***Martyrdom*: An excerpt from a senior comp**

by Ashley Biehl

*Anthea is a high school student in rural Upper Michigan. After school gets out, she goes to look for her brother, Donal, but cannot find him. She ends up talking to her choir director, Mr. Henderson, about trying out for the spring musical, but she says that she is not interested. After she leaves Mr. Henderson’s office, she finds Donal.*

“No problem,” she said with a nod, then continued out the door and down the stinky stairwell through the foyer to the cafeteria, which was empty. Dammit, where was Donal?

“Hey! Where were you?”

He was behind her. She turned and walked towards him since he was in the direction of the exit anyway. “Mr. Henderson wanted to talk to me about something. Why didn’t you tell me you had a meeting?” She kept walking out the glass doors and back through the senior hallway toward the exit. He followed her, taking half as many steps as she did since he was a good foot taller than she was even though he was nearly two years younger.

“Forgot about it until Bobby reminded me right before. What did Mr. Henderson want to talk about?” he asked as they walked out the side door to the parking lot. A whip of icy wind hit her face. The moment the snowflakes touched her lenses they melted and formed droplets on her glasses. Snow hadn’t been in the forecast that morning, but it was snowing all the same—not hard, but the roads would be slick.

“Oh, just choir stuff,” she replied.

“How can you talk about choir stuff for that long?” he asked, opening the back end of Anthea’s Ford Focus.

“How can you talk about baseball that long?” she shot back. “It won’t be the season for, like, three months.” She took her backpack off her back, and Donal set both their packs inside the car. “Besides, I wasn’t talking to him for that long.”

 “This was the first pre-season meeting so far, and games start in two and a half months, so practices will be coming up quick. And you see him in choir every day, right before lunch, so you could talk to him whenever about choir stuff.” He could always see right through her. Nearly always.

 They got into the car, and Anthea hit the ignition while Donal contorted himself so that his legs would fit behind the dash, crouching so his short brown hair just barely brushed the ceiling. It wouldn’t have been so bad if he hadn’t been both tall and muscular. Anthea was short and muscular, which made her look a bit stout, but Donal just looked athletic. He would have played all the sports he managed for if he hadn’t blown out his shoulder pitching Little League in 8th grade. He was fine now, but the prospect of another injury kept him from ever playing a sport again. But he liked managing well enough, so it was alright.

 “Yeah, he wanted to know if I was going to try out for the musical.” She pulled out of the parking lot and started the drive home.

 “What did you tell him?”

 “That I’d think about it.”

 “Wait, so you might not?” he asked, disbelieving.

 Anthea stifled a groan. She didn’t want to talk about it, but Donal was so persistent when he wanted an answer. She’d never hear the end of it so she might as well get it over with. “I don’t really want to.”

 “But you’ve always wanted to be in a musical. You’re obsessed already, so why not take one more step on the path to addiction?”

 “I like listening to musicals. That’s not the same thing as wanting to be in one,” she replied.

“Liking is an understatement, dontcha think?” She could tell he was just trying to make her angry, so she decided not to respond.

“I just don’t want to, okay?” Oh, well. Ignoring him never worked anyway. “And I haven’t tried out for one yet, so why would I start now?”

 “Yeah, but you didn’t try out before because you couldn’t, not because you didn’t want to.”

 “Yeah, well, this time I don’t want to.” She knew she sounded abrasive, but she couldn’t help it since she knew he had a point. Freshman year, she’d gotten a bronchial infection and had been hacking up mucus of various colors for two weeks starting, of course, with the day before auditions. She didn’t mourn that too heavily, since she probably would have only gotten a chorus role because Mrs. White, who retired and was replaced by Mr. Henderson at the beginning of this school year, had been big on seniority. Sophomore year—well, that was a different matter entirely. This time, though, she just didn’t want to try out and that was how things were.

 But of course Donal couldn’t just leave it alone. “You don’t want to do anything anymore. All you do is fuck around in your room until dinner, and then you go back to fucking around in your room.”

 “It’s called doing homework, asshole.”

 “Like you don’t have that done in two hours. I know what you do. You listen to musicals, and you watch interviews of famous people who perform in musicals, and you go on forums and discuss musicals with people just as obsessed as you are.”

