ll all be fine.*

But it wasn't. Kim wasn't at her locker, she wasn't in band, and she wasn't with Hailey or Maxine at their usual lunch table. I could have asked, I could have gone over and found out where Kim was, but Hailey had watery eyes and Maxine sat in silence, neither one of them looking at the other. Suddenly, I didn't want to know. Whatever happened, it wasn't some elaborate joke, I didn't slip into the *Twilight Zone*, and Kim wasn't going to pop out of a cake and crown me with a dunce hat. She was gone, and it hurt everyone.

After the final bell, I saw Maxine standing by her locker, eyeing me. I took an extra-long time with my books, hoping she would leave before me, but when I looked back up she was headed right my way.

*Oh great*, I thought. I closed my locker and acted casual.

"Hey, Maxine," I said.

"Hey," she said.

"So," I chuckled, trying to be light-hearted. "Hey, did Kim like die or something? I haven't heard from her."

Maxine seemed anxious, but giggled. To this day, I don't know why she was so breezy about it.

"Well, it's funny you say that," she said. "Kim tried to kill herself Friday night."

A lane of busses hit me, and a ton of bricks crashed on my fucking head.

I had nothing but questions. *When did she do it? How? Why'd she do that? Where's she at? What's going to happen? What about me?*

Maxine didn't know much; just that it happened. Apparently Hailey was the person to ask, because her mom and Kim's mom spent the last three nights crying together. But Maxine did mention that Dawn, Kim's mom, was going to call my mom to cancel our homecoming plans with the excuse that Kim was going to be out of town Saturday. Then I was left alone.

I slouched on the band door steps, holding my head in my hands. I couldn't begin to process it. I was so angry, because I felt, at least at the time, killing yourself was the most selfish thing you could ever do. Deprive friends, family, and the rest of the world of your presence and personality. What could be so goddamn traumatizing that Kim would want to take her own life over it? She was a fifteen-year-old girl, what sort of suffering or misfortune could she have going on? She was stupid. Suicide was stupid. I was going to miss out on the dance and it was all her fault. I threw my hoodie on and stomped off, looking to clear my head.

Our high school was only two blocks from the hospital. I saw the emergency room awning from across the street and thought, *Kim's probably in there*. I stopped on the entrance sidewalk and contemplated going in to see her. I wanted to scream my lungs out. I imagined myself telling her off for being so self-centered and hurting everyone else around her.

But really, I knew I wouldn't make it past the elevator. Eventually, I'd see her family there, crying, hugging, holding her, holding each other. I'd see them grieving and I'd remember that I was just some fucking guy Kim passed by in band. I *didn't* know her. I *couldn't* know what she was going through, and I had no right to do anything, but hope and pray she would get better.

When I got home, I slumped into our living room recliner, staring at my reflection in the black mirror of our TV, wanting this all not to be real. My mom came in and saw me moping there.

"Kim's mom called. She said Kim was going to be out of town this weekend."

I sunk back. "Yeah."

Mom shook her head. "That's so terrible of her to cancel on you like that."

I dropped my head. "Yeah, I know."

"She should have checked her plans if she was going to cancel," she said.

"Uh-huh." I said as I slogged upstairs, not wanting to hear lies I already knew about.

At dinner, I kept silent and didn't touch my plate of bow-tie pasta that mom bought just for me.

"Paul Benjamin, I know you're upset Kim cancelled, but you need to eat something", Mom said.

I glared up at her, and thought to myself, *She doesn't know. She thinks this is all about me losing my date. Should I tell her?*

But I didn't. For whatever reason, I couldn't tell my parents about it. They were always nurturing and understanding people, but I couldn't open up, not about this. I was still processing it, so it could have been that I didn't know what to say. And maybe I just didn't want anyone else to get upset, but I never said anything.

I dazed through school the next day. I didn't want to hear lectures or read stories, or even play my saxophone. I wanted to go back two weeks and take the manish Maxine to homecoming. Maybe someone Kim actually liked would have asked her, and things would be different, better.

