

Those Who Fail to Learn

Jasmine Patera

She was born screaming and seemed to never stop. The mother shushed her as they sat in the tub together, the moon cresting outside the open window. The breeze only incited the baby's rage, and it wasn't until she tasted milk that she grew silent.

"There we go," murmured the mother. "We're okay. You're okay, little one. You're going to live. It's all going to be fine."

No one was there to disprove her.

Guinevere's birthdays were each inaugurated with haskap fruit pancakes, sticky and softened with honey. Mother sang a song each time and after, guided the child's chubby hands to tear her presents open until she was old enough to do it herself. When she grew older, Guinevere decided she should meticulously unfold the newspaper wrapping, tearing off sections of tape until it could all be taken off without ripping anything. This year, the mother reached over to quicken the process, tearing the paper down the middle and revealing the small box inside.

"Darling, I have to go into the yard after this."

"Sorry," the girl mumbled and looked at the black box in her hands. On the front were a bunch of star shapes and white lettering she could only partially recognize.

"For your room's ceiling," she explained to Guinevere. "They stick

to it and glow in the dark. Do you like them?"

The girl nodded and imagined the space above her bed, glittering like the night sky outside. It seemed nice.

"I can return them," the mother said, sounding on edge.

"No. I want them."

"Open your next gift, then."

The rectangle-shaped gift was thin but tall. Guinevere frowned at the thought of hurting the newspaper but knew her mother would get impatient again. She tore the wrapping off.

"A book?" Guinevere looked up at her mother, forehead crinkled.

"A space book," she corrected, opening to a random page. "It's... hm. There's a big fancy telescope in space, and it's been taking pictures of a lot of different things. I had a book like this when I was your age, but this telescope takes much better pictures."

Guinevere looked at the page, seeing lots of blue and black wisps and specks of light. Stars? She was unsure that space really had things clustered together like that. It seemed mostly empty when she looked up.

"Thank you mom."

"You're welcome. I'm gonna go feed the chickens, but you can finish breakfast and play for a bit. Then we'll start lessons."

The mother stepped outside, and Guinevere set aside her presents to finish her pancakes. The fruit was comfortingly sweet, ripened around the warm weeks of her birthday, and combined with the honey stained her pale hands purple. She licked her fingers and opened her new book. She liked stories of astronauts and stars but had never seen anything like this. Space, where there were dusty pillars climbing, reaching up as if searching for something. Guinevere imagined she could climb it to the top and find aliens, the plastic green ones she saw at a themed restaurant in the city. Or a pot of gold. Something like that.

Wanting to save the book for later, Guinevere hopped from her seat and grabbed her dishes. She walked to the sink and reached to put the plate onto the counter near it. Morning rays shone through the windows, and she fought the urge to lie on the carpet, highlighted by the Sun. Like their cat—Mother bought him to catch mice, but he liked lazing in sunny patches of grass instead. Guinevere was just sitting back down at the table when her mother walked in with a basket of eggs.

"Are you ready?" She hummed and put the basket down on the counter and started to wash the dishes. "How about you pick a book to

read, and we'll practice your letters."

Guinevere ran off to one of the many bookshelves her mother owned. The children's books were conveniently low to the ground so she didn't have to look much harder for other ones.

"Ferdinand!" She grabbed the crimson book and ran to show the red bull on the cover to her mother. "Please?"

"It's a tad violent..." Mother said, even though she was the one who let it sit on the bookshelf. At the girl's pleading eyes she sighed and took the book from her. "Go sit down, then."

Guinevere obediently sat at the foot of her mother's rocking chair. She listened to the story and tried to sound out the letters when her mother showed her the pictures on each page. She liked looking at flowers like Ferdinand the bull, though there were only the ones deliberately planted rather than the ones mowed down in favor of grass. Whenever she played outside, she secretly wished on dandelions and blew the seeds on the wind even though her mother insisted they were weeds. As if they weren't meant to be there.

When they finished reading Mother asked her questions about the story to make sure she understood. Guinevere learned that it was in Spain, which wasn't here. She answered each of the questions but internally wondered about the other bulls in the story. Bulls from Spain. Why did they want to fight? Looking at flowers was much nicer. Even if there were bees.

