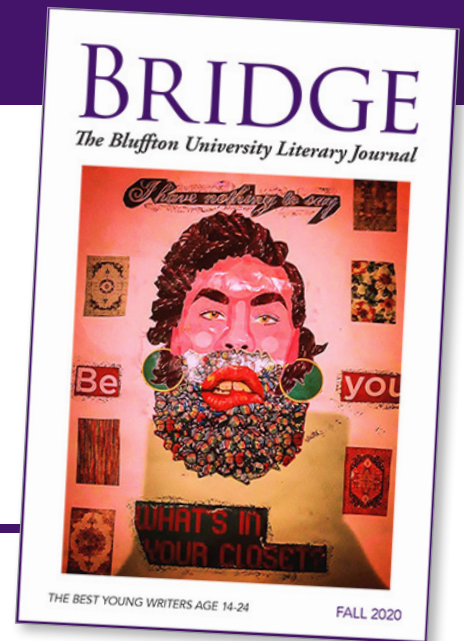


# BRIDGE

*The Bluffton University Literary Journal*



## MOTEL 6

Sonja Henze

We moved into that motel when I was about fifteen. The sink slumped away from the wall while forty years of smoke hung in the air and mold freely explored the shower. There were two queen beds, one for my parents, and one for the three of us. The decor had not changed from the sixties when it was built, and the contrasting blue and orange patterns often swirled through my mind as I drifted in and out of sleep. There was one window, but we always kept it covered with the ripped drapes. They might have been a warm yellow once, but they had faded and were stained with darker coffee colored circles.

Every morning my parents rose early to go to one of their two jobs, leaving us alone with the burn holes in the sheets. We were supposed to go to school, and we did when we could. But we also tried to pick up odd jobs around town. Mason was only seven, so Eleanor or I had to bring him to school every day. Days when we got too busy, the school called. My parents would yell at us and remind us of the sacrifices they were making to send us to school. And worse, how if we didn't keep going, the state might come and take us away from them. Eleanor was thirteen and picked up babysitting gigs whenever she could. Luckily, those rarely interfered with school. She was going to finish middle school at the top of her class, my parents'

*Continued on page 2*

**SONJA HENZE** lives in Saint Paul where she enjoys horseback riding, rowing, and spending time with her friends and her dog.

proudest claim.

I, however, was seventeen and going nowhere. I worked at the gas station down the street saying, “Hi welcome to Holiday!” and selling lung cancer to people who had exact change ready. My coworkers, a forty year old alcoholic, an overweight college dropout, and a surly ex-marine, loved to bitch. They complained about their crappy pay, ungrateful customers, numb legs, and how the world was conspiring against them. Maybe they were right. None of them were people I would have chosen to spend my time with. Though, at the end of the day, we kind of had each other’s backs.

All and all the job wasn’t too bad. I got paid twelve dollars an hour, which was enough to help buy food for my family and other necessities. It also gave me some other people to talk to and different perspectives on the world. I guess it could always be worse. Plus, I got to take home leftover donuts. Although, I was sick of the racist comments customers made: “Muslim, didn’t anyone tell you terrorists aren’t welcome in America?” At first I tried to explain to these idiots that I was actually Hindi, but I gave that up since it never helped anyway.

We actually had neighbors in the motel. I’m not sure if that made me sad or happy. Probably somewhere in between. Sometimes though, it seemed really sad and pathetic. I couldn’t help being pissed off at the world for sticking my family here. What did we do to deserve this no-star hell? Or the little Russian woman who lived down the hall from us? She loved to bake back in Vladivostok and it was obvious that not having a kitchen had eaten away at her remaining faith. She was beginning to resemble the last babushka in one of those nesting doll sets. But hey, like that one song says, “accentuate the positive.” Or like Brooklyn always quoted, “What doesn’t kill you, makes you ugly.”

---

*Continued on page 3*

Brooklyn was one of our neighbors. She got knocked up at seventeen and her loving parents kicked her out. She didn't end up keeping the child and decided instead to continue on with school. Now she's twenty-three and working part time to support herself while taking classes at the local community college. I'm not sure how Brooklyn does it. I would be lost without my family. But I guess she's just making lemonade.

I helped Brooklyn out with her homework sometimes, even though she was a better student than me. She always wanted to give me something in return. I always told her don't sweat it. I didn't mind because her company was enough. She had real life smarts, not the kind they teach you in school.

