

## The Student Health and Wellness Center for Success

### April Absurdity Short Story Contest Submissions

Our amazing Montgomery College students submitted their creative work based on 2 writing prompts. We were so excited to read the short stories they came up with, and now we can share them with you.

Prompt #1- "Write a story about someone who receives an unexpected call"

Prompt #2- "Write about a character who buys a secondhand coat and discovers something in the pocket."

## “The Trophy”

By Julia Haddad

The Hollywood sun in July left my hands sweaty as I self-consciously handed the man behind the souvenir kiosk an unearned \$20 bill for a trophy that displayed the words “Best Grandma Ever.” Before I left home, my grandma gave me her leopard print coin purse with everything in it and told me and my sister to enjoy ourselves. Universal Studios was packed with tourists and I found myself in a jetlagged blur. I was thinking of her a lot that day because I knew that she was sick back home. I couldn’t wait to get back home to tell her all about our trip and give her the plastic award my sister and I had picked out for her. I stood in line for the Jurassic Park ride myself, a lone rider, while my mother and sister waited on the other side of the roller coaster. As I neared the front of the seemingly endless line my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was my dad and I almost didn’t answer as I was about to board the ride, but I quickly answered the phone. His shaky voice told me what I had been dreading for months; my grandmother had passed away. The operator of the ride prompted me to step into the ride and I felt as if I wasn’t in my body as I mindlessly obeyed the man. I sat down and the ride began, thrusting me through a fabricated jungle filled with animatronic dinosaurs roaring in an attempt to frighten me, but I could not be more frightened than I already was. The downhill feeling in my stomach was constant throughout the ride and I envied those who were screaming with joy as I could not make a sound. The laughter surrounding me pushed me further into my despair as if they weren’t laughing but jeering at my misfortune. The tears came naturally, and the quick jerks and motions of the ride displaced the tears and sweat all over my face. We arrived back at the beginning of the ride and I exited to my right. We cut our trip short and decided to go back home to be with our dad and the rest of our family. I now stood under that same sun, but from Maryland now, at the burial ceremony dressed in black. My dad told me she waited until we were gone to get really sick because she didn’t want us to see her that way, but a part of me will always wish I could have said goodbye. Even in make-up so heavy that we could barely recognize her, our grandma still had the kindest expression on her face. Our sweaty hands placed the trophy displaying the words, “Best Grandma Ever” into her casket and it will remain with her for eternity.

## “Haunted Seconds”

By Piper Fair

The melamine bowl clattered to the linoleum, sending popcorn in all directions like a summertime firework. A dog’s melancholic bay drifted through the open window behind me as lightning bugs perched on the screen, guardians of the night.

“Are you okay?” Henry called from the living room. “Need some help?”

Butter and seasoning streaked my palms as I tossed handfuls of kernels into the trashcan. “I’ve got it,” I said. Some pieces had retreated beneath the stove, committed to exile with the dust bunnies and crumbs I couldn’t reach.

His phone started vibrating against the countertop, getting closer to the edge with each ring, while I was soaping up my hands, the butter proving stubborn. “Your phone, babe,” I said as I finally rinsed off the bubbles, stretching to reach a faded dishcloth.

Henry shuffled in with a handful of gummy bears and unlocked the device, a shrill, incessant beep proclaiming a missed call. He set the candy on the counter and adjusted his glasses. “It was the hospital.” His brows furrowed as he highlighted the number and tapped SEND to call them back.

He didn’t put it on speaker and leaned against the cabinetry, the cuffs of his jeans bunching at the ankles and tattered at the heels. “Hey, Dr. Abrams, sorry I missed your call.”

The cat blinked at me from her spot in front of the dishwasher, and I tried to count the stripes on her chest.

He shifted his weight, rubbing the back of his neck. His orange medication bottles were lined up neatly in a row behind him, a parade of pharmaceutical bandages. “How much time?”

The recessed lighting above the island swirled in the glossy finish on the floor, the knots in the wood like little cinnamon rolls. I’d never noticed it before.

I’d never had to.

