

TOP THREE COLLEGE ESSAYS
2021 A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS ESSAY CONTEST

First Place

Tasmyn McCauley

Georgia Southwestern University

A story inspired by Pieter Claesz's painting *Still Life*

Sharp Edges

The fear I felt grew like an expanding balloon within my chest as I pulled out the dull knife still stained with blood along with a tattered baby blue zip up jacket from behind my husband's dresser. I could not believe what I was holding. My heart was in the pit of my stomach. I dropped to my knees and my body froze as my head attempted to wrap around what I just found. Within seconds I heard our front door open. My husband was home. I jumped to my feet, wiped my face and shoved the knife and jacket back where I found it.

I met my husband at the bottom of the stairs as he finished taking his shoes off and undoing his tie.

"How was your day beautiful?" He said as he leaned in to kiss my cheek.

My heart was pounding through my chest as I kept my eyes directing at the hardwood floor.

"It was good. I was about to head to the store to pick up something for dinner. Do you have any requests?" I responded trying to keep my voice as steady as I could.

Without hesitation he responded, "I have really been craving crab, if you could find that, that would be awesome."

I nodded my head as I walked out the door, "Sounds good. I'll be back in a bit."

As I sat in my car, I felt paralyzed as the world around me kept moving. I felt as if my life was at a dead stop in time. Was my husband really that capable of doing something so brutal? If I asked about the knife, would he tell me the truth?

I backed out of our driveway and drove in complete silence all the way to the local grocery store. As I walked in, the smell of fresh cut strawberries and newly baked cake hit me straight in the face. I kept my head low as if everybody there knew what I just found. Turning the corner to the seafood aisle, I head towards where the crab should be. There is one left. I grab it and put it in the cart. I already have everything else at home, the crab was all I needed.

At checkout the tv is on behind the cashier. It's on the news.

Written in bold along the bottom of the screen, it projects,

"MISSING PERSON: WOMAN, LAST SEEN WEARING WHITE T-SHIRT WITH BLUE ZIP UP JACKET, RIPPED JEAN SHORTS AND BLACK SNEAKERS"

I dropped more cash than I needed to on the counter and rushed out of the store.

I didn't think he would hurt me but I wasn't sure he wouldn't somebody else. I took this into consideration and stayed calm as I arrived home. I wanted him to tell me the truth. I wanted him to trust me. Trust that I wouldn't tell anyone.

When I walked in the house he was passed out and snoring in his recliner. I stayed as quiet as I could as I prepared dinner. I got out the biggest pot we had to boil the crab. It would only take around 20 minutes. Along with the crab, I layed out a loaf of bread, and a bowl of red berries. I filled a glass goblet half way with white wine. I placed everything on a platter and sat it in the center of our round table.

Then I went to wake him. He's never been a deep sleeper so I only had to place my hand on his shoulder in order for him to wake up.

"Dinner's ready." I said.

"I don't know how I didn't wake up from the smell! I'm starving!"

"Mhmm." I mumbled.

We sat at the table, neither saying a word. Neither touching the food.

I placed my phone in my lap as it dialed the police.

We sat in silence for what seemed like eternity.

"Why did you do it?" I questioned.

His face dropped. He knew I knew.

"Do what?" He responded.

"You know what you did. Don't play dumb. You either tell me or you tell the detectives who are non stop searching for that woman." I demanded.

"How did you find out?" His voice deepened and his stare intensified.

"The knife. The jacket. You hid in OUR room!" I fumed.

His face became emotionless and cruel. He stood up out of his chair and rushed towards me. My phone dropped out of my lap in front of him with 911 across the screen.

At that moment, fear was an icy-cold hand around my throat that held me hostage in an iron grip.

Just before he reached me, police busted through the door, guns pointed and ready. He dropped to his knees, with his arms held high and stared at me in betrayal. He was taken into custody. I had to go to the station and answer questions.

When I got back home in the early hours of the morning, the food was cold and untouched. I finished off the wine.

Second Place

Darnell Chen

Albany State University

Inspired by *Pulcinella Singing with His Many Children* by Alessandro Magnasco

An Ugly Superstition

Who would've ever thought that I, Pulcinella, would've had a family? That I, Pulcinella, would be the father to a dozen of my own children? I've always been a man with the grotesque physique, a nose more crooked and longer than even Pinocchio's. A man who has always hidden his reptilian face behind a leather mask, as if he were going to a masquerade party. My own mother called me, "The ugliest and most foolish bastard alive."

I might've been foolish at times, but I'm not that ugly. I mean, I probably am pretty grotesque, but at least I was able to win the heart of the loveliest woman in town. My late wife used to say, "You live to laugh, not to chase after pretty faces." And to keep it real with you, I might've disagreed with her back then. I never saw personality as being more important than looks; it just seemed unrealistic. I don't know what God was doing when he made such a beauty fall madly in love with me.

Off the note, I thought it would be interesting to add that I wasn't a religious man; my wife, however, was probably the most devout person I've ever met. She wasn't able to convert me, but even if I didn't believe in the fantasies of the bible, I was still superstitious. Had anyone in town knew I wasn't a Catholic, my head would be dangling from a tree right now. My missus would tell me, "You'll be going straight to purgatory after they hang you from that big oak by the church."

Speaking of my dear wife, I honestly would've never had raised my kids if not for her. Before she passed, she told me, "Please make sure the kids grow into some fine young men." I'm not sure if she was in her right mind when she told me that, because those mosquito-looking kids have no chance of even coming close to become decent, much less "fine". Those ugly vermin have only inherited genes from me apparently, and none of their mother's. Had my mother been alive, she probably would've told me, "I never thought I'd see anything uglier than you until I saw those ugly ducklings of yours." But still, it feels good to know that you're far from the ugliest person in your own family.

