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The College Issue

Essays, Advice, Facts & More

*Plus, Spooky Fiction &
2 Author Interviews*

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College Admissions and the Imaginary Audience

by *Anonymous, Lincoln, MA*

I have an unremarkable confession to make. I'm a rising senior, and I hate the college application process. Not because of the essay writing, or the supplementals, or the college browsing. No, I've hated it long before that and I suspect I'll continue to dislike it afterwards. Why? Because it turns my life experience into a commodity to be marketed. For the past four years, partaking in an activity purely for the pleasure of it has been replaced by the frantic search for something, ANYTHING, that will look impressive and unique when neatly condensed into 150 characters on the Common App. The youthful joy of discovering something new is marred by a ruthless evaluation asking whether I can be good enough, or find some way to stand out, so that application readers will notice me.

I'm told that "this is life," that sometimes "you just gotta play the game." And a lot of kids do that – extraordinarily well, in fact. Especially in the wealthy suburbs of Boston, where parents and kids have been zeroed in on the process for years. Kids find an activity, something that's not too cliché but is visible enough to put on an application. They spend a few years on it, and voilà, a clear experience, ready to be gift-wrapped and sent off to the Ivy League.

But many others just don't play the game that well. For me, I hop between different activities, picking them up and dropping them off when I lose interest, looking around for something that I can stick to. The self-assurance that I would find something in time for application season sustained me for a while, allowing me to move through high school with a minimal amount of anxiety. Enough to allow myself to get A minuses and the occasional B, while my friends were pulling straight As in APs and then marching off to a robotics competition somewhere.

And I know I should have just sucked it up. I should have endured a couple years of activities and pushed myself enough to earn a 4.0. But I didn't and now I'm here, without enough of a margin to stave off rolling waves of anxiety. What do I say when adults and teachers ask me what I'm doing (a question that neatly omits the "for college")? Do I make something up? Or do I tell them the truth, that I'm mostly just working at the local grocery store, occasionally volunteering, hanging out with friends, and reading?

Of course, they don't care. They'll forget, or put my answer aside, within a few seconds. But my brain, in its raging adolescence, feels that I am always being watched, judged, evaluated. This is actually a well-documented and widespread feeling in teenagers and young adults, known as the "imaginary audience." We imagine that our life is a staged drama, and desperately hope that our acting can earn applause, or maybe just a nod of approval.

Maybe that's why I really hate the process. Not because of some convoluted feelings of commodification, but rather because it is the imaginary audience brought into reality. While most of the time, no one is watching, during applications, my life is quite literally being evaluated by a committee of a dozen or so adults who get to decide whether I am good enough to gain admission to their fine institution.

Fortunately, I'm not always in a state of anxiety. I recently read a book called "Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be." The essence of the author's point is that what you do in college is what really matters, not where you go. I can calm a spike of anxiety by reading a few pages, and reminding myself that my self-worth is not reflected by the college I stick on the back of my car. But the anxiety is always there, lurking in the background, waiting to rise and crash onto shore. 🍷

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Photo by Brianna Skye, Attleboro, MA

A Letter to Those Who've Been Part of The Rejects Club

by Marley Noel, Charlotte, NC

Results are in. After weeks of waiting, the decision that will decide whether you like yourself for the next five days is sitting pretty in your inbox. Your organs have already become a marching band inside of you at the mere thought of moving your mouse to check your status. Finally, courage kicks in, and running purely off of adrenaline, the email is opened. Blood chills throughout your body in that one second before the page loads for you to see ... rejected. "Sorry, try again next year," "Unfortunately ...," "You're a winner for even submitting!" No matter how sweet they set it, you know it's nothing but another rejection to add to your resume.

For those around our age (17 or so), these letters seem to come as often as the sunrise, whether it be from clubs, competitions, or colleges. We know we aren't the only ones submitting, yet for some reason, we feel like the only ones being rejected. It's the loneliest feeling being surrounded by "Mr. I Got In!" and "Mrs. Officially Five Times Published!" when you know you have a "There were a lot of applicants this year so ..." in your pocket, but I hope you hear me when I say you're not alone. I hope even if you stop reading right here because it got too corny or clichéd that you know these

rejections don't define you or what you can do. It's okay to feel hurt, give yourself that time to sulk. Give it a day – heck, give it a week. Just remember that the hurt is not forever. You've gotten through it before and, even if it feels like one more rejection will do you in, you'll get through it again. Learn from it if you want, but sometimes, it's okay to just lose. A loss doesn't always have to be some sort of stepping stone to something bigger. Sometimes, we just lose. I wish that was more accepted. Getting caught up in how we're gonna flip and reverse every loss prevents us from recovering and moving on. I'm not saying don't learn from your mistakes, but don't beat yourself up about it. Sometimes it's okay to just say, "Okay" and move on. You're still worthy of free time and food and sleep. Destroying yourself after every loss doesn't do you any good. Destroying yourself after something so natural as losing is just wicked! Wicked because we're all losers. We're all rejects. We all hide from this reality but maybe it's time we start shouting it from the rooftops.