Henry reached for his keys then and nodded toward the garage. “We’ll be there.”

I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel countless times during the drive, Henry keeping his gaze out the window as lamplight pooled in the street.

“Someone just died,” he said softly. “I’m taking their heart.”

“We talked about this,” I said as calmly as I could. “This person was an organ donor.”

We’d been rehearsing this moment for years, but Henry didn’t break his silence until we pulled into the parking lot of the emergency room, red letters ablaze. “I still feel like a thief.”

The night was a blur of scrubs and IVs, consent forms, and talk of immunosuppressants. His brow was salty with sweat when I kissed him in the hallway, his thin form lost in a mound of hospital gown and blanket. I couldn’t stop picturing the organ on ice in an old Igloo cooler, and I wondered if he saw it, too.

Henry was caught in a delicate balance of science and skill, and for the life of me, I couldn't remember how many stripes the cat had.

## “The Phone in the Corner of the Horizon”

By Rifka Handelman

Astronauts in space didn't get phone calls. They video chatted with their families, video and audio clear courtesy of NASA's finest technology. They called each other over the ship's intercom. Sometimes they flew by the International Space Station and exchanged a joke with the astronauts there. And of course, they had the techs at Houston talking in their ears every second, about levels or orbit or trajectories or whatever your specialty on the Horizon Space Station was. The old-timey corded phone, unobtrusive only by the fact that it was in a corner, hadn't been used at all.

So when Captain Will Mark, the leader of the crew, came rocketing down the corridor where Leah Silva was dusting the ceiling lights, she never thought he would tell her to pick up the phone.

Someone moving that fast was a hazard. No one ever moved like that, propelling themselves along the walls like a crawling monster. Leah set down the panel cover.

“Your wife is on the phone for you,” Mark said. He sounded urgent, tense but there was a softer note in his voice.

Leah immediately raised her hand to her comm set, off and dangling around her neck.

“Not that! The *phone*.” Before Leah could even look at him quizzically, he gestured down the hallway. “The special use telephone. In the corner.” Leah opened her mouth, but he cut her off. “Go!”

She didn't try to think what could be on the other end of the phone line as she flew down the hallway, hands slapping against handholds. When she reached the room, she met the wide eyes of Speights, the engineer, who was murmuring into the phone “She's here, she's here, hold on.”

Speights handed Leah the phone and stepped back.

“Leah?” The voice sounded choked, almost muffled but Leah knew she would know it anywhere.

“Em? Emily? I'm here. What happened? Are you okay?” The hard plastic of the phone dug into Leah's palms.

“There was an accident. A bad one. Oh Leah, I can't feel anything! The-the doctor found the phone number in my wallet, the one from NASA and called it—Leah, I can't feel my fingers.”

A sort of striking, nameless horror washed over Leah. “No, Emily—no! I love you. You're going to be okay. I promise. Please.” The force of the last word evaporated into the space between them.

Something terribly calm had wound its way into her wife's tone. “I can't wait till you come home, Lee. You'll be a famous astronaut and we can buy a house and I'll finish my PhD and we'll have kids.

Leah sniffled. “That sounds—”

The shrill wail of the heart rate monitor cut her off. Her legs collapsed and she slumped to the ground, still clutching the phone, the cord a bridge down to her. Crackly voices from Houston filled the room and her crewmates gathered around her, but Leah only held the phone, even as the single, ear-shattering note became the incessant beeping of the dial tone.

## "Re-Gifting"

By Virginia Streamer

Repeated phone calls offer me an extended warranty on the car I no longer own, or credit card relief for the debts I do not have. But I still answer the phone out of curiosity. The call from a stranger who knew a lot about me and my family, which was initially unnerving, turned out to be a gift. He started with a series of questions: "Are you the daughter of Louise Parker Boden? Are Gail Boden Reis and Dora Parker Drummond your sisters?" Finally, he said, "I am Albert Thompson. I locate uncollected funds to find the heirs. You have rights to the estate of Tom Parker Jr in Arizona. "A son of Tom Sr? a brother to my grandmother, Ellen? She had one sister, Carrie, no brothers." For 25% Thompson would send us our shares.

