

Joseph Laguerre

Professor Courtney McDermott

ENG 542

5 April, 2026

Merlot Lakes

The final bell at Merlot Lakes High School sounded less like freedom and more like the release of a pressure valve. The hallway outside Josh Couch's locker filled instantly with noise—lockers slamming, sneakers squeaking across the tile floor, varsity backpacks swinging through the crowd like wrecking balls.

Josh waited a few seconds before stepping forward. Over the past four years, he had learned the value of letting the first wave of students pass. Invisible kids didn't get shoved into lockers or dragged into hallway drama. Invisible kids kept their heads down, finished their homework, and made it through the day without anyone really noticing them.

He spun the dial on his locker and pulled it open. Inside were textbooks, a battered notebook, and the Evanescence T-shirt he had worn under his hoodie that morning. He stuffed the shirt into his backpack just as Roger appeared beside him.

Roger was slightly taller and broader than Josh, his hoodie half-zipped and a pair of scuffed headphones hanging loosely around his neck. He held out a Nintendo Switch.

"Thanks for letting me borrow this, bro," Roger said.

"All good, dude," Josh replied, slipping the console into his bag.

Roger leaned against the lockers. "My parents went nuclear last night. Pretty sure they might split."

Josh paused for a moment. "That sucks, man."

Commented [JL1]: Establishes Josh's character arc, beginning as an invisible kid.

Roger shrugged like he didn't want to sit with the thought too long. "So we still gaming tonight?"

"Yeah. Let me get through homework first. I'll text you when I log on."

"Cool. Catch you later."

Roger drifted toward the exit while Josh zipped his backpack and joined the slow river of students moving down the hallway.

Halfway there, he noticed a pile of textbooks and loose papers scattered across the floor. A lanky sophomore with messy dark hair knelt beside them, trying to gather everything before someone stepped on it.

Josh crouched down and handed him a binder.

"You good?"

"Yeah," the kid muttered. "Thanks. Cole happened."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "The quarterback?"

"Yeah." The kid shoved papers into the binder. "Said I was talking to his girlfriend."

"What did you do?"

"She asked to borrow my pencil sharpener," the kid said. "Apparently, that's illegal now."

Josh shook his head and handed him the last book. "That's ridiculous."

The kid slung his backpack over his shoulder. "Someone should deal with him. But nobody's gonna touch him."

Josh watched him walk away before heading outside.

Commented [JL2]: Hallway bullying (indirect escalation of conflict)

Commented [JL3]: Good use for scene breaks.

The afternoon air smelled like cut grass and warm asphalt. Josh unlocked his blue Kent Ambush BMX from the bike rack and hopped on. The ride home took about ten minutes through quiet neighborhoods where every house looked almost identical.

At the intersection of Baxter and Pulse, he stopped and pressed the crosswalk button. While he waited for the light to change, the sound of raised voices carried across the street.

Two figures stood arguing on the lawn of a yellow house down the road.

Josh squinted.

Cole Sawyer.

And Katerina Balboni.

Even from a distance, Cole looked exactly like he did under the stadium lights on Friday nights—broad shoulders, thick arms, his gray football hoodie stretched tight across his back like armor. Kate stood a few feet away from him with her arms crossed, her long red hair hanging loose around her shoulders instead of tied back with the ribbon she wore on game days.

"Kate, you always come to the after-parties," Cole was saying. "Why's this weekend any different?"

"I don't even know if I want to go to homecoming with you anymore," Kate replied.

Cole grabbed her arm.

"Get off me," she snapped.

Josh hesitated.

He could keep riding. Invisible kids stayed out of other people's problems.

Instead, he pushed off the curb and rode closer.

"Hey," Josh said, dropping his bike. "Let her go."

Commented [JL4]: Cole is a functional character but needs depth:

He is a clear threat, consistent presence, escalates the conflict.

He doesn't feel like a full character. He's a force of conflict but not a person with stakes.

Add some humanizing or contextual details such as pressure to maintain status, insecurity, or social identity.

Commented [JL5]: Kate is an improved character; however, she is still slightly functional. She only functions as motivation for Josh, a symbol of being seen.

Give her one independent emotional beat that isn't tied to Josh.

Could be expressing fear privately, reflecting on Cole beyond anger, or making a decision unrelated to Josh.

Commented [JL6]: Street confrontation (personal escalation of conflict)

Cole turned slowly. Up close, he looked even bigger—half a head taller than Josh and thick through the shoulders from years in the weight room.

"And who the hell are you?"

Josh swallowed but stepped forward anyway. "Doesn't matter. Just leave her alone."

Cole shoved Kate aside and moved toward him.

"Kate, you bringing random weirdos into this now?"

"God, Cole," Kate said, brushing dirt from her jeans. "This is exactly why we're done."

Cole turned back toward her, and before he could finish whatever insult he had ready, Josh stepped behind him and landed a quick, low blow.

Cole folded over with a grunt.

"Come on," Josh said, grabbing Kate's hand.

They ran to the bike. Kate climbed onto the rear pegs and grabbed Josh's shoulders as he pedaled hard down the street.

For a block or two, neither of them spoke. Then Kate laughed breathlessly and brushed wind-blown hair out of her face.

"Well," she said, "that was dramatic."

Josh glanced back at her. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said. "Thanks to you."

Josh walked Kate to the front door of her brick two-story house. A basketball hoop hung above the garage, and a police cruiser sat parked in the driveway.

"I'm embarrassed you had to see that," she said.

"It's fine," Josh replied. "Your boy seemed a little unhinged."

Kate snorted. "He's basically a toddler when he doesn't get his way."

"I mean," Josh said, "technically we're all kids."

She studied him for a moment. "You're Couch, right?"

Josh blinked. "Uh... yeah."

"You sit two seats in front of me in Algebra."

Josh rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. I know."

Kate smiled and tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear—the same nervous habit Josh had noticed whenever teachers called on her in class.

"Thanks for helping me," she said.

"No problem."

She hesitated before unlocking the door.

"He's probably going to do something stupid," she said. "I don't want you getting dragged into this."

Josh shrugged. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Kate gave him a skeptical look. "You don't know Cole very well."

"My dad will be home soon anyway," she added. "The Chief."

"You actually call your dad the Chief?"

Kate laughed. "Everyone does."

She stepped inside.

"See you tomorrow."

Josh rode home slower than usual. The adrenaline from the confrontation faded as the streets grew quiet again.

Cole Sawyer wasn't just some random guy.

He was the quarterback.

The kind of guy people stepped aside for in hallways.

Josh coasted into his driveway and sat on the bike for a moment, staring at the pavement.

Tomorrow might be interesting.

The next morning, everyone stared.

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"Bro," Roger said, "why is everyone looking at you weird?"

Josh sighed. "So... I might've gotten into it with Cole yesterday."

Roger stopped walking. "I'm sorry, what?"

Josh explained.

Roger shook his head.

"You fought the starting quarterback. For head cheerleader Kate."

Josh shrugged. "It wasn't like that."

Roger smirked. "Oh, it was exactly like that."

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His books were scattered across the floor.

Roger whistled. "Well... guess he heard about it."

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His stomach dropped.

Both tires had been slashed.

“What piece of shit,” Roger muttered.

Before Josh could respond, something slammed into the back of his head. He hit the pavement hard.

Cole stood over him.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?”

A crowd gathered quickly.

Cole shrugged out of his letterman jacket and tossed it aside.

Josh tasted blood as Cole’s fist connected with his face. Roger tried to help, but two linemen held him back.

Josh wiped his nose. “That’s all you got?”

Cole swung again.

Josh dodged and tackled him. They crashed onto the pavement before Cole drove a knee into Josh’s stomach and stood.

“Get up.”

Josh struggled to his feet.

Kate stepped between them. “Enough already. I’ll go to the stupid dance with you.”

Cole tilted his head. “You’re protecting him?”

“Does it matter?”

Josh staggered forward. “She doesn’t want you.”

He looked around at the students watching.

“How many of you have dealt with this guy?”

At first, only a few hands lifted.

Then more followed.

Commented [JL7]: School retaliation (public escalation of conflict)

Commented [JL8]: Stakes are strong, but could feel more personal.

Internally, what does Josh risk? Losing his anonymity, becoming a target permanently, changing how people see him?

Commented [JL9]: This a major thematic payoff: It needs more weight.

Ways to improve could be: students looking at each other, fear of retaliation, then shift to one brave student raising their hand, and others follow.

That one student who steps forward could be the student that Josh helps in the hallway at the beginning.