Signed,

A Certified Reject 🌻

Undecided

by Alex Montes De Oca, Lima, Peru

“That’s okay; you still have time.”
 Because this has been one of the top phrases I’ve heard throughout my academic life, a part of me had forgotten that all that time I had to think about college and what I wanted to do with myself was supposed to be filled with active thinking. As time inevitably passes by and deadlines start to pile up on the horizon, I began to realize that the answer does not suddenly appear when it’s most convenient, like those messages in a bottle that always conveniently drift to the main character’s exact whereabouts. Some of my friends are those main characters, though. I wonder if I’ll get my bottle soon.

* * *

When I was younger, I used to be fascinated by planes and dreamt of becoming a pilot. My parents would buy flight simulators for me to play with, and since we grew up relatively close to the city’s airport, I would often hear the rumbling of arriving and departing planes as they soared through the sky. Growing older meant that much of that reality had to be put to rest. Flight school is expensive and requires hours upon hours of flight time, which also costs money, to progress past that first step of getting a private license. Instead, since my math and science grades were pretty decent back in middle school, my dad, also an engineer, pointed my attention to aerospace engineering. “If you can’t fly the planes, you could at least design them,” he would tell me. It sounded logical to me, so I tucked that idea in the back of my mind and never put more thought into what I would do when I grew up – my first mistake. Now, I’ve ditched the idea of aerospace engineering and multiple other branches of engineering, and now I feel stuck in a limbo of having so many options that I feel like there are none.

Also happening during my early years was being forced into learning an instrument

by my parents. It was a steep learning curve, but today I am very grateful for the ability to read and perform musical pieces. With this, I grew a deep appreciation for the compositional aspect of music for the pieces I would play (and fantasize about playing). More often than not, I would search up the soundtrack to various movies and listen to the works of the composers of “Howl’s Moving Castle,” “La La Land,” or other ear-pleasing works. This affinity wasn’t limited to movies, though. The TV shows I watched and the video games I

“I have to tread
 onward and decide
 on a path because
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would play had soundtracks that I would find myself searching up on YouTube after a playthrough, trying to recreate the feeling of my first listen. This was how I found channels like Insaneintherainmusic, KyleLandry, and 8-bit Music Theory, amongst others, where I would become mesmerized by the amount of detail present in musical pieces and how impressive it looked to perform. Music performance, composition, and theory became points of interest for me, and although the IB class didn’t scratch my itch to learn more about it (nor did I give myself enough time to practice on my own), I would dream of composing or performing for a large audience. Now, I know I can’t choose music as my major because there would be such a slight chance at a significant payout down the road. An arts degree would not pay the bills, which is just how the world works.

The way I see it, critical choices are similar

to a choose-your-own-adventure book. I used to always look for the true ending and worked backward from there, trying to “beat” the book in one go. Not that I’d get much satisfaction from that, it was just better than losing to a couple of pieces of paper. I could’ve tried to read through the entire book and choose the options I thought were most correct, but I didn’t want to be wrong, especially after investing so much time into it. Whether it’s committing to something or reaching farther than what I think my reach is, there’s this fear of wasting time. Sure, I can go through each of my interests and try pursuing a degree in it, but there’s a risk. I’m only 18, after all. Am I even qualified to define the trajectory of my life?

Qualified or not, sitting next to a ticking time bomb doesn’t lessen the intensity of the blast. I have to tread onward and decide on a path because I know no one else can or will do it for me. Taking this decision is one of the first tests of strengths we encounter as adults, which admittedly is a strange word when describing a high school graduate. Usually, having difficulty so early into a game would be concerning, but in the end, we all want to live successful lives. Comfort, stability, and happiness are all luxuries that require effort and a willingness to try something new. At this point, as the road ahead of us diverges, I need to be able to trust my gut feeling, regardless of whatever risk I think exists. A risk-free decision does not exist.