“So what happens if I take the chain rule of g of x?”

“It's f prime of g of x times g prime of x.”

Brooklyn's ice blue eyes found mine. “Uhh explain to me again why you're failing school?” she asked.

I shrugged. I honestly didn't know. I had been a good student once. That was before.

“Do you want to live in this motel the rest of your life?” Brooklyn sounded like my mom.

Of course I didn't want to live here the rest of my life. No one's life goal is to end up in a two-star motel in a flyover city, but the sea never gives up its dead. Luckily, before I could answer Brooklyn, there came a knock.

Logan's football player frame rattled the door as he came busting in. “Oh boy am I happy to see you guys.” Logan was another teenager living in the motel. The hollowed shell he called his mom lived here, too, with her sunken eyes like two black holes and what remained of her rotted and stained teeth. One of his bouncy

---

*Continued on page 4*

black curls fell in his eyes as he turned towards me. “Dude, where have you been lately? I’ve missed you.”

He only missed me because he cheated off of me. “I’ve been sick.”

The perfectly tweezed arch of Brooklyn’s eyebrow crept up.

“Ah man that blows. Hey did you guys hear? A new family moved in.”

“Really?” New residents were always exciting, in a depressing kind of way. Although, new people brought new risks, you never knew what they were into, or if they were the kind of people who would rip you off if given the chance. Still, we tried to be welcoming because we were all in the same pitiable situation.

“Ya. Room 327. Looked like there was a teenage girl.” Now Logan’s eyebrows crept up. “You should go introduce yourself, if she just moved here she probably doesn’t have a boyfriend...” He shifted his weight toward me before collapsing back down onto the bed. “Anyways, did you get the homework done while you were sick? Ms. Gardner was rambling on about logarithmic limits and something about the limit not existing-”

The limit of Logan’s imagination? She got that right. I was a scrawny five foot nine almost adult who looked like they should be in the eighth grade. No girl wanted to go out with me.

Nevertheless, Logan had peaked my curiosity. I wondered how she ended up at this dream destination. The motel was near the airport, which seems like a good location in theory. Except that as time went on newer and nicer hotels were built around it, leaving it mostly vacant. Airplanes could be heard at every hour and the rusty locks on the blue doors marbled with chipped paint, barely worked. Our door could be opened with an aggressive jiggle of the handle and a push. We weren’t really worried about getting ripped off though. There wasn’t much to steal, even though

---

*Continued on page 5*

everything we owned was in that motel room: photo albums, the first American dollar my dad made (which he had framed like the restaurants here do), our school supplies, and what little clothes we had.

The leaves turned to crunched dust below my feet. I still hadn't seen the new girl. I was starting to think Logan made her up, except whenever I "nonchalantly" walked up to the third floor the lights were on in 327. I could have just knocked on their door and said "Hi," but I was too pathetic for that.

One day I dragged myself home after a stressful day at work to find my family fighting. My dad smelled like a freaking brewery. My mom was tearing at her cuticles till they bled. Tears were welling up behind my sister's eyes. After having to clean up diarrhea on the bathroom floor of work and having a white customer try to explain to me how to do my job, I was not in the mood for any drama. So, I turned and walked right back out the door as my mom yelled "Sai wait!"

Anger clawed at me. I was not enough of a man to handle a dumb fight. I was nothing more than a scared child who walked away. I hated myself more, and the anger continued to grow. I tried not to run as my feet swiftly swept over the concrete below, carrying me towards the pool.

Once the door to the pool had closed behind me I finally allowed myself a shaky breath, wishing I could remember how to cry. The pool was empty. It'd been this way the whole time we'd lived here. Somehow the room still smelled strongly of chlorine to me. My nose hadn't gotten used to that smell. A few broken plastic pool chairs sat along the edge of the pool, now serving as condos for upwardly mobile spiders. The kidney shaped pool slowly got deeper, going from three to six feet. I held on to the cold metal of the shaky ladder and climbed down into the pool. It

---

*Continued on page 6*

was my favorite place to be alone when I was upset; something about the moving shadows and echoes of the space that calmed me. I was weaving around the ever-expanding patches of black mold to get to the standing bench in the deep end when I noticed her: a small, pale, redheaded teenage girl.