I did what I could with my homework that night and tried drowning things out with the little upbeat music I had on my iPod. Then my phone buzzed with a text from Hailey.

In all caps, Hailey said, "PAUL! KIM CAN GO TO HOMECOMING WITH YOU!!!!!"

I lit up like a kid going to Disney World. But given how bad things were the last two days, I was skeptical. I asked Hailey where she heard that, if she was serious, and one-hundred percent positive that Kim could go.

“Kim’s mom told me to text you,” she said. “Dawn’s handling the flowers and reservations, you just have to pick Kim up at her house.”

Then I was gleeful, over the moon, shouting the news to my parents. Finally, everything was coming up Millhouse!

The next day at school, I was excited, and bragging, rather than telling, my friends. They were all as insipid and introverted as I was. They didn’t have dates to homecoming, and they didn’t care. But I made such a big deal out of mine. I held it above my friends because I needed to believe I was making progress. No matter how nerdy and antisocial we were as a group, I was better because I actually got to see a girl, even for one night.

Our most awkward friend was Brock. He had thick-framed glasses on his face, and a perpetual white-fro on his head, despite him being Methodist. The rest of the school knew him as the kid that punched Cassie Wheeler in the face when they were only six years old, and ever since then he was a loner, a misfit. But he fit in with us.

“I got my date back!” I said, nudging Brock, “So I don’t have to be a weird loner after all. \*cough\* Brock \*cough\*.”

Brock laughed it off. “So where was she?” He asked.

My face dropped. I didn’t know where Kim was coming from, and I had no genuine idea of what shape she was in. I realized I was only cheerful because I got my date back, not because Kim was okay. I wondered if that made me a bad person, that if Kim was supposedly selfish, I was even worse.

I wish I could say I soul-searched my own self-interest as much as I resented Kim for hers, but I didn’t. In fact, the days flew by in the optimism of homecoming week, and the dance was happening before I knew it.

When I got to Kim’s house, her plump and expressive mom hugged me. I got the sense she was like that with everyone, like a preschool teacher who never grows out of squeezing everyone she meets.

She told me I was handsome. She placed a hand on my suitcoat shoulder and pointedly said, “I’m so happy you get to go to the dance.”

I nodded and smiled, “Me too.”

When I first saw Kim come down a set of narrow wooden steps, she looked beautiful and somehow taller in her floral-swirled, black and white dress. Her black skirt was tight around her skinny legs, a skirt short enough to move in, but long enough to keep her quaint and pretty. She wore a turquoise belt that added a splash of color, matched her dangling necklace, and accentuated her figure. She seemed happy. She complimented my shirt and tie, and was up for

more and more pictures. We pinned flowers on each other, and it started to feel like we were any other pair going to any other dance.

I drove us on a long ride to Hailey's house for group pictures. When it was just the two of us, part of me wanted to ask her about the hospital, and grill her with all my lingering questions. But I restrained myself, because I was still some guy she barely knew, and this could be a night of normalcy for her.

Still, I was curious. When she turned to open her door, I looked for scars on her wrists, or marks on her neck, but there weren't any. Even now, I don't know how she did it, and maybe that's for the best. At least that's what I've told myself.

She and I forced poses with her friends, and ate dinner as a group, you know, the usual crap. When we got to the dance, just about all the girls from her class hugged her tight and told her how good she looked. She made these funny, sarcastic faces when she talked to them. She had this genuine beam about her that you couldn't get from a posed picture. This is what Kim needed most, not a date, and not some dumb dance, but to see everyone who cared about her.

Still, we danced, and talked a little. It was small stuff like complaining about our friends, which was superficial, but always fun to do. One thing that did stand out were the slow dances. Maybe it was because she was so short, but instead of putting her hands on my hips or shoulders, Kim wrapped them around my body like we were hugging. I remember at the end of one song, Kim looked up at me, and I looked down at her. Our eyes met and she smiled. If we were dating, we might have kissed. But it felt more like a smile of comfort, like she was saying, "Thank you for being here with me." I wrapped my arms tight, hugging her for real, and we left it at that.