Cole glanced around, suddenly unsure.

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A tall silver-haired officer pushed through the crowd.

Kate smiled.

“Dad.”

Chief Balboni looked at Josh. “You alright, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cole froze.

“I think we're done here,” the Chief said calmly.

Deputies escorted Cole toward the office as the crowd slowly broke apart.

Josh sat on the curb while the adrenaline drained out of him. Kate sat beside him.

“You didn't have to do that,” she said.

Josh shrugged. “Seemed like someone should.”

Kate looked out across the parking lot. “Thanks for not being invisible yesterday.”

Josh glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“Most people saw what was happening,” she said. “They just kept walking.”

Josh thought about the hallway earlier that week—the kid picking up his books while everyone stepped around him.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “People do that a lot.”

Kate stood and offered him a hand. “Come on. You definitely need the nurse.”

As they walked toward the building, students stepped aside to let them pass.

Josh could feel people looking at him now—really looking.

For most of high school, he had learned how to disappear into the background of hallways and classrooms.

But today was different.

Today, everyone has seen him.

And for the first time, that didn't feel like something to hide from.

Commented [JL10]: Core Theme: Invisibility vs. being seen

Introduced early, reinforced through action, landed clearly at the end.

What's missing is echoing the theme mid-story

A way to fix that is brief moments where Josh notices people ignoring things or himself choosing silence (before breaking the pattern)

Ending is strong: Mirrors opening concept, emotional resolution without being overdramatic, subtle but clear transformation.

One final internal line could deepen resonance as in not just "people see him" but "how he feels about being seen."

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"All good, dude," Josh replied, slipping the console into his bag.

Roger leaned against the lockers. "My parents went nuclear last night. Pretty sure they might split."

Josh paused for a moment. "That sucks, man."

Roger shrugged like he didn't want to sit with the thought too long. "So we still gaming tonight?"

"Yeah. Let me get through homework first. I'll text you when I log on."

Commented [JL11]: The final bell at Merlot Lakes High sounded less like freedom and more like a pressure valve releasing.

Smoother phrasing, removed redundancy

Commented [JL12]: The hallway outside Josh Couch's locker filled instantly with noise—lockers slamming, sneakers squeaking, backpacks swinging through the crowd like wrecking balls.

Cut "across the tile floor" (implied), keeps rhythm tight.

Commented [JL13]: Invisible kids didn't get shoved into lockers or dragged into drama.

Conciseness

Commented [JL14]: Invisible kids kept their heads down, finished their homework, and made it through the day without anyone really noticing them.

Word Economy

Commented [JL15]: Roger leaned against the lockers. "My parents went nuclear last night. I think they might split."

Clarity

“Cool. Catch you later.”

Roger drifted toward the exit while Josh zipped his backpack and joined the slow river of students moving down the hallway.

Halfway there, he noticed a pile of textbooks and loose papers scattered across the floor.

A lanky sophomore with messy dark hair knelt beside them, trying to gather everything before someone stepped on it.

Josh crouched down and handed him a binder.

“You good?”

“Yeah,” the kid muttered. “Thanks. Cole happened.”

Josh raised an eyebrow. “The quarterback?”

“Yeah.” The kid shoved papers into the binder. “Said I was talking to his girlfriend.”

“What did you do?”

“She asked to borrow my pencil sharpener,” the kid said. “Apparently, that’s illegal now.”

Josh shook his head and handed him the last book. “That’s ridiculous.”

The kid slung his backpack over his shoulder. “Someone should deal with him. But nobody’s gonna touch him.”

Josh watched him walk away before heading outside.

The afternoon air smelled like cut grass and warm asphalt. Josh unlocked his blue Kent Ambush BMX from the bike rack and hopped on. The ride home took about ten minutes through quiet neighborhoods where every house looked almost exactly the same.

Commented [JL16]: A lanky sophomore with messy dark hair knelt beside them, gathering everything before someone stepped on it.

Word Economy – removed “trying to” filter phrase

Commented [JL17]: Strong voice, natural dialogue.

Commented [JL18]: The ride home took ten minutes through quiet neighborhoods where every house looked identical.

Conciseness – Removed about and almost

At the intersection of Baxter and Pulse he stopped and pressed the crosswalk button. While he waited for the light to change, the sound of raised voices carried across the street.

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Even from a distance Cole looked exactly like he did under the stadium lights on Friday nights—broad shoulders, thick arms, his gray football hoodie stretched tight across his back like armor. Kate stood a few feet away from him with her arms crossed, her long red hair hanging loose around her shoulders instead of tied back with the ribbon she wore on game days.

“Kate, you always come to the after-parties,” Cole was saying. “Why’s this weekend any different?”

“I don’t even know if I want to go to homecoming with you anymore,” Kate replied.

Cole grabbed her arm.

“Get off me,” she snapped.

Josh hesitated.

He could keep riding. Invisible kids stayed out of other people’s problems.

Instead, he pushed off the curb and rode closer.

“Hey,” Josh said, dropping his bike. “Let her go.”

Cole turned slowly. Up close he looked even bigger—half a head taller than Josh and thick through the shoulders from years in the weight room.

“And who the hell are you?”

Josh swallowed but stepped forward anyway. “Doesn’t matter. Just leave her alone.”

Commented [JL19]: Effective minimalism – good pacing

Commented [JL20]: He could keep riding. Invisible kids stayed out of other people’s problems.

Strong thematic reinforcement

Commented [JL21]: Josh swallowed and stepped forward anyway.

Flow: “and” reads smoother than “but” here

Cole shoved Kate aside and moved toward him.

“Kate, you bringing random weirdos into this now?”

“God, Cole,” Kate said, brushing dirt from her jeans. “This is exactly why we’re done.”

Cole turned back toward her, and before he could finish whatever insult he had ready,

Josh stepped behind him and landed a quick, low blow.

Cole folded over with a grunt.

“Come on,” Josh said, grabbing Kate’s hand.

They ran to the bike. Kate climbed onto the rear pegs and grabbed Josh’s shoulders as he pedaled hard down the street.

For a block or two, neither of them spoke. Then Kate laughed breathlessly and brushed wind-blown hair out of her face.

“Well,” she said, “that was dramatic.”

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“It’s fine,” Josh replied. “Your boy seemed a little unhinged.”

Kate snorted. “He’s basically a toddler when he doesn’t get his way.”

“I mean,” Josh said, “technically we’re all kids.”

She studied him for a moment. “You’re Couch, right?”

Josh blinked. “Uh... yeah.”

Commented [JL22]: Josh stepped behind him and landed a quick low blow.

Grammar: Removed unnecessary comma

Commented [JL23]: Clean and effective pacing.

Commented [JL24]: Good tonal balance after tension.

“You sit two seats in front of me in Algebra.”

Josh rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I know.”

Kate smiled and tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear—the same nervous habit Josh had noticed whenever teachers called on her in class.

“Thanks for helping me,” she said.

“No problem.”

She hesitated before unlocking the door.

“He’s probably going to do something stupid,” she said. “I don’t want you getting dragged into this.”

Josh shrugged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Kate gave him a skeptical look. “You don’t know Cole very well.”

“My dad will be home soon anyway,” she added. “The Chief.”

“You actually call your dad the Chief?”

Kate laughed. “Everyone does.”

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Josh coasted into his driveway and sat on the bike for a moment, staring at the pavement.

Commented [JL25]: Could be a cliché gesture, but acceptable – optional variation if repeated later.

Commented [JL26]: The adrenaline faded as the streets grew quiet again.

Word economy: Removed “from the confrontation” it’s implied already that is what he’s recovering from.

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“Bro,” Roger said, “why is everyone looking at you weird?”

Josh sighed. “So... I might’ve gotten into it with Cole yesterday.”

Roger stopped walking. “I’m sorry, what?”

Josh explained.

Roger shook his head.

“You fought the starting quarterback. For head cheerleader Kate.”

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His books were scattered across the floor.

Roger whistled. “Well... guess he heard about it.”

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His stomach dropped.

Both tires had been slashed.

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Before Josh could respond something slammed into the back of his head. He hit the pavement hard.

Cole stood over him.

Commented [JL27]: Josh noticed it the moment he walked through the front doors.

Concise – With the scene change and the fact that everyone was staring, school is the obvious location of this situation.

Commented [JL28]: Strong, immediate action.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?”

A crowd gathered quickly.

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Josh tasted blood as Cole’s fist connected with his face. Roger tried to help but two

linemen held him back.

Josh wiped his nose. “That all you got?”

Cole swung again.