 “Have you been on my computer?” Well, that wasn’t the denial she had meant to say. She looked over at him and he actually looked a bit offended.

 “No, idiot, it’s all you talk about whenever you bother to come out of your room to say anything.”

 Time to deflect. “No, like you said before, I come out of my room for dinner. And that’s another thing I talk about with you, how Mom never cooks dinner anymore. And actually, I saw her get the slow-cooker out yesterday, so I think she’s making that pot roast that’s been in the fridge.”

 “Oh, thank God, because if I had to eat leftover ham casserole again… wait, how long’s that roast been in the fridge?”

 “Only a few days. It can’t have gone bad yet.” A few moments passed in silence, except for the low hum of the radio playing something old-sounding that she didn’t recognize. Her deflection seemed to have worked. Now he was thinking about food and not about her trying out for the musical.

 The drive continued that way until the radio started playing hits from the 80’s that Anthea knew all the words to. *We're talking away/I don't know what/I'm to say I'll say it anyway/Today's another day to find you/Shying away/I'll be coming for your love, OK?/Take on me/Take me on/I’ll be—*

 “Would you shut up?” Donal poked her in the arm.

 “What?” She rubbed the spot where he had poked her. Ouch.

 “I hate it when you sing along with the radio. You don’t sound good.”

Anthea hadn’t realized she had been singing. “I do so sound good, you jerk.”

 “No you don’t. You don’t blend with that guy’s voice at all.” God, Donal was such a jerk! Why did he always have to needle her?

 “Okay, so first you’re telling me to try out for the musical, and now you’re saying I can’t sing? Way to be an encouraging and supportive sibling, fucktard.”

 “Don’t be such a bitch. That’s not what I meant. You’re supposed to sing in a musical. You’re not supposed to sing along to the radio when I’m in the car with you because we’ve talked about this before, and the deal is that you won’t sing with me in the car as long as I don’t eat any of your Jaffa Cakes. And have I eaten any of your Jaffa Cakes?”

 “No,” Anthea replied, scowling.

 “Then don’t sing when I’m in the car!”

 “But I can’t help it! I didn’t even realize I was singing.” She tried not to sound petulant, but she just couldn’t control herself very well around Donal. He always brought out the best and the worst in her. “Do you actually want one of my Jaffa Cakes?” Yes, he could have one of her overly-expensive British snack foods, chocolate-covered squidgy-orange heaven in a box, because she never went back on a deal and she had been singing, even if she hadn’t meant to.

 “No thanks. I’ve got beef jerky.”

 “Probably for the best. I’ve only got one left in the box and it’s probably stale. Then you’d just complain about me only sharing barely-edible food with you.”

 “Probably.”

 The rest of the drive passed quickly. The roads weren’t so slick that Anthea had to drive under the speed limit, but she didn’t feel comfortable going the usual five over—especially since the majority of the drive was on the bumpy county highway they lived on. Actually, the rest of the drive only passed quickly because there wasn’t much drive left. Anthea turned into their driveway that stretched past the icy-covered pond that used to be a gravel pit and pulled into the garage.

 She lived on the outskirts of Menominee, which was as about as far south you could go in the Upper Peninsula without being in Wisconsin. Her house was not quite in the country, but definitely not in the city, though a lot of people wouldn’t call Menominee a city since fewer than 10,000 people lived there. But it was the fourth largest community in the UP, so that had to count for something.

Anthea lived in a large house that her parents had built before she and her brother had been born, but in anticipation of having a kid or two so that future remodeling would not be necessary. Her parents had to wait ten years for Anthea to turn up, though. She thought it was funny that they’d pretty much given up hope of having children, and then there were two of them in the house within twenty months of each other. Anthea thought it was even funnier that she and her brother had turned out to be holy terrors in their earliest years. There were some great stories about Donal and her fighting and prodding at each other, how shopping with them had been a nightmare and going to church with them had been even worse.

Now Donal was pretty much her only friend. But that’s the kind of thing that happens when you like musicals more than you like people, and only becoming attached to the ones you’re forced to be around. Kind of like Stockholm syndrome in a way, but less sinister. Donal may have been a jerk, but most of it was all in fun, and Anthea often gave as good as she got. And he was her brother, so that was that.