

He Saw Me and Smiled

By Robert Diez

Look up from the ground. I traced the cracks of the hallway's baseboard moulding with my eyes. A clump of hair seemed woven to the carpet flooring — ugly limbs protruding and grasping at the loose threads here and there, as though they were holding on for life.

Look up, and say hello. The passing shoes each told a story. Dirty Reeboks from a recent expedition for Geology. A pair of fresh-out-of-the-package Uggs that foretold a chilly winter. The people wearing them were fleeting mirages, shaped by the conditions of their environment. The shoes themselves, though — anchors to the world, cracks and creases of truth — could not be so easily swayed. It had always been easier to study them — far less guesswork of the unknown.

Start a conversation. Look up. Continuing through the hallway, I sidestepped a pair of mud-caked Converse. A hard left to my room. Turning the key, and pushing open the door — my eyes remained fixed downwards the entire time.

It was the compression below my feet that I felt first. The burst of something so tightly wound, so pent-up, that the first prod to its exterior resulted in a rapid deflation. The juice let out around my shoe, like swamp water infiltrating a footprint in a patch of vegetation. It seemed to rise from beneath, as though it'd been there all along.

[SCAFFOLD: A SHOWCASE OF VANDERBILT FIRST-YEAR WRITING](#) | Vol. 5 | Spring 2023

Scaffold is a digital collection of first-year writing curated by the [Vanderbilt Writing Studio](#). To highlight the developing writing processes and learning experiences central to the growth of new college writers, the collection pairs each piece with a recorded reflection from its author. Visit [Scaffold's website](#) to listen to the authors reflect, learn more, and tap into this resource for college students and instructors alike.

The copyright to this work rests with the author. Proper attribution required. Vanderbilt retains a non-exclusive right to distribute the work as part of this collection.

But it hadn't, of course. I analyzed the semi-translucent flesh I had peeled off of my sole. A few drippings at last acquiesced to gravity's demands, and gently descended to a splatter. I was holding a grape, or at least what was left of it.

I'm not a particularly suspicious person, but I do believe in a rational explanation behind everything. I don't recreationally eat grapes, nor do I leave them on the ground as a trap for any possible intruders. My roommate was quite messy, and thus theoretically could have dropped the grape on his way out – but I hadn't seen him so much as smell a fruit or vegetable since classes began, so that was definitely out of the question. One thing was for sure: this grape had been placed in my room. As I studied the loose grapeskin in my palm, my periphery alerted me of a presence through a blurred lens. A lanky, freakishly tall, and spotted presence.

My gaze moved like a weighted lever, gradually up and then, all at once, down. In my flash of vision I saw it: a giraffe, contorted and pretzeled into the corner of my room, sat rather stoically. I analyzed the grout between my tiled floors. Grape juice had begun to spread throughout the space. My countenance stiffened, but remained fixed downwards.

Look up. See. I dared not flinch, out of fear that any commotion was a kind of confirmation of the absurd truth laid out in front of me. Perhaps by remaining stifled, I could retract inwards, and I would wake up from this freakish dreamscape.

The sound of a gentle strum was the first threat to my rigidity. Six notes in tandem. A chord progression further elicited me out of my stern withdrawal. Surely the giraffe wasn't... playing a guitar? Another strum. A melody filled the room – serene and reminiscent of childhood gaiety. Was a zoo animal coaxing me out of my paralysis with a serenade?

I was faced with a choice between self-imposed sanity or the terror of locking eyes with a guitar-playing giraffe. I relaxed the tension in my forehead. The saggy flesh of the grape, now discarded on the ground, loafed atop an unfurling labyrinth of juice-soaked grout. Suddenly, it looked rather pathetic. My eyes drew upward, along the path of the guitar's sound waves. I locked eyes with the creature, and we exchanged smiles — large incisors populating the inside of its upturned lips. I didn't feel fear anymore; the warmth of life's embrace, with all of its unpredictability and guesswork, flowed through me.

I gently closed the door behind me on my way out of the room. The LED lights above flickered once or twice, then steadied. *Look up.* I turned right and — before any hesitation could creep up from within me — swaggered into the Hank Ingram common room. *Say hello. "Hi everyone." Start a conversation. "I'm Robert. It's nice to meet you."*