Josh dodged and tackled him. They crashed onto the pavement before Cole drove a knee into Josh’s stomach and stood.

“Get up.”

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“Does it matter?”

Josh staggered forward. “She doesn’t want you.”

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Then more followed.

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A tall silver-haired officer pushed through the crowd.

Commented [JL29]: Vivid sensory detail.

Commented [JL30]: No Change but more expansion could enhance emotional weight. Already indicated in the macro edit.

Kate smiled.

“Dad.”

Chief Balboni looked at Josh. “You alright, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cole froze.

“I think we’re done here,” the Chief said calmly.

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“You didn’t have to do that,” she said.

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“Yeah,” he said quietly. “People do that a lot.”

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Josh could feel people looking at him now—really looking.

For most of high school he had learned how to disappear into the background of hallways and classrooms.

Commented [JL31]: “I think we’re done here,” the Chief said.

Word economy: Removed “calmly” (tone already implied)

Commented [JL32]: Josh could feel people looking at him now—actually looking.

Fine as is, but “actually” feels sharper here.

But today was different.

Today everyone has seen him.

And for the first time, that didn't feel like something to hide from.

Commented [JL33]: Today, everyone had seen him.

Tense consistency: Align with past narrative tense

Commented [JL34]: For the first time, it didn't feel like something to hide from.

Clarity: Slightly smoother sentence structure

What I'm doing well:

Strong sentence clarity overall, natural dialogue, clean pacing, minimal clutter

Patterns to watch for: Filler words, filter phrases, redundancy, and adverbs.

Joseph Laguerre

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About 1600 words

Editorial Review for Joseph Laguerre, “Merlot Lakes”

Joseph, I think “Merlot Lakes” is a strong, easy-to-follow story with a clear character arc. Josh’s growth from someone who stays invisible to someone who finally steps up and is seen gives the piece a solid emotional center. The story moves well, the conflict comes in early enough to keep the reader interested, and the dialogue feels believable for the age group and setting.

What stood out to me most was the theme of invisibility. That idea comes through clearly from the beginning and carries through to the ending. This gives the story a nice sense of completion. I also think the school setting works well because it feels familiar without being overloaded with description.

My main suggestions would be to go a little deeper into Josh’s thoughts and emotions, make Cole feel a little less one-note, and give Kate a bit more agency. I also think a few places could be slowed down just enough to let the emotional weight of certain moments land more fully. Overall, though, the story has a good foundation, clear momentum, and a message that comes through.

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"All good, dude," Josh replied, slipping the console into his bag.

Roger leaned against the lockers. "My parents went nuclear last night. Pretty sure they might split."

Josh paused for a moment. "That sucks, man."

Commented [TS35]: I liked that Josh's identity as someone who stays invisible is clear right away. That gives the story a strong foundation. I do think it would help to show a little more of what that invisibility feels like for him emotionally. *Intention & Core Purpose*

Roger shrugged like he didn't want to sit with the thought too long. "So we still gaming tonight?"

"Yeah. Let me get through homework first. I'll text you when I log on."

"Cool. Catch you later."

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Instead, he pushed off the curb and rode closer.

“Hey,” Josh said, dropping his bike. “Let her go.”

Commented [TS36]: This scene, where Josh steps in to help Kate, is a major turning point. Because it matters so much, I think it could be slowed down just a little so we feel more of Josh’s fear, hesitation, or thought process. *Conflict & Stakes*

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Josh sighed. "So... I might've gotten into it with Cole yesterday."

Roger stopped walking. "I'm sorry, what?"

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Both tires had been slashed.

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Cole stood over him.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?”

A crowd gathered quickly.

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Josh tasted blood as Cole’s fist connected with his face. Roger tried to help but two linemen held him back.

Josh wiped his nose. “That all you got?”

Cole swung again.

Josh dodged and tackled him. They crashed onto the pavement before Cole drove a knee into Josh’s stomach and stood.

“Get up.”

Josh struggled to his feet.

Kate stepped between them. “Enough already. I’ll go to the stupid dance with you.”

Cole tilted his head. “You’re protecting him?”

“Does it matter?”

Josh staggered forward. “She doesn’t want you.”

He looked around at the students watching.

“How many of you have dealt with this guy?”

At first only a few hands lifted.

Then more followed.

Commented [TS37]: This parking lot scene works great as the climax because everything becomes public. I do think the emotional aftermath could be developed a little more. The resolution comes fast once Kate’s Dad arrives, and I wanted just a bit more reflection from Josh. *Pacing & Rhythm*

Commented [TS38]: Cole works as the antagonist because readers immediately understand the kind of power he has in the school. At the same time, he feels a little familiar bully/quarterback type. Adding another layer of personality or social control could make him feel even more believable and effective. *Structure & Tension*

Cole glanced around, suddenly unsure.

For the first time since Josh had known his name, Cole Sawyer didn't look like the king of Merlot Lakes. He looked like just another kid standing in a parking lot.

A tall silver-haired officer pushed through the crowd.

Kate smiled.

“Dad.”

Chief Balboni looked at Josh. “You alright, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cole froze.

“I think we're done here,” the Chief said calmly.

Deputies escorted Cole toward the office as the crowd slowly broke apart.

Josh sat on the curb while the adrenaline drained out of him. Kate sat beside him.

“You didn't have to do that,” she said.

Josh shrugged. “Seemed like someone should.”

Kate looked out across the parking lot. “Thanks for not being invisible yesterday.”

Josh glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“Most people saw what was happening,” she said. “They just kept walking.”

Josh thought about the hallway earlier that week—the kid picking up his books while everyone stepped around him.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “People do that a lot.”

Kate stood and offered him a hand. “Come on. You definitely need the nurse.”

Commented [TS39]: Cole feels a little too much like the typical bully/quarterback type. Giving him a little more personality or complexity could make him feel more believable.

As they walked toward the building, students stepped aside to let them pass.

Josh could feel people looking at him now—really looking.

For most of high school he had learned how to disappear into the background of hallways and classrooms.

But today was different.

Today everyone had seen him.

And for the first time, that didn't feel like something to hide from.

Commented [TS40]: The story has a clear arc, which I liked. Josh starts off trying not to be noticed, and by the end, he's willing to be seen. That works very well. *Protagonist & Motivation*

Commented [TS41]: The story is very readable and accessible, which is a strength. For a literary magazine setting, though, I think it could go a little deeper emotionally and maybe push the prose just a bit more in places. That would help it feel less like a straightforward school conflict story and more like a literary piece with added depth.

Micro Edit

Joseph Laguerre

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About 1600 words

Merlot Lakes

The final bell at Merlot Lakes High School sounded less like freedom and more like the release of a pressure valve. The hallway outside Josh Couch’s locker filled instantly with noise—lockers slamming, sneakers squeaking across the tile floor, varsity backpacks swinging through the crowd like wrecking balls.

Josh waited a few seconds before stepping forward. Over the past four years, he had learned the value of letting the first wave of students pass. Invisible kids didn’t get shoved into lockers or dragged into hallway drama. Invisible kids kept their heads down, finished their homework, and made it through the day without anyone really noticing them.

He spun the dial on his locker and pulled it open. Inside were textbooks, a battered notebook, and the Evanescence T-shirt he had worn under his hoodie that morning. He stuffed the shirt into his backpack just as Roger appeared beside him.

Roger was slightly taller and broader than Josh, his hoodie half-zipped and a pair of scuffed headphones hanging loosely around his neck. He held out a Nintendo Switch.

“Thanks for letting me borrow this, bro,” Roger said.

“All good, dude,” Josh replied, slipping the console into his bag.

Commented [TS42]: “The final bell at Merlot Lakes High School sounded less like freedom and more like the release of a pressure valve.”
This is a strong opening line. It sets the tone immediately and gives the story energy right away.

Commented [TS43]: The Evanescence T-shirt is an interesting detail.

Roger leaned against the lockers. “My parents went nuclear last night. Pretty sure they might split.”

Josh paused for a moment. “That sucks, man.”

Roger shrugged like he didn’t want to sit with the thought too long. “So we still gaming tonight?”

“Yeah. Let me get through homework first. I’ll text you when I log on.”

“Cool. Catch you later.”

Roger drifted toward the exit while Josh zipped his backpack and joined the slow river of students moving down the hallway.

Halfway there, he noticed a pile of textbooks and loose papers scattered across the floor. A lanky sophomore with messy dark hair knelt beside them, trying to gather everything before someone stepped on it.

Josh crouched down and handed him a binder.

“You good?”