After they talked about letters and numbers enough where they started to blend together, the mother noticed Guinevere's antsy-ness and finally sent her outside. The afternoon was sunny but windy, and she entertained herself by trying to chase the wild rabbits into the tree line. Then she brought a treat for the chickens squawking in their run. Her favorite was the brown-feathered Miss Fluff, who didn't need to be chased and didn't squirm like the others when she was held. Often she'd taken a wing to the nose from one of the others, but Miss Fluff cuddled her nicely.

Something roared in the distance, drawing closer. Miss Fluff squawked and jumped from her arms, racing towards the coop. Guinevere froze, her heart jumping up in her chest. It was too loud. Too loud. It was coming from above, so she looked up and saw something tear across the sky, leaving a pair of sharp white lines in its wake. Like clouds, but in the shape clouds would never be in. She imagined that it was slicing through the sky and would shatter, crash down right on top of her.

The porch door rattled against the house and Guinevere saw the

terrified expression from her mother as she rushed to pick her up.

"What was that?" The girl questioned, clinging to her while she tried to look up at the sky. But her mother pressed her face into her shoulder.

"Nothing, dear. Just... just a plane." Mother sounded frazzled as she carried her daughter inside.

"What's that?"

"It's... a big metal bird that flies people to far-away places. Like over the sea."

"What's over there?" Guinevere wondered if that's where the bull-fighting was. The plane was getting quieter. The mother pets her hair, silent for a moment.

"Nothing much."

As she usually did in the summer, Guinevere's mother pestered her about schoolwork, about how important it was to look over and practice it. And reading. That summer her concerns had turned into reading less, resulting in Guinevere being dragged to parks, churches, and community events at the museum in town.

"I don't wanna go," she whined one Saturday afternoon as her mother did her hair. "It's too hot out."

Guinevere yelped in pain when the hairbrush dragged painfully against her scalp, and then again when her hair started getting pulled into a braid.

"Shh. It doesn't hurt. And you need to go outside, you'll look pretty with a tan. You're too pale."

Guinevere sulked, feeling a headache develop from the pain. It didn't matter what she wanted. When her mother had dolled her up enough, she was led to the car. The drive into town was long and boring. There were barely any trees to look at. She imagined a wolf running outside the window, keeping pace with the car. Eventually the plains of grass turned into ugly houses, boulevard trees and people walking their dogs. She shrunk into her seat when the car came to a stop until her mother came around to let her out.

Guinevere stepped out of the car, looking like a fawn on the asphalt. Everything was too hot, too bright. She felt like a baby bird being pushed out of the nest. Her mother prodded her forward, and she crossed the boundary into the playground. Dazed, she hid under the slide.

Underneath it was quiet, cool, and calm. More relaxing than the

screaming children ruling over the slide above. Mother always asked why she didn't ever play with the other kids, and she didn't know how to respond. Gwen looked around to see if her mother was watching, but instead saw a brown-eyed boy race over to her as if being chased. The boy jumped and slid across the playground pebbles, kicking up dust until he skidded to a stop at her feet. His skin reminded her of her favorite pinecone in her collection, and with just-as-sharp eyes.

"What's your name?" He gasped out between pants.

". . . Guinevere," she said finally.

"Oh." He wrinkled his nose and sat up. "Can I call you Gwen?"

"Okay."

"My name's DJ."

"Okay."

DJ giggled, but Guinevere wasn't sure what was funny about her response. They stayed in the cool shade for a moment. It felt pleasant. DJ looked over to where her mother had ventured to a bench, turning her cheek as if she wasn't just staring.

"That your mom?" He asked.

Heat rose to her cheeks. "Yeah."

"Is your dad here?"

"No. I don't have one."

"Oh." DJ's face fell, and he bumped his shoulder into hers. "He die in the war? My dad did too."

Guinevere swallowed. She didn't want to embarrass herself, but the question raced around her mind. "What war?"