She sat in one of the dusty white spider infested chairs. Recovering from my initial freeze, I tried to rearrange my face into something resembling warmth. I stared at her. She stared back at me. Somehow, even on the collapsing chair, she sat so delicately. Like a poised statue.

“What are you doing here?!” Shit, that sounded so much more judgmental than I had meant. Now she’s going to think I’m a douche.

“Just trying to find some peace and quiet and collect my thoughts. I didn’t realize you had claimed this space.” She motioned her hands around the pool’s floor.

I somehow moved the feet attached to my body in her direction. I felt my gut constrict and my throat tighten. My pulse hammered. Now that I’d had time to collect my own thoughts, speaking to her felt almost impossible. No. I can do this. All I need to do is talk. I do that every day. Be cool and casual. “Wha-what I meant to say was, hi- I’m Sai.” The words fell out of my mouth landing somewhere on the floor. Definitely not cool.

She smiled, probably trying not to laugh. “Claire,” she said.

Why was it that her voice sounded like the tinkling of chimes and mine sounded like I was choking on a pea? “I think I’ve seen you around lately,” I lied. I didn’t want her to be freaked out by some doofus she found alone in a pool.

“Oh. Maybe.” There was a flicker of pain on her face where warmth had previously been.

In the silence I panicked and said, “I, uh, just wanted to invite you to uh,

---

*Continued on page 7*

come over to play cards with my friends and me tomorrow. We try to have game night on Saturday. No pressure- just if you want to- you should come. We'll be in room 204."

"Okay. Cool."

I now felt incredibly awkward, gaining a new found fascination with the cracks in the turquoise concrete of the pool.

"Well, I better be going. I don't want to interfere with your alone time. It was nice to meet you, Sai." She got up to leave.

I gave a lame little wave as she walked off. She didn't turn around. I'm sure I looked like an idiot standing there alone. I just couldn't keep a grin from growing on my face.

"Hey guys. I invited Claire, the new girl, to join us tonight. Hope that's okay." I stated as flatly as possible when I walked into Brooklyn's room the next night. Logan and Brooklyn made eye contact acknowledging surprise.

"That's cool. The more the merrier." Brooklyn said, excitement slipping into her tone.

Logan chimed in. "Usually you take a girl out to dinner on a first date. But, I guess this is good, too."

I rolled my eyes so hard trying to bore a hole in Logan's head that it hurt. "It's not a date. I just want to help her make friends."

Logan and Brooklyn smiled at me and began setting up Spades.

I tried to ignore the gnawing in the pit of my stomach. The night dragged on. No Claire. Soon the fear was replaced with anger. I'd made a fool of myself. With Claire, with Brooklyn, and with Logan. They didn't say anything as the hour passed,

---

*Continued on page 8*

however, they would occasionally glance at the clock. Finally, Brooklyn looked at me, shrugged, and said, “Her loss.”

I appreciated Brooklyn’s effort to make me feel better. Still, I felt the shame resting on my face. Not ten minutes later, a quiet knock came at the door. I jumped up. My fingers ran through my too long black hair and I could feel it crunch from all the hair gel I’d put in it. I took a deep breath and sighed out the stress. I opened the door.

“You didn’t ever tell me what time you guys meet at,” a nervous Claire said. Shit.

“Hey it’s all good, you’re right on time! I’m Brooklyn. This is my room, and that’s Logan,” she said with a wave in his direction. “Come on in.”

Claire drifted towards the table and sat on a stool we had found in a junkyard, resuming the same delicate pose from this morning. “Oh, I love Spades.”

Once my body finally decided to remember how to breathe I settled into the fast paced rhythm of the game. My nerves faded away with the dim hum of the heating vent. As the light disappeared from the sky we played on, the motel room glowing with fluorescent lighting, and maybe even happiness.

The arrival of winter was signified at school by girls wearing their Ugg boots and cardigans, outfits which cost as much as my entire family’s wardrobe. Their long parkas whistled as they rubbed against my backpack at school. I hadn’t seen Claire since we played cards together about two weeks ago. I figured she was busy, or, at least, I hoped that was it. I had considered going up to her room to check on her a few times, though I always chickened out.

My parents usually didn’t get home until late, which left “making” dinner

---

*Continued on page 9*



up to Eleanor or me. There was no fridge in our motel room. There was a microwave, so we ate a lot of frozen pizza. We'd steal food from the lobby when we got the chance. Although, the most we ever got was an apple that wasn't good even when it was ripe, or an individual sized box of cereal. Plus, once my dad got food poisoning from the breakfast so we were always weary.