“Yeah,” the kid muttered. “Thanks. Cole happened.”

Josh raised an eyebrow. “The quarterback?”

“Yeah.” The kid shoved papers into the binder. “Said I was talking to his girlfriend.”

“What did you do?”

“She asked to borrow my pencil sharpener,” the kid said. “Apparently, that’s illegal now.”

Josh shook his head and handed him the last book. “That’s ridiculous.”

The kid slung his backpack over his shoulder. “Someone should deal with him. But nobody’s gonna touch him.”

Commented [TS44]: Roger’s line about his parents adds depth, but Josh’s response could maybe show a little more of their friendship.

Commented [TS45]: “Cole happened.” I liked this line. It tells us a lot in a short space. *Clarity*

Josh watched him walk away before heading outside.

The afternoon air smelled like cut grass and warm asphalt. Josh unlocked his blue Kent Ambush BMX from the bike rack and hopped on. The ride home took about ten minutes through quiet neighborhoods where every house looked almost exactly the same.

At the intersection of Baxter and Pulse he stopped and pressed the crosswalk button. While he waited for the light to change, the sound of raised voices carried across the street.

Two figures stood arguing on the lawn of a yellow house down the road.

Josh squinted.

Cole Sawyer.

And Katerina Balboni.

Even from a distance Cole looked exactly like he did under the stadium lights on Friday nights—broad shoulders, thick arms, his gray football hoodie stretched tight across his back like armor. Kate stood a few feet away from him with her arms crossed, her long red hair hanging loose around her shoulders instead of tied back with the ribbon she wore on game days.

“Kate, you always come to the after-parties,” Cole was saying. “Why’s this weekend any different?”

“I don’t even know if I want to go to homecoming with you anymore,” Kate replied.

Cole grabbed her arm.

“Get off me,” she snapped.

Josh hesitated.

He could keep riding. Invisible kids stayed out of other people’s problems.

Instead, he pushed off the curb and rode closer.

Commented [TS46]: “At the intersection of Baxter and Pulse he stopped and pressed the crosswalk button.” This needs a comma after “Pulse.” *Grammar and Mechanics*

Commented [TS47]: Cole’s physical description is strong and helps raise the tension.

“Hey,” Josh said, dropping his bike. “Let her go.”

Cole turned slowly. Up close he looked even bigger—half a head taller than Josh and thick through the shoulders from years in the weight room.

“And who the hell are you?”

Josh swallowed but stepped forward anyway. “Doesn’t matter. Just leave her alone.”

Cole shoved Kate aside and moved toward him.

“Kate, you bringing random weirdos into this now?”

“God, Cole,” Kate said, brushing dirt from her jeans. “This is exactly why we’re done.”

Cole turned back toward her, and before he could finish whatever insult he had ready, Josh stepped behind him and landed a quick, low blow.

Cole folded over with a grunt.

“Come on,” Josh said, grabbing Kate’s hand.

They ran to the bike. Kate climbed onto the rear pegs and grabbed Josh’s shoulders as he pedaled hard down the street.

For a block or two, neither of them spoke. Then Kate laughed breathlessly and brushed wind-blown hair out of her face.

“Well,” she said, “that was dramatic.”

Josh glanced back at her. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Thanks to you.”

Josh walked Kate to the front door of her brick two-story house. A basketball hoop hung above the garage, and a police cruiser sat parked in the driveway.

“I’m embarrassed you had to see that,” she said.

Commented [TS48]: “Josh swallowed but stepped forward anyway.” *Comma after but, Grammar and Mechanics*

Commented [TS49]: Kate’s “that was dramatic” works well. It gives her personality and breaks the tension naturally.

Commented [TS50]: “A police cruiser sat parked in the driveway” could be tightened a little since “sat” and “parked” are the same. *Word choice*

“It’s fine,” Josh replied. “Your boy seemed a little unhinged.”

Kate snorted. “He’s basically a toddler when he doesn’t get his way.”

“I mean,” Josh said, “technically we’re all kids.”

She studied him for a moment. “You’re Couch, right?”

Josh blinked. “Uh... yeah.”

“You sit two seats in front of me in Algebra.”

Josh rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I know.”

Kate smiled and tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear—the same nervous habit Josh had noticed whenever teachers called on her in class.

“Thanks for helping me,” she said.

“No problem.”

She hesitated before unlocking the door.

“He’s probably going to do something stupid,” she said. “I don’t want you getting dragged into this.”

Josh shrugged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Kate gave him a skeptical look. “You don’t know Cole very well.”

“My dad will be home soon anyway,” she added. “The Chief.”

“You actually call your dad the Chief?”

Kate laughed. “Everyone does.”

She stepped inside.

“See you tomorrow.”

Josh rode home slower than usual. The adrenaline from the confrontation faded as the streets grew quiet again.

Cole Sawyer wasn't just some random guy.

He was the quarterback.

The kind of guy people stepped aside for in hallways.

Josh coasted into his driveway and sat on the bike for a moment, staring at the pavement.

Tomorrow might be interesting.

The next morning, everyone stared.

Josh noticed it the moment he walked through the front doors of Merlot Lakes.

"Bro," Roger said, "why is everyone looking at you weird?"

Josh sighed. "So... I might've gotten into it with Cole yesterday."

Roger stopped walking. "I'm sorry, what?"

Josh explained.

Roger shook his head.

"You fought the starting quarterback. For head cheerleader Kate."

Josh shrugged. "It wasn't like that."

Roger smirked. "Oh, it was exactly like that."

They reached Josh's locker.

His books were scattered across the floor.

Roger whistled. "Well... guess he heard about it."

After school Josh walked toward the bike rack.

Commented [TS51]: "Tomorrow might be interesting.." *Tomorrow is going to be interesting.*

Commented [TS52]: Roger's dialogue sounds very natural for the scene and their age group.

His stomach dropped.

Both tires had been slashed.

“What piece of shit,” Roger muttered.

Before Josh could respond something slammed into the back of his head. He hit the pavement hard.

Cole stood over him.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?”

A crowd gathered quickly.

Cole shrugged out of his letterman jacket and tossed it aside.

Josh tasted blood as Cole’s fist connected with his face. Roger tried to help but two linemen held him back.

Josh wiped his nose. “That all you got?”

Cole swung again.

Josh dodged and tackled him. They crashed onto the pavement before Cole drove a knee into Josh’s stomach and stood.

“Get up.”

Josh struggled to his feet.

Kate stepped between them. “Enough already. I’ll go to the stupid dance with you.”

Cole tilted his head. “You’re protecting him?”

“Does it matter?”

Josh staggered forward. “She doesn’t want you.”

He looked around at the students watching.

“How many of you have dealt with this guy?”

Commented [TS53]: “Both tires had been slashed.” Great short sentence. *Clarity*

Commented [TS54]: “ respond something slammed”, comma behind respond. *Grammar and Mechanics*

Commented [TS55]: “Josh tasted blood as Cole’s fist connected with his face.” *Love the sensory detail.*

At first only a few hands lifted.

Then more followed.

Cole glanced around, suddenly unsure.

For the first time since Josh had known his name, Cole Sawyer didn't look like the king of Merlot Lakes. He looked like just another kid standing in a parking lot.

A tall silver-haired officer pushed through the crowd.

Kate smiled.

"Dad."

Chief Balboni looked at Josh. "You alright, son?"

"Yes, sir."

Cole froze.

"I think we're done here," the Chief said calmly.

Deputies escorted Cole toward the office as the crowd slowly broke apart.

Josh sat on the curb while the adrenaline drained out of him. Kate sat beside him.

"You didn't have to do that," she said.

Josh shrugged. "Seemed like someone should."

Kate looked out across the parking lot. "Thanks for not being invisible yesterday."

Josh glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"Most people saw what was happening," she said. "They just kept walking."

Josh thought about the hallway earlier that week—the kid picking up his books while everyone stepped around him.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "People do that a lot."

Commented [TS56]: "At first only a few hands lifted. Then more followed." This is a strong moment and works well. *Comma after first, Grammar and mechanics.*

Kate stood and offered him a hand. “Come on. You definitely need the nurse.”

As they walked toward the building, students stepped aside to let them pass.

Josh could feel people looking at him now—really looking.

For most of high school he had learned how to disappear into the background of hallways and classrooms.

But today was different.

Today everyone had seen him.

And for the first time, that didn't feel like something to hide from.

Joseph Laguerre

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About 1250 words

Merlot Lakes

The final bell at Merlot Lakes High didn't sound like freedom. It sounded like something cracking under pressure.