DJ blinked and his mouth opened. Before he could respond, he turned to look at a toddler approaching loudly, her pink shoes smacking into the pebbles. Her hair was tied into two little buns with pink ribbons, and she found herself wanting to touch it. DJ groaned. "Colette, get outta here! I'm talking!"

Undiscouraged, the girl sat in his lap, sucking on her pacifier. The boy huffed and hugged her and looked back at Gwen embarrassedly.

"She follows me around."

An odd feeling welled up in her chest. Gwen took a big breath. "Do you wanna play?"

He beamed. "Okay. But we gotta include her or she'll cry."

Their earlier conversation sat in the back of her mind. Instead of worrying about it, she let DJ lead her up the slides. They both took turns

holding little Colette and going down while she shrieked happily. Gwen found herself smiling.

After what felt like no time at all, a tall man called out. "DJ! Colette!"

DJ paused from trying to restrain the squirming baby and looked to Gwen guiltily.

"Do you have a phone?"

"No."

"Oh." He cocked his head. "I'll write my address down, and you can write to me? My dad says I have to practice my writing."

"Okay." She'd never written a letter before, and she felt happy at the thought of being able to communicate with someone. Gwen followed the pair to their dad, who looked pleased to see his children intact. She found herself standing back as the family talked, shifting her weight awkwardly. It was only after Colette was put in a car-seat that their dad wrote on the back of a receipt until she heard—

"Guinevere," her mother hissed, glaring down at the girl as she meekly turned. "What did I say about getting near strangers? Their cars, specifically?"

Gwen squirmed under the stare of her mother. "To... not?"

"Hey," DJ's father interrupted, offering his dark hand to her mother. "I'm Elijah. No worries here, I was just giving your daughter our address in case she wanted to write to my DJ. He's been trying to make some new friends since we moved; I'm sure you understand."

The mother stared at the hand for a moment before shaking it. The kids refused to look at each other.

"I'm Adelaide. And that's fine, just Guinevere needs to remember we don't talk to strangers."

The man said something she didn't hear and passed her mother the receipt, who shoved it into her purse she was clutching. Gwen's ears rang, cheeks burning hot as she stared at the ground. It felt there was a lump in her throat.

"Let's go, Guinevere."

The girl took her mother's hand and padded back to the car. She didn't even put on music; just made sure Gwen was buckled and drove into the countryside, lips pursed. She looked out the window, squirming under the glances she saw her mother give in her periphery.

"Did my... did my dad die in the war?" The war, Gwen found herself asking after a long bit of silence. She didn't know that there was a the war,

although she knew that there were some from their history lessons. Things that happened a long, long time ago—a bad thing. But an intangible sort of ‘bad.’ She saw her mother’s knuckles, white on the steering wheel.

“No, honey,” Mother said after a moment. “You have a dad, but I don’t know him. I... hmm. I chose him because I wanted you. But that’s it.”

“Okay.” Gwen pulled the seatbelt away from where it dug into her neck. “I didn’t know there was a war.”

“I didn’t tell you about it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a child,” she said, looking sternly at Gwen from the rearview mirror. “You don’t need to worry about that stuff. You should just be a kid. It’s almost over anyways.”

Gwen bit her tongue, wanting to mention what DJ said.

“Who’s winning?” she finally asked. The response was instantaneous.

“Us, of course.”

The Sun blazed brightly at its zenith, and Gwen found herself wishing she’d remembered to fill up a water bottle. There was that sickly humidity to the air; it clung to her and made her feel heavy. Waiting on the front porch was miserable, her shoulder sore with the heavy backpack her mother had given her. The flip-phone inside felt like it was burning through the nylon as she scanned around, trying not to think about it.

“It’s for emergencies,” her mother had insisted when she placed the box in her hands a week ago. Only, Gwen didn’t know what counted as an emergency. If she got sick, for sure, like that one time she tried to cook breakfast and gave them both salmonella. But the degree of importance and how upset her mother would be if she called about something not on that scale was unknown. So her brain was stuck cycling through scenario after scenario, hoping and not hoping her mother would come back for her.