I called, "Gail, did you get a call about money in Arizona?"

"Yes, don't believe it. Supposedly 28,000 will be split 5 ways, between us three and Carrie's two daughters. Less the finder 's share."

"Let's offer him 15%." I suggested.

"This has to be a scam. Ellen and Carrie didn't have any brothers! How could we not know about them?" Gail asked. "Why did we think we were related to Swedish royalty or writers of the Compton Encyclopedia? Did our grandmother's father really sell slot machines on Mississippi River boats? I'll call Dora—you two never agree on anything. You call Carrie's girls; see what they think. Tom Parker Jr. was in a hospital in Arizona because he couldn't care for himself. One brother did not marry; the other had no children."

"You got a lot more out of Thompson than I did." I explained Tom Jr 's estate went back to his father. Tom Sr's estate went to his sisters. Ellen and Louise, her daughter, were deceased, so it came to us, the granddaughters, but Carrie's share went to her daughters. Paperwork completed, 15% agreed upon, we forgot about it.

A year later, a check for over \$3000 arrived. A river cruise? Down payment on a new car? Something special, long lasting? Glancing at picture of my granddaughter, Melody, I saw she looked sad and unsure. What happened to the beautiful, outgoing, smiling child? Then I realized she was hiding her crooked, unattractive teeth. "Melody, would you like to have your teeth straightened?"

"Yes, but Mom can't afford it."

"Would be OK if I took care of it?"

"Okay."

At the orthodontist, we learned the it would take two years, cost over three thousand, and we saw grim pictures of patients before and the happy smiles after treatment. This became a family project. Melody followed directions without complaints. Dr. Abeny took her case to his group meeting. Everyone agreed, he would have to remove a tooth. A month later, he came out beaming, everything was lining up, no tooth had to be pulled. We were ahead of schedule. By 12 months, Melody was wearing a retainer and smiling at everyone. Ten years later, I enjoy her smile, and so do the elderly people she looks after.

## “The Missing Piece”

By Susan Searles

“Oh, Lucy, you *must* get that coat! It fits you perfectly, and that soft blue matches your eyes!”

Although a little more than I wanted to spend, we were heading into the cold Boston winter months, and I had ventured out unprepared for the drop in temperature that day. The vintage wool coat was well made, and given how hard it was for me to find clothes that fit me so well, I marched up to the register and bought it.

We walked back to the apartment, and as I reached for my keys, I felt something tumbling around in my coat pocket with them. The puzzle piece I pulled out was mostly sky—one of the last pieces you would put in your puzzle. I gazed at it thoughtfully as I turned the orphaned piece over in my fingers.

“Brew a pot of tea, Kathy. I have something for us to do this afternoon.” I went back to my closet, pulled out my keepsake box, and spread its contents across my bed—a bundle of letters—mostly from my older relatives who actually wrote letters back in their day, a braid tied with a pink ribbon from the pony I rode on my grandparents’ farm as a kid, a baggie of dirt scooped from the field at Fenway, several bird feathers and rocks, ribbons from 4-H, and finally, a jigsaw puzzle from the Christmas shortly after my twelfth birthday. I tucked the puzzle under my arm and went out to join Kathy.

The afternoon rolled on as Kathy and I assembled the puzzle and shared stories of our childhoods. As the youngest in our families, our friendship had arisen partly from the fact that we had grown up having a hard time getting a word in edgewise and always being the last child to do things—lose a tooth, date, drive, stay up late, go to college.

“We never actually finished this puzzle,” I shared. I told her about the Christmas out at the farm that went from one of the happiest times to one of the most traumatic of my younger years—one of those defining moments where you come out a different person on the other side. I recalled sitting at the table with my three sisters working on the puzzle when I heard a crash behind me. My grandfather had suffered a stroke and collapsed on the kitchen floor. My dad and grandmother went with him to the hospital, but Grandad never came home, and that was my last Christmas at the farm.