I used to wonder where all of it went wrong, until I had a sort of epiphany. I realized that it just runs in the family. Like seriously, even my own parents weren't particularly good-looking. Heck, they weren't even close to average, they were more abnormal if anything. And don't get me started on my grandparents - they were the only sin that God has ever committed besides my kids and me.

My kids and I now attend church every Sunday, repenting for whatever our ancestors did that made the divine screw up our bloodline. We commit our time to the choir, singing every gospel known to man. It's a new hobby now, just me and my stooges filling the air with not-so-divine sounds. I'm pretty sure we sound like dying cats, and the choir wants to oust us out. In the end however, it's not like we're truly religious people. We're superstitious people.

Will there ever be a time when I'll be able to take off my mask and look normal? Will there ever be a time when my children will have families of their own? Will there ever be a time when my late wife rises from the dead? The answer is no, and will always be a no. I'll never be normal, my children are disappointments, and my wife is long gone. But who do we have to blame? We don't have a time machine to change our past so what's the point of pondering on it? And honestly, I don't know – but it's always worth a cheap laugh. It's as my mother always said, "If God can't change it, then you can only laugh about it."

Third Place

Alexis Conley

Georgia Southwestern State University

Inspired by *Jockey Cigars* by Cedric Smith

Untitled Essay

My family is different, and by different, I mean...gifted. I've only heard stories passed down from generation to generation but never thought they were true. My mother said that when I turned 18, I would understand. Little did I know...my life would soon change forever. It was November 23, 2016, and my classmates and I were going on our annual field trip to some art museum downtown. It was my birthday, and the most exciting thing about this trip was not having to sit in a boring classroom all day.

As the bus pulled up to the museum, we began to unload. The second I stepped into the building I heard this voice in my head saying, "Don't be afraid, embrace your callings." I've never been so spooked in my life. I looked over at my classmate to ask if she heard that too, she looked at me like I had three heads! I tried to brush it off but the further we got into our tour the stronger the voices got.

Then, it happened. As I passed by a portrait of some man's face everything faded away, within seconds; I was there...next to him strolling down Janey Avenue. I was so scared and confused! Why am I here? I tried to escape but nothing worked. So, I was left with no choice but to figure out why I was here.

I followed the man down the sidewalk which led me to an old historical-looking saloon where I saw him staring gloomily at the property. I peeked through the doors as people came in and out and it seemed to be full of life and good times.

So, why was he so sad? Only one way to find out. I built up the courage to go talk to him myself. "Hi, my name is Elenor but my friends call me Elly." Ben replied, "Well, nice to meet you, Elly. I'm Benjamin Harvey." I asked why he was so bummed. Turns out that the old saloon was Ben's great grandfather's and has been passed down to each generation. It was KNOWN for the best cigars in town.

Even though everybody loves the silver saloon, the city council is trying to tear it down to build a new mini-mall. He's been battling this fight with the council for years now and they aren't budging. They proposed an offer they knew Ben wouldn't be able to resist. His mother is a stage four cancer survivor, and believe me, her bills piled up quickly. They became so expensive she missed many payments on her house, leaving the city council with no choice but to foreclose it. They told Mr. Ben that if he signed his deed to the silver saloon over to the city, that they would clear any debt his mother Miriam had on her home and allow her to keep it. So, he did what every loving son would do...shook the city slicker's hand.

Ben will not be able to do anything fun, but at least his mother would be able to keep the home he grew up in. Then, it hit me. THIS IS MY PURPOSE. I need to help Ben save the saloon! But, how? Maybe if I gather enough people together and explain what we need to do in order to save the saloon we can confront the council and put an end to this madness.

The hunt for my army began. I knocked on every door and stood on every sidewalk corner until I made it happen. By the fourth day, our group grew to 450 people! The final date for the closing of Silver

Saloon was that Saturday and we had three days to somehow convince the council that Ben's saloon is the heart of the town. We made signs, wrote letters, and even created a petition signed by well over half of Crane County's population! After tonight the fate of the silver saloon will be set in stone.

We camped in tents outside of city hall to show unity, and by seven A.M our protest will begin. After a long night, the sunrise crept upon us. We gathered with our signs, and chants until the mayor came outside to see what the ruckus was about. I led a speech to explain how we can NOT tear down the Silver Saloon. We handed over our petition. "If you do not keep the silver saloon running then we will no longer sell our bread and crops to you and boycott ALL local businesses," I said on behalf of our group. "The business and money you plan to bring in with your new mini-mall won't mean a thing if we do that!!!"

We wouldn't budge until he gave in! After six hours of protesting...it worked! This shows that no matter how impossible an obstacle may seem to overcome, there is strength in numbers and a loyal community. They agreed to allow Mrs. Miriam to live stress-free in her home considering how much she gives back to the community with her gardening, and the silver saloon will live to see another day.

After all was said and done Mr. Ben came to me with tears of joy rolling down his face asking how he could repay me for my help. I replied, keep bringing joy into this town like you always have. Then that was it, everything turned white and before I could process what was happening, I was back at the museum!

"Elly, where have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you!" Everyone said. I knew if I were, to tell the truth, everybody would think I completely fell off my rocker, so I just said I was having girl troubles in the bathroom. Nobody ever questions that. My work was done, I figured out what my gift was, and had the ABSOLUTE best birthday ever! And I must say, I did like the art museum.