The dust cloud in the distance broke her out of her stupor. Gwen looked away to seem nonchalant, a happy-nervous pit in her belly. It’s not mom’s car. Gravel crunched as Elijah’s SUV pulled up in the driveway, and DJ poked his head out of the window. “Come sit in the back with me!”

Gwen nodded and rushed over with her head ducked, clutching her bag. The car smelled like cloves when she sat inside, buckling up sheepishly as DJ and his father greeted her. Colette, in her car seat on the other

side, just looked at her with big eyes.

"Your mom really got you a phone?" DJ questioned, moving over to sit in the middle.

"Yeah."

"Cool, now we can actually text!"

Gwen nodded and fished the phone out of her bag. "It's not like yours though." Her mother had given it to Gwen with herself as the single contact. DJ listed off a string of numbers, which she then trialed-and-errored into sending a text. "Hi."

The boy pulled out his smartphone when it buzzed, grinning as he read it. Elijah reversed out of the driveway and set back out on the gravel road towards town. Gwen noticed that her friend was starting to grow out his hair. He hadn't told her that in their letter-writing. DJ launched into an excited plan of what they were gonna do for the day.

"And we're gonna play *Mario Kart*, and I'm gonna teach you about Transformers, and—"

"Woah, kiddo." Elijah glanced at them from the rearview mirror. "Let Gwen breathe for a moment. She's probably missing her mom."

DJ made a face. "I thought you said—"

"DeAngelo," Elijah warned, which startled all three of the kids in the back seat. Colette whispered conspiratorially. "Daddy's mad."

Gwen felt that familiar nervous pit in her belly. Her mother didn't say why she was going away. She didn't think about it too hard; just excited that her requests for a sleepover were finally accepted. But now she worried that it was some adult thing her mother kept her out of yet again.

Elijah sighed and turned up the radio, a low voice listing off words mindlessly. "—where bombing resumed earlier today after negotiations grinded to a—" Elijah cursed and turned the volume down, glancing back at Colette as the two older kids eyed each other.

"Swear jar," the little girl sing-songed. The rest of the ride was tersely silent. Gwen looked down, feeling a buzz in her pocket. It was her mother:

"Honey, is Elijah not there yet?"

"Yes. We're driving. Sorry."

"You were supposed to text me."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll call you tonight. I love you."

Gwen shoved the phone in her bag, turning her face away from DJ's quizzical look. Something about that phrase from her mother made her get all squirmy inside. Finally, the car pulled into the driveway of a nice-looking house with cool white paneling. Most of the other houses looked similar, like cookie-cutter shapes lined down the paved roads. People with dogs or baby strollers on the sidewalk. So different from the flat fields or boring tree lines of her yard at home.

After everyone got their shoes off in the foyer, Elijah went upstairs to put Colette down for a nap, while DJ excitedly pulled Gwen into the basement. "I get to sleep on the couch while you're here, and you get my room. We're gonna stay up sooo late!"

Gwen sat on the gray couch downstairs, watching as her friend set up the TV. It was too bright, a weird disorienting mesh of moving pictures and bright colors. DJ shoved a misshapen piece of plastic into her hands.

"Okay, this is what I was talking about. Me and my friends play it all the time. So basically, you pick a character and a Go-Kart, and we try and race each other."

DJ showed her which buttons to press. It felt weird in her hands, and she had to look down repeatedly to make sure she was pressing the right circles. It took a moment of negotiation before they finally started.

"Okay. Remember what I said! Yep, wait, nope, Gwen, you're going backward, no, you have to stay on the track, stay on the track, he's giving you the arrow because you're going the wrong way!"

Gwen frantically mashed the buttons, a feeling of helplessness welling up in her chest. "How do I turn?" She found herself whining as DJ laughed at her. He paused the game, came over to help her with the controls once more, and fiddled with something before they eventually started again. This time everything was slower and quieter, and it was easier to figure out what exactly her princess character was doing in response to the controls.