The hallway broke open. Lockers slammed. Voices collided. Rubber soles shrieked against tile until it blurred into a single, restless hum.

Josh Couch stayed where he was.

Timing mattered. Let the noise crest. Let it pass.

Then move.

He stepped forward once the hallway thinned and opened his locker. Inside: textbooks, a worn notebook, the Evanescence T-shirt he wore like a second skin. He shoved it into his bag.

Roger appeared beside him, holding out a Nintendo Switch. "Appreciate it."

"All good."

Roger leaned against the lockers, gaze drifting somewhere past Josh. "My parents went at it again last night."

Josh paused. "Bad?"

Roger exhaled through his nose. "Yeah. Doors-slamming bad."

Josh nodded. "You alright?"

Roger shrugged. "I'm here."

It wasn't an answer, but it was the only one Roger ever gave.

"So we still gaming?" Roger asked.

“Yeah. After homework.”

“Cool.”

Roger peeled away with the crowd. Josh zipped his bag and followed the slower current toward the exit.

Halfway down the hall, the current split around something—books scattered across the floor. A kid knelt in the middle of it, grabbing at loose pages before they were stepped on.

Students curved around him without looking down.

A sneaker clipped one of the books, sending it skidding.

Josh stepped in and caught it.

“Here.”

The kid looked up, surprised—actually meeting his eyes.

“Thanks,” he said. “Cole happened.”

Josh’s jaw tightened. “Quarterback?”

The kid nodded. “Said I was talking to his girlfriend.”

“What did you do?”

The kid held up a small plastic sharpener. “Loaned this out.”

Josh let out a short breath. “That’s ridiculous.”

The kid shoved the last of the papers into his binder, then hesitated.

“People saw,” he said. “They just kept walking.”

Josh held his gaze.

“Yeah.”

“I’m Evan.”

“Josh.”

Commented [JL57]: Named the student Josh helps in the hallway, also reintroduces him in the climax, and makes him the first to step forward when Josh asks the student body how they feel about Cole. This created cause and effect storytelling and reinforces the theme through action.

Evan nodded, then slipped back into the crowd.

Outside, the air smelled like cut grass and hot pavement. Josh unlocked his bike and rode the same ten-minute route through streets that repeated themselves—same lawns, same mailboxes, same quiet.

At Baxter and Pulse, he stopped at the crosswalk.

Voices carried across the street—tight, controlled.

He looked up.

Cole Sawyer stood on a lawn, shoulders squared, posture fixed. Kate Balboni stood across from him, arms crossed.

“You always come,” Cole said. “Why’s this different?”

“Because I said no,” Kate replied.

Cole grabbed her arm.

Josh’s hands tightened around the handlebars.

He could leave. Keep moving. Let it pass.

By the time he got home, it would already feel distant.

That’s how it worked.

His chest tightened.

The hallway. The books. Evan on the floor while everyone stepped around him.

Nobody’s gonna do anything.

Josh exhaled.

If he left now, nothing in his life would change.

Except he would know.

Commented [JL58]: Added internal hesitation before intervening. Transforms Josh from a passive observer to an active moral agent.

He tightened his grip on the handlebars.

Then pushed off the curb.

“Hey.”

Cole turned.

Up close, he wasn't just big—he was certain. Like the world had always made room for him.

“And who are you?”

Josh swallowed. “Doesn't matter.”

Cole looked at him, trying to place him—and failing.

“Kate,” Cole said, “you bringing people into this now?”

Kate pulled free. “No. He just isn't a jerk.”

Something flickered across Cole's face. Then it hardened.

Josh stepped forward.

“Let her go.”

Cole moved fast.

Josh reacted on instinct—low, quick enough to break contact.

“Come on,” Josh said, grabbing Kate's hand.

They ran.

They didn't stop until the noise dropped behind them.

Kate laughed, breath catching. “That was—wow.”

Josh steadied himself against the handlebars, hands still shaking.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. Then, quieter: “Thanks.”

They walked the rest of the way to her house. A police cruiser sat in the driveway.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You didn’t have to get involved.”

Josh looked at her. “I did.”

She studied him.

“He’s not going to let that go.”

“I know.”

“My dad’s the police chief.”

Josh blinked. “That feels important.”

She smiled, but it didn’t settle. “Yeah.”

“Still... thank you.”

That night, Josh sat at his desk, a math worksheet open in front of him.

The numbers blurred.

He checked his phone. Nothing.

Set it down. Picked it back up.

Every sound outside pulled his attention toward the window.

He replayed it.

In one version, he kept riding.

Nothing happened.

That version sat wrong.

The next morning, the looks started.

Subtle. Constant.

“Why is everyone staring at you?” Roger asked.

Josh exhaled. “I got into it with Cole.”

Roger stopped. “You’re serious?”

Josh nodded.

They reached the locker.

Josh’s books were on the floor.

No note. No message.

Just confirmation.

Roger whistled. “Yeah.”

Josh crouched and gathered them.

No one helped.

After school, the bike rack was half-empty.

Josh saw it immediately.

Both tires—cut clean.

He stared.

Not surprised.

Just confirmed.

Something hit him from behind.

The ground snapped up.

His ears rang.

Cole stood over him.

“You should’ve stayed out of it.”

Josh pushed himself up, tasting blood.

“You could’ve ignored it,” Cole said. “Like everyone else.”

Something strained under the words.

“You think I don’t have people watching me all the time?”

Josh blinked.

Then the moment broke.

The punch landed.

The world narrowed—sound dulling, edges sharpening.

Josh staggered.

He could stay down.

End it.

Cole gestured. “Get up.”

Josh stood.

Not because he thought he could win.

Because staying down felt like disappearing.

Cole swung again.

Josh drove forward instead of back, tackling him. They hit hard. Cole recovered faster, forcing him down.

Kate stepped forward—then stopped.

“No,” she said. “I’m not doing this for you anymore.”

Cole turned. “What?”

“You don’t get to control everything.”

Commented [JL59]: Added this line to give Cole a brief moment of vulnerability. Makes the conflict less cliché.

Commented [JL60]: The fight scene is mostly physical, but this bit adds emotional intensity beyond the action.

Commented [JL61]: Added this part to the equation because it gives Kate an opportunity to acknowledge her complicity in Cole’s actions through her inaction. She makes a decision to make better choices with this statement.

The crowd shifted.

Josh wiped blood from his lip and looked around.

“How many of you have dealt with this?”

Silence.

Then—

“Yeah.”

Evan stepped forward, gripping his binder tight enough to crease it.

“He does this all the time,” Evan said. His voice shook once, then steadied. “To people he thinks won’t push back.”

The words held.

Another hand went up.

Then another.

Not all at once.

But enough.

Cole looked around.

For the first time, he hesitated.

A tall, silver-haired officer pushed through the crowd.

“Dad,” Kate said.

Chief Balboni looked at Josh. “You alright?”

Josh nodded.

The Chief turned to Cole.

“We’re done here.”

Josh sat on the curb later, the adrenaline draining out of him.

Kate sat beside him.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said.

Josh let out a breath. “I did.”

She nodded.

“People saw,” she said.

Josh looked across the parking lot.

Evan stood with a small group now, talking—still unsure, but not invisible.

“Yeah.”

“Not just today.”

Josh nodded.

“Sometimes people just need someone to go first.”

Kate smiled slightly. “Yeah.”

Inside, the hallway sounded the same.

Lockers. Voices. Movement.

Josh rested his hand against his locker.

For years, he had learned how to move through this place without leaving a mark.

That hadn’t changed.

He could feel it thinning already—the attention, the moment.

By next week, most of this would settle back.

Cole would still be here.

So would everything else.

Commented [JL62]: Changed the ending to align with literary realism. This avoids an overly tidy resolution in which he's the hero and becomes part of the in-crowd. That's not real.

Down the hall, Evan laughed—too loud, a little off—but not hidden.

Josh closed his locker.

He stepped into the flow of students before it cleared.

He didn't wait this time.

END

Commented [JL63]: On a micro level, I worked on word economy, sentence rhythm, sharpened imagery, and tightened dialogue.

Joseph Laguerre

Professor Courtney McDermott

ENG 542

1 March, 2026

Grand Isle

I think meeting someone for the first time is nerve-wracking. It's even wilder to choose a place that neither of you has been to before. Jocelin and I have known each other for about a decade, but the planets never aligned to meet until this past July. The anticipation was killing me because I've loved that woman for quite some time, but this was the first time we were in a position to do anything about it. We were both very excited to go on this adventure together, as neither of us had even been to New Orleans.