For all those who are as undecided as me in trying to chisel away at the marble of the future, know that the choice we are making is one where there are no wrong answers. It’s normal to be afraid, and although there’s a net of supporting peers and family members, the choice must come from us and us alone. Victory comes from those who choose their outcome, not those who let it choose them. After all, we have the time. 🐼

Out of the House

by Charlie Raghavan, Lincoln, MA

Whenever the clock creeps past 9 a.m., a vague feeling of discomfort washes over me. Before then, I'm fine. I'm supposed to be at home, waking up, eating breakfast, brushing my teeth. Everyone else is doing the same thing. All the other soon-to-be high school seniors in the sweltering days of July. But then 9 a.m. rolls around, and people march off to their summer internships, interesting jobs, and exclusive camps. But me? I stay. Stay in the house, without my internship, because I didn't get accepted to the one I wanted. Sure, I have a grocery store job and do community service, but those are just so, perilously ... generic. They won't pop off the page when an admissions officer glances at it.

My parents try not to pressure me. But at 9 a.m., I can feel the silent questions start to roll in like a fog, pushing against my mental defenses: Why aren't you doing something? No, not reading, or occasionally volunteering. Something...well, you know! In my head, I shoot back responses I could never muster up the confidence to say in real life: Oh, you mean something for college? No, I know this isn't really just for me, stop trying to convince me otherwise. The imaginary retort satisfies me for a moment, before the anxiety returns.

My sister, a year older than me, graduated about a month ago. She decided to postpone applying to colleges for a year, unsure of where exactly she wanted to go. For her, the silent questions are more explicit. There's an urgency in my parents' voices as they say "Come downstairs!" or "You need to get a job!" Occasionally, the urgency disappears, and with utter resignation they ask, "What's going on?"

I don't want that to be me. I don't want the silent questions to turn explicit as I wallow in my indecision. So I need to get out of the house, and I pounce on any chance I get. The library is my respite, and I'm close enough to the local one and another two that I'm usually able to find shelter during the week. There, I can hunker down and just read, just be myself. But the fog is ever-present, and it reaches me in the library as well. There, I oscillate between self-acceptance and stifling anxiety. One moment I'm reading history, and the next, I rush to my computer in a desperate search for any internships that might still be on offer. It's an impossible search.

Even going downstairs is difficult. I want to be able to sit in the kitchen and goof off with my dad, or talk about my friends with my mom. But college is an ever-present, unwelcome guest in our house, always lurking in the background, waiting to assert its importance. I avoid downstairs even more when there are guests over, who can't help but to ask a rising senior where they're looking and which extracurriculars they're doing. And what do I do then? I can't exactly lie with my parents around. No, I'd have to tell the truth, and feel their imaginary waves of judgment roll over me.

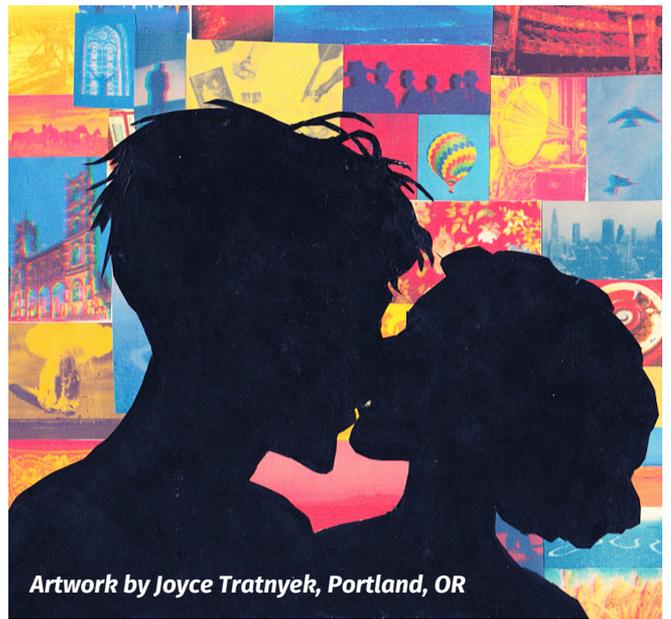
Gradually, I've settled into a middle ground. I'll increase my work hours, do some more volunteering, and try my best to snag an impressive-sounding opportunity, if one still exists this late in the summer. Not for me, or even, really, for college. Mostly just so I can go downstairs again. 🌱