When we placed the last piece out of the box, as I suspected, we were missing one piece of sky. I hopped up, pulled the little piece out of the blue coat, and popped it into the puzzle. Kathy stared at me in disbelief. I smiled through my tears and told her, “My grandmother always sneaked a piece out just for me so that I could be the one to finish the puzzle.”



## “25 Cents”

By Oriana Smith

Lawrence, used his last money, bought a coat, cheap, a few dollars, at the thrift shop. At night, slept at a men's shelter. In the morning, walked towards the door of the men's shelter, tugged his new coat, someone else's old one, secondhand, ragged, up around his neck. Braced himself against the cold, pushed open the door, and walked out. He shivered in the shade cast by the city skyscrapers with their heads in the clouds. Passed by the business men in their sharp coats, leather briefcases, gold watches, lined pockets. Lawrence imagined he was them, walking to a business meeting, important. Stumbled as a man, rushed, bumped him, mumbled “Sorry”, hopped into a cab, sped off. Lawrence kept walking, stepped out into the sunlight, blinded. Then smacked across the face, by the wind, as it whipped around a corner. Hit buy reality. Lawrence shoved his hands into his pockets against the cold, felt lint balls, rolled them around. Stopped. Searched around again, felt something cold, grabbed it, and pulled out his hand. A quarter. Twenty-five cents, glinting in the sun.

Lawrence walked to a street corner, sat on a familiar step in front of an abandoned shop, pulled out a plastic cup, and dropped in the quarter. He shook it around. Nothing. Sat for an hour. Watched the people run by, too busy to pay attention. Gold shimmering, silver shinning, shoes clipping, phones buzzing, coats warming, not smiling. Lawrence glanced down in his cup at the 25 cents and started to hum. He gazed at the birds flying. Watched a squirrel climb up a park tree. Saw a butterfly flutter, land on a trashcan, flutter again, then choose a flower. Pretty.

Lawrence got up, walked across the street, drawn buy the warmth of a coffee shop. He would ask for a small cup of water. Side-stepped into the store. Avoided the people running to and from. No one paying attention to anyone else. Busy. Running in. Pulling money out of wallets. Buying coffee. Rushing out again. Lawrence, shy, straightened his coat. Stepped over to the side of the counter. Listened.

“Sir, your card is declined.”

Business man. Didn't have enough money. “How much do I owe you?”

“Another 25 cents, sir.”

Man, shuffled through his pocket, dropped his keys. Frustration. “I don't have any cash.”

Lawrence walked over and laid his 25 cents on the counter.

“Sir, I don't want your money.” Proud.

Lawrence smiled, “Neither do I.”

Lawrence walked back out, into the traffic of people. Breathed in the cold air. Walked down the street, back to his step. Sat down. Rested. Watched the people. Run. Run. Rush. Bump. Push. Go.

“No”, Lawrence said. “If this is what money buys, I am content without it.”

## “Recursion”

By Jack Leonard

How deep did it go? Rick waded through mounds of trench coats and rain slickers piled in front of his apartment door, searching for the next step, hoping against all hope that this would finally be the end. He found it in the back of his bathroom, buried beneath a lush mountain of mink-fur mantles: a pink child-sized windbreaker with a single, massive pocket in its back. He sighed. Just like every other goddamn coat in his room. Rick reached into the pocket, grasping a piece of cloth and tugging; like a magician's scarf appearing from nowhere, an impossibly large down jacket sprang from the windbreaker's pocket. Rick measured the wingspan and sizing of the down jacket, confirming his suspicions: from the original, massive overcoat purchased at the thrift store's original sizing to the more petite coat before him, each coat pulled from each pocket was about a millimeter smaller in diameter, length, and shoulder sizing than the one before. According to his calculations, he only had about 31,415 jackets left to pull out before each iteration was too small to see with the naked eye. Rick was going to make a fortune off of this strange phenomenon, just as soon as he made sure nobody else could make money from it. Pulling up a chair and letting out a sigh, Rick looked at the ocean of fabrics flooding his small apartment. He was going to need a bigger space to put all of his future merchandise; he should probably fill this one up first though. Rick grabbed the down jacket, reached inside, and resumed his task once again.