A week before the trip, we conversed while she bathed.

"For shoe packing purposes, how tall are you?" Jocelin asked.

"6 feet, why?" I responded.

"Oh, perfect. I'm good. I'm 5' 7", and my tallest heels are 3 inches."

"That's a thing?"

"I don't want to be taller than you, dude."

"Okay, fair."

"I was just looking at your Facebook. You literally don't have one female friend who isn't gorgeous."

I thought I was cooked here. Usually, women get curious about the women in your life to see if you're a fuckboy or not. I have many female friends. I've always just gotten along with

Commented [JL64]: Should begin closer to the actual situation, like the conversation they have on the phone

Commented [JL65]: Cliché we can do without

Commented [JL66]: Just use the pronoun her

Commented [JL67]: Emotionally important but underdeveloped. A concrete memory from the past could be used in its place.

Commented [JL68]: Filler word, we can remove

Commented [JL69]: This line should say we conversed on the phone while she bathed. We have never met, but the wording of this sentence suggests we're in the same room.

Commented [JL70]: Try to stick with "said" on all dialogue tags.

Commented [JL71]: After one back in forth, dialogue tags are not needed until there's a pause.

Commented [JL72]: There were 8 consecutive lines of dialogue here. Use some action beats or narration to prevent talking heads.

Commented [JL73]: About the "other" women

them much better because they can understand how I wear my heart on my sleeve. However, this never played out in my favor in the dating sense.

Commented [JL74]: Cliché I can get rid of.

"Present company included. What made you curious?" I said nervously.

Commented [JL75]: Dialogue tag. Stick to said.

"Thank you. Sheesh. Oh, I'm just scrolling." Jocelin responded.

Commented [JL76]: Another dialogue tag note.

Much of that conversation felt like an interview. I felt like she was sizing me up, trying to ask deep questions for her mental Rolodex. I do well in school, but when it comes to matters of the heart, I just assume I'll fail because of my track record. I'm divorced. I haven't had a serious relationship since the divorce. She's currently divorced, too, but it's been much longer for me.

Commented [JL77]: New paragraph. Use Jocelin's name here. You can use pronouns afterwards.

On the day of the trip, I was so nervous that I thought I would be sick waiting in the airport. We kept each other in the loop about where we were. We knew heading into the trip that I would get there much earlier, so I was supposed to get the rental car, check into the hotel, and then head to the airport when it was time to pick her up. I checked in at the Hotel Modern. It was undergoing renovations, but it was a quaint spot accessible to the main areas we wanted to visit.

Commented [JL78]: Word weakens the message, remove it

Commented [JL79]: Use a brief sensory or situational detail instead of a summary explanation of the divorce. This will show rather than tell.

Commented [JL80]: Waiting "at" the airport

I pulled up to the airport about 20 minutes after she landed. By then, she was just grabbing her luggage to meet me outside. I waited in the designated area when this brunette Californian beauty dragged her suede-rolling luggage. I clocked her as I saw that majestic face approaching the car. Surprisingly, I kept my composure as I popped the trunk and exited to help.

Commented [JL81]: Effective introduction, but I should try using a detail that only I would notice.

Commented [JL82]: Unnecessary adverb.

"Hey there, Fancy Face (as I affectionately call her)," I spoke.

She hands me her luggage. She hugs me.

"Right back at ya, Fancy Pants," Jocelin responds.

Commented [JL83]: Try to keep the names uniform if they're only going to come up once. Just use the character's actual names.

I closed the trunk and opened the door for her to enter.

"Well, aren't you a sweetheart," Jocelin says as she enters the vehicle.

I get back inside the vehicle and turn it on. I turn to my right as she's buckling her seat belt. I stared a beat too long because she gave me a smirk.

Commented [JL84]: I looked a beat too long. She smirked. This edit increases intimacy and cinematic pacing.

"Your pictures don't do you any justice. You are much prettier in person." I said.

"Jesus, Joe, way to make a girl feel special," she responded.

We had many adventures on this trip. There was a lot of walking—Jocelin is the type to just walk around and feel the vibes—and plenty of drinking. A fun fact about New Orleans is that there is an area down Bourbon Street where you can get pizza and daiquiris in the same venue.

Commented [JL85]: The days blurred into walking, drinking, and chasing whatever caught our attention next.

We spent a couple of hours taking pictures of all the happy couples on vacation. She said that she always sees people taking selfies and wanted to be of service.

Commented [JL86]: On Bourbon Street, we found a place selling pizza and daiquiris under the same neon lights.

This keeps the narration within the lived experience rather than a travel-guide voice.

We went on a haunted pub crawl that I would recommend to everyone. We also tried Absinthe for the first time, which I highly don't recommend. It seemed like a good idea at the

Commented [JL87]: a decision we regretted almost immediately.

time, but it turned out to be terrible. One night, we got our tarot cards read. She's been experimenting with spirituality, and this experience has led her to learn a lot about herself. She made me get mine, and we learned how much writing and Jocelin mean to me. It's not the kind of thing you want someone else to broach the subject on, but here we are.

Commented [JL88]: She made me get mine, and the reader spoke about writing as if it were a person waiting for me – and about Jocelin as if she already knew. Takes the summary out and improves imagery.

We spent a whole day at Grand Isle Beach, which we found two hours southeast of New Orleans. Just by how many bridges it took to finally reach the end, it reminded me a lot of Key West. She rapped Cardi B lyrics the whole way down like she's lived the life. She connects a lot to the lyrics because of her recent divorce.

We took a stroll down the beach when we got out of the car. She asked me to take a picture of her in front of this group of rocks. I remembered just how the sun hit her face in a certain way. It felt like the completion of a story that I've been writing for ten years in my head. I

Commented [JL89]: The sun caught her face just right. Removes filter phrase.

grabbed her hand as we walked, and she looked down, and we paused. At that moment, I felt like it was now or never.

Commented [JL90]: There was no later left to wait for. Avoids now or never cliché.

"J, you know how much I care about you, right?" I asked.

"I mean, yeah, I care about you too, dude." She responded.

"Well, hear me out. This has been the most incredible week of my life being in this place with you. It's made me think of how many of these moments we can have together.

"Wait a minute, J—", she blurts out.

I press my finger on her lips.

Commented [JL91]: I touched a finger gently to her lips.

"Just let me finish. I've always wondered what our lives would be like if we gave you and me a shot. We've never been single at the same time," I say.

"Oh, dude. Do you know why I disappear sometimes?" she responds.

"No, why?"

"Sometimes I just think you speak my language. We click. We make sense. I start thinking that we're going to be this and that. I get overwhelmed by it. I step back."

"What does that mean?"

"You know I love you, and you're one of the most important people in my life. I don't think we should risk our friendship by crossing the line. Don't hate me!"

As we drove back from Grand Isle to the hotel, neither of us said much. The laughter that had filled the car earlier in the week was replaced by the steady hum of tires crossing bridge after bridge. Outside, the sun had started to melt into the wetlands, throwing long streaks of violet and gold across the water. I remember thinking how the landscape looked endless, and how, for the first time that week, I wished the road would just keep going and never deliver us anywhere.

Commented [JL92]: The landscape stretched endlessly beside us...

That night, we didn't go out. We sat on the bed with the TV playing something forgettable on mute, sipping the last of a bottle of cheap wine. Jocelin scrolled through her phone while I half-pretended to pack. Every fiber of me wanted to reach for her hand again, but I didn't. I told a joke about how I'd never get used to New Orleans humidity, and she smiled—one of those polite, grateful smiles people give when they don't know what else to do with silence.

Commented [JL93]: I wanted to reach for her hand again, but I didn't.

The next morning, I dropped her off at the airport. She thanked me for the trip, for the "escape," and hugged me like someone clinging to an old sweater—familiar, comfortable, but no longer needed. When she turned to go, I told myself not to watch her disappear into the terminal, but I did.

Since that week, life has rolled forward the way it always does—emails, errands, new faces. But sometimes I'll catch a certain song on the radio, or see a stretch of sun flashing off water, and all of it comes flooding back: that road, that confession, that line between friendship and what might have been. Grand Isle taught me that courage doesn't always lead to the outcome you hope for, but sometimes the act of asking—of reaching across that gap—is its own kind of love story.

Commented [JL94]: Grand Isle didn't give me the ending I imagined, only the certainty that asking mattered.