The pair settled into silence as they played. DJ seemed content to have finally showed her the video games he was always writing about. She contemplated his words in her mind. Me and my friends, me and

my friends, me and my friends. Gwen didn't know how many friends was normal to have—did he think she was weird for only talking to him? She'd played with other kids back when her mother forced her to, but none really wanted to be her friend.

"DJ?" Gwen found herself asking between races.

"Yea?"

"Umm..." she looked away when he paused the game to look back at her. The embarrassing question died in her chest. A different one, then. "What was... up... with your dad?"

"Oh. Right. Umm, I think he just doesn't want Colette hearing about that stuff 'cuz she's so little. And he doesn't talk about it with me much 'cuz he wants me to 'develop my own opinions.'"

"My mom has a computer and stuff, but I don't really know anything about..."

"About the news?"

"Yeah."

"Right. Yeah. My dad told me... that. And how your mom didn't want you eating certain stuff. I'm gonna make you try a chip though. If you want. He told me not to pressure you."

Guilt wormed in her belly even as she fantasized about the snack food she'd seen but never tried. "Yes please."

DJ just grinned. After he claimed his trophy (Gwen had finished last in all but one race), they bounded upstairs to raid the cupboards. She found herself wanting to stay, where everything was fun and tasted new in a way she'd never had before. It felt like a real family, the kind that lived in her storybooks. It was only hours later when she was nestled up in some fresh blankets and fighting to keep her eyes open that the phone on her pillow buzzed.

"Hello?" Gwen's voice was thick with sleep.

"Hey darling." Her mother's voice was quiet in a way she'd never heard before. Gwen found herself sitting up.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. In my hotel room." She sighed. "Everything alright there? You ate?"

"Umm, yeah." Gwen expected an interrogation. She was on edge, waiting. "How long is it gonna be?"

"I don't know, honey. A week at most. I hope just another day or two."

Gwen was silent.

"Hello?"

"Sorry. I'm here."

"If anything's wrong, I'll come home right now. You matter most."

"No, I'm fine. I just..." her voice grew thick with tears. "I miss home."

"Oh, baby." Her mother sighed, voice crackling with the flip-phone's cheap audio. "Just handle it tonight. I can get on the earliest flight tomorrow."

"No, I..." Gwen wiped her tears, sniffing. "I just miss you. Where even are you?"

"I... in my hometown. I wish it didn't happen this way, that I could've found a better place for you to stay, but..." There was silence. The mother calculated, measured. "My father was hospitalized. I needed to see him."

"What?" Her heart dropped. She'd assumed... something. Or nothing. That they had no family at all.

"I know, I'm sorry. I... we don't have a good relationship. I never wanted you to meet him. So please just deal with it for a little bit longer. Please? Don't worry about it. About me or him. You don't need to worry about it."

"O—okay."

"Good." The mother sighed. "I love you, Guinevere."

There was a beat of silence. A weight bore down on her.

"Love you too."

Gwen was on the precipice of a tight rope, staring below into an abyss. A single misstep could plunge her into the depths below. It was her first day of high school, and the only thing that prevented her from bursting into tears was the humiliation that coursed through her veins at the thought of a single social mistake.

"Girl, chill out," DJ chastised as they walked toward the first class of the day. Physical sciences. Stuff she'd touched on before with her mother's education, but a concern nonetheless—she was afraid that public school would be harder, she'd be expected to know everything, and situations her brain couldn't even come up with.

"First day everyone just goes over the syllabus. Your teacher's pet-ass is gonna be fine."

His comments never helped. The busy halls made her shrink into herself. There were the groups of friends that walked like turtles in the

center of the hall, and a person with a tail, and everyone shouted, and there were teachers trying to give directions, and through it all DJ was her guide, ferrying her like Charon through the River Styx.

"Make sure to text your mommy that you're okay," he teased when they sat in the back of a classroom, students trickling in. Gwen jolted and fished out her smartphone from her backpack. Her mother had already texted: "You found your class alright?"

She responded with an affirmative, and that was that. Her going to a public high school was a point of contention with them and allowed only with many conditions and lectures about its dangers. Such as a new phone with an app to track her location, a promise to call her if anyone "used drugs" in her presence, and a horrible, horrible conversation about sex. But ultimately the mother relented.