One night I was heating up a frozen mac and cheese for myself when I heard a faint knock on the door. My mom and dad were at work and Eleanor had taken Mason to the park. It couldn't be Logan or Brooklyn. They would have just pushed their way in. I cracked the door open to find Claire, eyes red and cheeks puffy.

"Can I come in?" She choked.

"Ya. Course. Here, have a seat anywhere." I quickly slid my textbooks off my bed and onto the floor. "I'm making mac and cheese. Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head.

I sat down on the bed opposite the desk chair she was slouched in. The defensive position, so different from her normal confident presence, made her seem vulnerable. I felt the sudden need to protect her. Only problem was, I had no clue how to. Asking if she was okay seemed like a dumb idea because clearly she wasn't. I just didn't know what else to say. So we sat in silence until we were interrupted by the beep-beep-beep of the microwave.

"How long have your dinners looked like that?" She asked.

"About a year and a half."

She grimaced. "How'd you end up here?"

I told her everything. Distracting her was at least one thing I could do. I told her we had a house once. Then my dad lost his job. He searched for months.

---

*Continued on page 10*

Everywhere he tried told him he was over-qualified for the job. We moved in with my aunt when I was eleven. My mom had to leave her job because of the move. Even though my mom found another job soon after the move as a house cleaner, my dad continued to struggle. I told her how eventually my aunt's patience wore thin. None of us resented my aunt afterward. All of our patience was wearing thin, too. We moved again, landing at this motel. My parents told us it was just temporary and soon we would find a nice, more permanent, apartment.

The distraction of the story seemed to calm her down and she nodded along. When I finished she lifted her green eyes to mine and said she was sorry. I knew she meant it too. I mustered up the confidence and asked her how she ended up here.

"My mom and dad got divorced. It was ugly. My dad comes from serious money and he took everything. He even wanted to take me. So one night my mom told me to pack only what I needed and we left. We've been bouncing around from place to place ever since, trying to outrun him."

I didn't know how to respond to that. She didn't seem to need a response. Somehow the silence wasn't filled with awkward "umms" and spastic movements. We just sat there.

"Well I should go, my mom will wonder what happened to me." Her voice rippled through the silence.

"Okay. I'll walk you to your room."

She nodded and we headed out through the ramshackle door.

As we shuffled along I felt the heat of her fingers brush against my hand. A shiver ran up my spine in the wintery air. We didn't talk, but the faint squeeze of her hand said it all. I had never been this close to her before. The smell of artificial

---

*Continued on page 11*

mangos and faded roses filled my nose. When we reached 327, she stopped. Her green eyes locked with mine for the second time tonight. Unflinching. I leaned forward, not breaking eye contact. The roaring of the highway faded away and I let my eyelids drop. My lips found hers. The chill of the night vanished. Warmth filled me from within.

The next morning I got up before my family and made a cup of Jasmine tea for Claire. I carefully poured it into my favorite mug- Winnie the Pooh and Piglet playing Pooh sticks. The white handle had a chip in it from the multiple moves. I held the mug with both hands to keep them warm in the brisk, winter morning air. As I walked down the long hallway, I glanced beyond the black guard rail. The landscape didn't seem so bad after all.

When I finally reached 327 I gave a faint knock, just as Claire had done the night before. No answer. I knocked a little louder. Still nothing. Finally, I pushed my body weight against the door and jiggled the handle. I stumbled in when the door flew open. The only thing that greeted me was the thick air that strangled my lungs, heavy with smoke. Another bleak, depressing room, like every other one in the motel. A falling down sink in the corner, a hole in the cheap, fake wood of the bathroom door, and a dizzying comforter pattern on a perfectly made bed. Pieces of Winnie the Pooh and Piglet scattered across the concrete.

I gave a courtesy knock on Brooklyn's door before collapsing inside. She was lounging in her bed reading *Explorations in Ancient Literature*. She glanced up at me and I knew she understood. She slid over on the yellowish sheets to make room for me. When I sat down next to her the bed sunk and let out a faint squeak that was

---

*Continued on page 12*

more like a sigh, as though it didn't have the energy to complain about the weight it was forced to bear.

“Claire's gone.”

Silence.

She put her arm around me. “As they say in my favorite song ‘what doesn't kill you makes you ugly.’”