Joseph Laguerre

Professor Courtney McDermott

ENG 542

15 February, 2026

Grand Isle

I think meeting someone for the first time is nerve-wracking. It's even wilder to choose a place that neither of you has been to before. Jocelin and I have known each other for about a decade, but the planets never aligned to meet until this past July. The anticipation was killing me because I've loved that woman for quite some time, but this was the first time we were in a position to do anything about it. We were both very excited to go on this adventure together, as neither of us had even been to New Orleans.

A week before the trip, we conversed while she bathed.

"For shoe packing purposes, how tall are you?" Jocelin asked.

"6 feet, why?" I responded.

"Oh, perfect. I'm good. I'm 5' 7", and my tallest shoes are 3 inches."

"That's a thing?"

"I don't want to be taller than you, dude."

"Okay, fair."

"I was just looking at your Facebook. You literally don't have one female friend who isn't gorgeous."

I thought I was cooked here. Usually, women get curious about the women in your life to see if you're a fuckboy or not. I have a lot of female friends. I've always just gotten along with

Commented [TF95]: I love your story and as a reader I rooted for Joe to find his love. You have a great story with all of its parts. The dialogue had one or two areas needs attention to wording. Grammar, I did not see any issues. It read as a modern day story. Characters are easy to identify and bond with as a reader. The descriptions of the colors of the sunset, their interactions with each other, (loved the pet names). If this is a future novel bring more detail of them into being. Maybe create tension for him as he is thinking about becoming serious with her. Foreshadowing. I loved it.

Commented [TF96]: Great hook.

Commented [TF97]: Maybe too wordy here. About is an adverb. It reads strong without "about a" and could be eliminated.

Commented [TF98]: In person or by phone? I am not sure if were speaking in person or by phone?

them much better because they can understand how I wear my heart on my sleeve. However, this never played out in my favor in the dating sense.

Commented [TF99]: The sentence reads okay, but If you reword it might have a stronger presence.

"Present company included. What made you curious?" I said nervously.

"Thank you. Sheesh. Oh, I'm just scrolling." Jocelin responded.

Much of that conversation felt like an interview. I felt like she was sizing me up, trying to ask deep questions for her mental Rolodex. I do well in school, but when it comes to matters of the heart, I just assume I'll fail because of my track record. I'm divorced. I haven't had a serious relationship since the divorce. She's currently divorced, too, but it's been much longer for me.

Commented [TF100]: I love the description.

On the day of the trip, I was so nervous that I thought I would be sick waiting in the airport. We kept each other in the loop about where we were. We knew heading into the trip that I would get there much earlier, so I was supposed to get the rental car, check into the hotel, and then head to the airport when it was time to pick her up. I checked in at the Hotel Modern. It was undergoing renovations, but it was a quaint spot accessible to the main areas we wanted to visit.

Commented [TF101]: Did the renovations create drama checking in and finding a room?

I pulled up to the airport about 20 minutes after she landed. By then, she was just grabbing her luggage to meet me outside. I waited in the designated area when this brunette Californian beauty dragged her suede-rolling luggage. I clocked her as I saw that majestic face approaching the car. Surprisingly, I kept my composure as I popped the trunk and exited to help.

"Hey there, Fancy Face (as I affectionately call her)," I spoke.

She hands me her luggage. She hugs me.

"Right back at ya, Fancy Pants," Jocelin responds.

I closed the trunk and open the door for her to enter.

"Well, aren't you a sweetheart," Jocelin says as she enters the vehicle.

Commented [TF102]: I am enjoying your dialogue with the main characters. I visual see and hear the conversation and action. You have given few physical details, but I can see her as I read.

I get back inside the vehicle and turn it on. I turn to my right as she's buckling her seat belt. I stared a beat too long because she gave me a smirk.

"Your pictures don't do you any justice. You are much prettier in person." I said.

"Jesus, Joe, way to make a girl feel special," she responded.

We had many adventures on this trip. There was a lot of walking—Jocelin is the type to just walk around and feel the vibes—and plenty of drinking. A fun fact about New Orleans is that there is an area down Bourbon Street where you can get pizza and daiquiris in the same venue. We spent a couple of hours taking pictures of all the happy couples on vacation. She said that she always sees people have to take selfies and wanted to be of service.

We went on a haunted pub crawl that I would recommend to everyone. We also tried Absinthe for the first time, which I highly don't recommend. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it turned out terribly. One night, we got our tarot cards read. She's been experimenting with spirituality, and this experience has led her to learn a lot about herself. She made me get mine, and we learned how much writing and Jocelin mean to me. It's not the kind of thing you want someone else to broach the subject on, but here we are.

We spent a whole day at Grand Isle Beach, which we found two hours southeast of New Orleans. Just by how many bridges it took to finally reach the end, it reminded me a lot of Key West. She rapped Cardi B lyrics the whole way down like she's lived the life. She connects a lot to the lyrics because of her recent divorce.

We took a stroll down the beach when we got out of the car. She asked me to take a picture of her in front of this group of rocks. I remembered just how the sun hit her face in a certain way. It felt like the completion of a story that I've been writing for ten years in my head. I

Commented [TF103]: You are a storyteller because I feel as if I am sitting and talking with Joe. He is sharing details with the audience. Well Done!

Commented [TF104]: I giggled here. I do not recommend it either.

Commented [TF105]: This sentence maybe needs to be revised? It reads awkward out loud.

Commented [TF106]: This sentence might need to be revised. It reads awkward. Maybe removing "Just by" might help with the revising?

Commented [TF107]: I love the details, but just and " hit her face" could be revised to "shines on her skin and face" or how her face and skin glows in the sun. A few ideas.

grabbed her hand as we walked, and she looked down, and we paused. At that moment, I felt like it was now or never.

"J, you know how much I care about you, right?" I asked.

"I mean, yeah, I care about you too, dude." She responded.

"Well, hear me out. This has been the most incredible week of my life being in this place with you. It's made me think of how many of these moments we can have together.

"Wait a minute, J—", she blurts out.

I press my finger on her lips.

"Just let me finish. I've always wondered what our lives would be like if we gave you and me a shot. We've never been single at the same time," I say.

"Oh, dude. Do you know why I disappear sometimes?" she responds.

"No, why?"

"Sometimes I just think you speak my language. We click. We make sense. I start thinking that we're going to be this and that. I get overwhelmed by it. I step back."

"What does that mean?"

"You know I love you, and you're one of the most important people in my life. I don't think we should risk our friendship by crossing the line. Don't hate me!"

As we drove back from Grand Isle to the hotel, neither of us said much. The laughter that had filled the car earlier in the week was replaced by the steady hum of tires crossing bridge after bridge. Outside, the sun had started to melt into the wetlands, throwing long streaks of violet and gold across the water. I remember thinking how the landscape looked endless, and how, for the first time that week, I wished the road would just keep going and never deliver us anywhere.

Commented [TF108]: I use just a lot too. The word "just" can drag a sentence down to feel not as strong. "Let me finish. ..." reads different. What are your thoughts?

Commented [TF109]: Powerful symbolism.

Commented [TF110]: WOW! Love this. The detail of the end of the day. Nice.

That night, we didn't go out. We sat on the bed with the TV playing something forgettable on mute, sipping the last of a bottle of cheap wine. Jocelin scrolled through her phone while I half-pretended to pack. Every fiber of me wanted to reach for her hand again, but I didn't. I told a joke about how I'd never get used to New Orleans humidity, and she smiled—one of those polite, grateful smiles people give when they don't know what else to do with silence.

Commented [TF111]: Details of the pain and sadness. The reader has a sense of what is happening and not a happy one.

The next morning, I dropped her at the airport. She thanked me for the trip, for the "escape," and hugged me like someone clinging to an old sweater—familiar, comfortable, but no longer needed. When she turned to go, I told myself not to watch her disappear into the terminal, but I did.

Since that week, life has rolled forward the way it always does—emails, errands, new faces. But sometimes I'll catch a certain song on the radio, or see a stretch of sun flashing off water, and all of it comes flooding back: that road, that confession, that line between friendship and what might have been. Grand Isle taught me that courage doesn't always lead to the outcome you hope for, but sometimes the act of asking—of reaching across that gap—is its own kind of love story.

Joseph Laguerre

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About 1250 words

Grand Isle

By the time her plane landed, I had already checked the arrivals board three times.

Not because I didn't trust the screen, but because I didn't trust myself to sit still without doing something.

Jocelin and I had known each other for nearly ten years, long enough to understand each other's rhythms but never long enough to meet. Timing had always been just slightly off—one of us in a relationship, the other just getting out of one, always a step behind or ahead of whatever window might have made sense.