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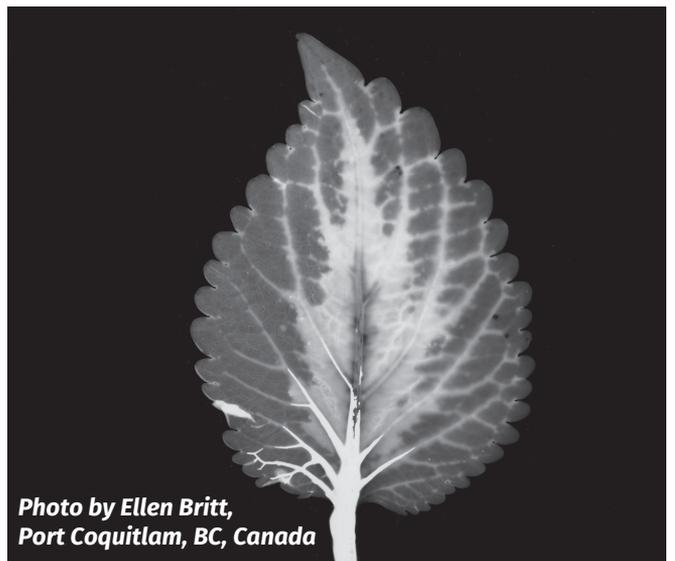
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Witness

by Riddhi S., Cupertino, CA

She saw him. She saw him get killed.
She saw the life drain out of his eyes.
She heard his screams of pain.

She heard the footsteps of the murderer as they ran away. She felt a tingling sensation course through her. She felt a tight knot form in her chest.

She witnessed it all.

But no one believed her. Not a soul.

She knew it had happened. Her eyes couldn't have betrayed her. She wasn't dreaming nor was she hallucinating. The

“ Her fingers were numb as she dialed the police ”

rasping of the man's final breaths and the crimson blood were all too vivid for it to be a figment of her imagination. She was there. She was watching. She was witnessing.

She had approached the body, hands trembling. The man lay in a pool of his own blood beneath her feet, his body peppered with bullet wounds. His glassy eyes were

rolled back, showing only the bloodshot sclera of his eyes.

Her fingers were numb as she had dialed the police. Her breath was shaky, and her voice was uncertain. She told the officer on the phone what had happened.

"May I ask what your name is?" The officer had questioned.

She responded softly. A moment went by. Her eyes widened as the officer started to laugh.

"Nice try. Don't joke that much. We all know

murders are implausible." The officer had drawled before ending the call.

The phone fell out of her hand and landed with a thud on the ground. What was the officer talking about? She clutched her heart with both of her hands and fell to her knees. What is going on? Her head was spinning. The ground around her started to spin as well. The lifeless body was still in front of her, her clothes and hands now soaked with blood.

No. Something was wrong. Something was missing. Why did the officer hang up so abruptly? Why was the officer so ignorant? She stood up and started to walk away from the body. She needed help. She needed to ask someone else. As she turned around she saw a young man walking by. Her feet dragged her towards him.

"Please help! Please help me!" Her cries were loud, and she collapsed onto her knees. The man immediately turned his head.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his eyebrows cocked in annoyance.

"Please! There has been a murder. Someone has been killed! I saw it all!" She begged, her voice desperate and cracking.

The man's eyes lingered over her for a moment. He scoffed. "This isn't funny. Joking about death is despicable." He shook his head as he walked away.

"Please!" she called out weakly, grasping for the man's hand. But it was out of reach, and her hand fell to her side.

Tears streamed down her face. They tasted like salt and regret. Stop. Stop it. Stop crying. She kept scolding herself as she slowly stood up. Stop being weak. Make them believe you. They must believe you. She hurried back to the scene of the crime. The knot in her chest tightened even harder each time she saw those lifeless eyes. It was as if they were chiding her, tormenting her. She grabbed her phone from the ground, making sure it was still functional.

She wanted to call the police. She should call the police. But what if she got in

“ *She hurried back to the scene of the crime. The knot in her chest tightened each time she saw those lifeless eyes* ”

trouble. What if they didn't believe her again. She shut her eyes as pain filled her body. Her words had failed her once again. Her mouth refused to open. Refused to fight back. How weak she was.

She crumbled to the floor in tears. After all, that was what she was best at. Crying. All she could do was cry. She couldn't even stand up for herself. Couldn't even prove something. And she hated herself for being so useless.