Finally the teacher arrived. Gwen took out her school-provided tablet to access the syllabus—her single belonging that her mother had no access to. While she was lectured on class expectations, she found herself staring at the search browser. It offered many things up to her. National tensions. Tragic deaths. Celebrities she'd never seen nor heard the name of. She tapped on the first one, her anxiety about the class fading to boredom. Her blood froze.

Former CEO of Armstrong Enterprises passed away late Sunday night according to his family foundation. Lawrence Telcait was in end-of-life hospice care for a year following his resignation as CEO....

Gwen scanned the article, her heart beating loudly in her chest. Telcait. Telcait. His picture looked like her mother, too. The same eyes, fair skin, their jaw. DJ caught her horrified expression and peeked over.

"Huh, guy's got the same last name as you."

The teacher gave them a warning look. Gwen ignored her, typed in the man's name, and found more articles. Each dressed it up differently. Danced around it. Controversial involvement... record profits... health issues... hospitalized for a week three years ago... stroke during a press conference... survived by his daughter. It all meant the same thing. A man that people wouldn't hate because of the money he brought them.

She pulled out her phone and texted her mother under the desk:

"Can you come pick me up?"

There was no response. She squirmed in her seat, barely getting

through the awkward icebreakers. When the bell rung she rushed to the bathroom, ignoring DJ's concern. The puffs of smoke emitting from one of the stalls would've gone unnoticed if not for the sweet scent. Finally:

"What's wrong?"

"Please?"

"I'll be there in thirty."

Gwen sat awkwardly on the toilet, lifting her feet up to hide from the girls chatting outside. It got quieter when the next period started and she was still there, huddled up. She found herself slowly typing each letter into her phone like a bird pecking at seeds. For details. The war. What she was given was merely the surface. Numbers. Dates, stained forever in history. She tried to comprehend the depth of each life, the magnitude of their sorrows and joys, life that she may—or may not? — had a role in taking. It came up blank. Surely, she thought, this all was a coincidence and her mother made her money another way. A normal way. She didn't want to know the truth. She wanted to go home—she'd drop out, wouldn't join Science Club like she wanted to, ignore DJ. Gwen closed her eyes and waited.

She was called over the intercom a while later and trudged down to the office. Her mother was there and smoothed over her skipping class with the receptionists. Gwen's pale, tearful face added to the lie. The walk to the car was quiet and it wasn't until they were pulling into the driveway that the mother sighed. "Baby, what happened?"

Gwen burst into tears and reached over the center console to hug her mother. It came flooding out. She wanted to be a baby again, unknowing, unblameable. Bewildered, her mother patted her back. Eventually she pried Gwen away and forced them inside from the chilly fall air. They settled on the couch together. Gwen felt the closest she'd been to her mother in years, and the way she hugged back might've revealed the same in reverse. She just lost her father.

It didn't matter. Gwen wanted to claw out the blood in her veins. It was only when her mother held her that it felt okay to live with it.

The last time she argued with her mother was when Gwen turned eight-

teen. There were no gifts or singing. Just a conversation.

Gwen laid alone in her dark room. A nice apartment in town, sharing with DJ and a friend she'd met in high school as they prepared to start their first years in college. It was the first thing she'd done with the money. His money.

Its presence weighed on her most days. That day it prevented her from getting up. She pulled her blanket over her head. No one else knew. She wanted to burn it, give it away. Sometimes she donated quiet sums. But the greedy part of her dreamed. If she used it well maybe her hands would be clean. Once she might have fantasized on fleeing to space. Now she just wanted to move far, far away where no one knew her; devote herself to saving lives instead. It seemed the most she could do, being just one person.

It was a distant dream.

Jasmine Patera is from Mandan, North Dakota. She enjoys writing poetry and can often be found with her nose stuck in a book. She is inspired by the works of Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver. Jasmine is pursuing a degree in English with a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing at the University of North Dakota, where she is also a member of the Writing Club. She hopes to one day pursuing a career in editing as a member of a publishing house.