Until now.

I stood outside the pickup area, keys in hand, trying to look like this was routine. Like picking up a woman you'd quietly loved for a decade was something you could do without rehearsing it first.

A week earlier, we'd been on the phone while she packed.

"For shoe purposes," she said, "how tall are you again?"

"Six feet. Why?"

"Oh, perfect. I'm five-seven, and my tallest heels are three inches."

I laughed. "That's a thing?"

"I refuse to be taller than you."

Later, her tone shifted.

Commented [JL112]: I revised the opening hook because my previous one was too abstract. This has a stronger, immediate hook.

“I was looking at your Facebook,” she said. “You don’t have a single female friend who isn’t gorgeous.”

I sat up a little straighter.

“Present company included.”

She laughed, but it didn’t quite dissolve the tension. Conversations with her were like that—light on the surface, something measured underneath.

We were both divorced. Careful now in ways we hadn’t been before.

By the time her plane arrived, every version of what I planned to say had disappeared.

She came through the sliding doors, pulling her suitcase, scanning the curb. Sunlight caught in her hair, and for a second, everything else—cars, voices, movement—fell away.

I stepped out and opened the trunk.

“Hey there, Fancy Face.”

She smiled immediately. “Fancy Pants.”

She hugged me, and it felt familiar in a way that didn’t make sense for a first meeting.

New Orleans moved differently.

Music leaked out of doorways. The air carried the smell of sugar, smoke, and something fried. People drifted instead of walking, as if they trusted the day to take them somewhere worth ending up.

Jocelin leaned into that.

“Let’s just wander,” she said, already turning down a side street.

We did.

We ended up on Bourbon Street eating pizza and drinking daiquiris out of plastic cups.

Commented [JL113]: Removed Summary and added a scene. There was previously a we had many adventures summary here. The purpose of this change is to create immersion through scene instead of summary.

“This is chaos,” I said.

“This is perfect.”

She insisted we take pictures for strangers.

“Everyone’s always doing selfies,” she said. “We can do better.”

So we did—framing shots, handing phones back to couples who looked like they wanted to remember exactly where they were.

“You’re weird,” I told her.

“I’m efficient.”

The tarot reader was her idea.

The shop was narrow and dim, lit in amber tones. The air smelled faintly of incense and old paper, like something that had been handled too many times.

“You first,” she said, nudging me toward the chair.

I sat across from the reader, trying not to overthink it.

She laid the cards down one at a time, deliberately.

“You’re holding onto something that never resolved.”

I almost smiled.

“Something you’ve carried longer than you admit.”

I didn’t respond.

She turned another card.

“You think it’s timing,” she said. “Those things haven’t lined up.”

That one landed.

“It isn’t timing. It’s that you’re waiting for it to feel certain.”

Commented [JL114]: Rebuilt this scene to serve as a structural hinge. This scene now introduces the core theme explicitly but organically. It also directly motivates later confession.

I shifted in my seat, feeling the truth of it settle in a place I hadn't been paying attention to.

"What happens if I don't wait?" I asked.

She met my eyes.

"Then it becomes real."

Jocelin went next.

I watched her from across the room. She smiled once, then grew quiet, her shoulders drawing in slightly like she was holding something close.

When she came back, she shrugged it off.

"Nothing wild," she said. "Just vague life stuff."

But later that night, walking back through the warm, crowded streets, she said:

"Do you ever feel like you're right at the edge of something—and if you move, there's no going back?"

I glanced at her.

"Yeah."

She nodded, eyes forward.

"That's where I've been lately."

By the time we drove out to Grand Isle, something had shifted.

Nothing obvious.

Just a quiet awareness running underneath everything we said, like we both knew we were getting closer to something we hadn't named yet.

Commented [JL115]: Adds reflective dialogue. Gives Jocelin interiority and mirrors theme.

She controlled the music.

That morning, it was Cardi B—loud, confident, completely out of place against the long stretch of road and water.

“You know all the words?”

“Of course. Don’t judge me.”

“I’m impressed.”

She laughed and kept going, like she believed every line.

The road stretched out over water, bridge after bridge, until it felt like we were driving toward the edge of something.

At the beach, everything opened.

Wind. Water. Space.

“Take a picture of me,” she said, walking toward a cluster of rocks.

I lifted my phone.

The light caught her just right—soft, golden, outlining her face and shoulders.

For a moment, it didn’t feel like I was taking a picture.

It felt like recognizing something I’d been circling for years without naming.

We walked along the shoreline after that.

I reached for her hand.

She let me.

We walked like that for a while—quiet, steady, no need to fill the space.

Then she looked down at our hands.

We stopped.

The sound of the water filled everything around us.

I thought about the cards.

Waiting for certainty.

“J,” I said, “you know how much I care about you, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

I took a breath.

“This week—being here with you—it’s been everything I thought it could be. And I keep thinking... what if this wasn’t just this week?”

She exhaled, already shaking her head slightly.

“Do you know why I disappear sometimes?”

“No.”

“Because I start thinking like that,” she said. “About us. About what it could be. And it gets overwhelming.”

Something tightened in my chest.

“You speak my language,” she said. “We make sense. That’s the problem.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t want to lose this.”

The words settled between us.

The drive back felt longer.

The same bridges. The same water.

Different silence.

Commented [JL116]: Expanded part of the Grand Isle scene that now includes a callback to the tarot scene. Connecting the earlier scene to the decision moment.

Commented [JL117]: Revised for more natural phrasing. Keeps the emotional part authentic without overstating.

She rested her head against the window, watching the horizon.

I kept my eyes on the road.

The sun dipped low, turning everything gold and violet. The kind of light that usually makes you slow down to take it in.

I didn't.

That night, we stayed in.

The TV played on mute while we sat on opposite sides of the bed, sharing the last of a cheap bottle of wine.

I made a joke about the humidity.

She smiled.

We let the silence stretch.

The next morning, I dropped her off at the airport.

She hugged me tightly.

"Thank you," she said. "For all of this."

"Yeah."

She pulled back, gave me one last look, then turned toward the terminal.

I told myself not to watch.

I watched anyway.

Life moved forward the way it always does.

Work. Errands. Conversations that didn't carry the same weight.

But sometimes something small brings it back—the right song, light reflecting off water,
the feeling of a road stretching farther than expected.

And I think about that moment.

Standing on the edge of something.

Choosing to say it anyway—

and watching it settle into what it was.

END

Commented [JL118]: Reduced explanation at the end. Added image-based closure. Trust reader and increases resonance.

Commented [JL119]: From a micro perspective, I worked on word economy, sentence rhythm, sharpened language, dialogue refinement, and image-based writing.

In my first editing practice during week three, I used a developmental editing approach because the writing required structural and narrative refinement. Annjanette's story, *The Ghost Feather*, contained strong ideas but needed higher stakes to support a stronger plot progression for her protagonist. Now is the time to address that issue, since it's the first read-through. For instance, in *Grand Isle*, broad statements about the trip were expanded into specific moments, such as the airport meeting and the Grand Isle confession. I also repositioned the tarot reader scene to serve as a thematic hinge, reinforcing the central tension between hesitation and action. This approach was appropriate because the piece needed deeper characterization, clearer pacing, and stronger cohesion.

In my second editing practice, I shifted to an acquisitions editing approach, treating the revised draft as a near-finished piece. At this stage, I focused on refining sentence rhythm, tightening language, and ensuring market readiness. In my review of Taisha's work, *Kept*, I focused on the micro aspect of editing while also balancing it's readiness to submit to *American Short Fiction*. In my own works, *Grand Isle* and *Merlot Lakes*, I reduced repetitive phrasing, varied sentence structure, and sharpened the openings and endings to engage readers more effectively. This demonstrates my ability to evaluate work through a publication lens, prioritizing clarity, tone, and readability without over-editing the author's voice.

Critiquing my work and my peers' work showcases my professional skills by demonstrating adaptability. I moved from large-scale revisions to precise line edits, showing control over both macro and micro editing. My feedback on the second sample differed from the first in tone and focus: instead of a directive restructuring approach, I offered targeted refinements, using more collaborative and affirming language.

The editing profession has evolved to emphasize collaboration and sensitivity to the author's voice. Through both independent work and peer feedback, I've learned how tone impacts reception. I've had the opportunity to work on creative fiction and creative non-fiction this term. Understanding editorial roles clarifies the author-editor relationship: developmental editors shape the work, while acquisitions editors assess its readiness for publication. This process has strengthened my editorial identity, positioning me as both a critical thinker and a supportive collaborator.