Her mind was swirling with thoughts. She couldn't swallow nor could she speak, her throat was dry and hoarse. She still knew she wasn't dreaming. This is real. She is real. It had to be real. But why didn't anyone believe her? Why was she never given a chance? Her breathing started to slow down. Her tears lessened.

What if it is a dream? But in my dreams, who am I? Where am I? Her reality felt distorted and warped, nothing seemed real yet nothing seemed fake. She reached up, trying to grasp something, trying to find something tangible to provide her some certainty.

Maybe she was nothing. Nothing at all. Maybe she was as thin as air. No, thinner than air. As unreachable as the heavens, as unbelievable as the gaping chasm of hell. No. No, she had to stop. No, she knew this was real. She couldn't push the truth away. She still had to face the truth, truth is something no one can evade.

What was wrong with these people? Were they just merely stupid? Or oblivious? Or did they just not care?

Why did they not believe her? What had she done to make them so against the thought of murder? She had so many questions but no answers. But there was only one way to elucidate these questions.

Slowly, she dialed the police again with trembling, frail, bloodied fingers. They picked up.

"Hello? I'd like to report a murder," She begins once more, telling her story.

"Alright. What's your name, miss?" The officer asks. But before she can respond, the man cuts her off with a chuckle. "Just kidding. We don't need your name for a prank."

She opened her mouth to protest, but the call ended. Slowly, she pushed herself up, wobbling a bit. She took a moment to stabilize herself, then inhaled sharply. Her eyes were closed and her face was pointed towards the blue, blue sky. Her eyes slowly opened after a brief pause, glimmering under warm rays of sunlight.

"My name," she began quietly, swaying gently with the wind. "Is Elora Bathory." She giggled, then disappeared into the shadows of an alleyway.

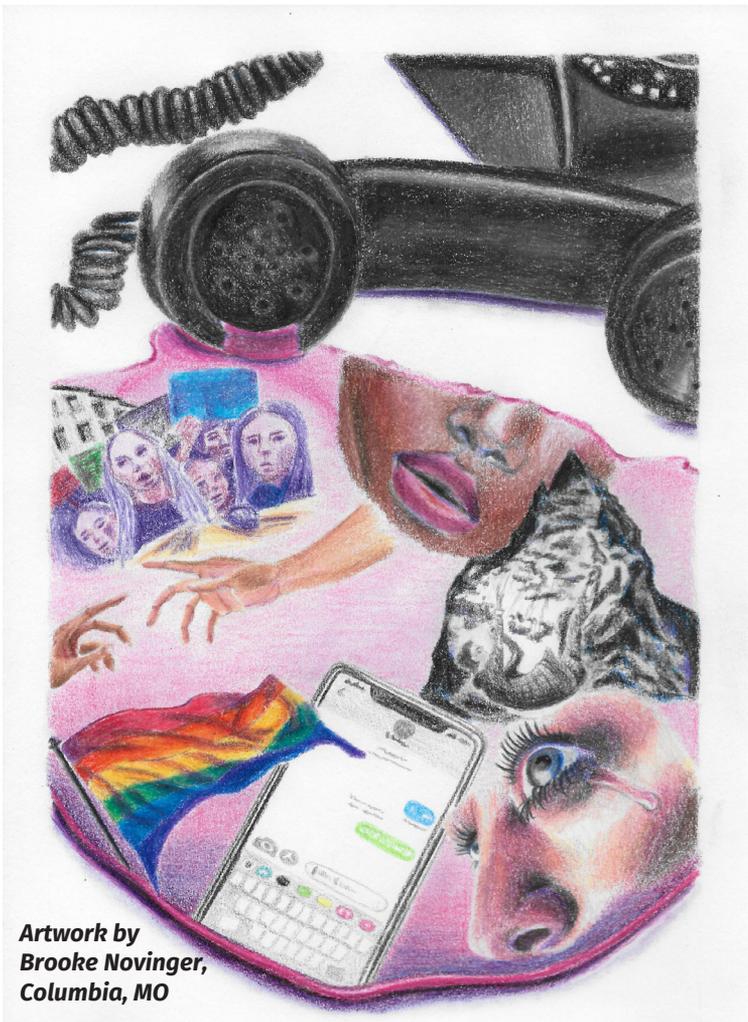
She twirled a gun in her hands. 🖤

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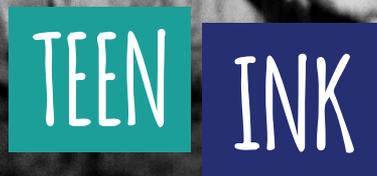


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