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## The Very Blood in My Veins

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## The Very Blood in My Veins

### Author Bio

Mikelyn Britt is native to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Britt is a member of the Gettysburg College's class of 2023 where she is majoring in English with a creative writing concentration and a peace and justice minor. She is also the opinions section editor of the school newspaper, The Gettysburgian.

## The Very Blood in My Veins

MIKELYN BRITT

I have long since lost my focus at work. The twitch begins in the early afternoon, just as the ponies take their places on the starting line. I take hurried glances behind my shoulders before switching the tab. Five more minutes. I wait to place my bet. I don't like them to know what I'm thinking. My eyes lift to the large, white clock above my cubicle, the second hand slows at my gaze. My knee bounces under the desk as sweat pools under my arms. Footsteps echo up the row. I exit the jockey tab and open an existing document; a letter to the company after my return from rehab, a promise of cleanliness and progress.

"Theo," a booming voice sounds. "How's the endorsement coming along, son?"

"Good, Mr. Burke," I respond with a quick nod. "Should be done by the end of the day, sir." I feel gravity lifting out from beneath. My mouth feels full of cotton.

"That's what I like to hear," he laughs, large stomach shaking obnoxiously. Burke's a family friend. He's the only reason I'm still working at this shithole. A good word and a heavy wallet from my father, no doubt. "How's the old ball and chain doing?"

His question passes through me without any contact. My eyes look beyond him and meet the clock face once again. The second hand sped up since I've last looked. It's nearly half-past one, two more minutes to the start of the race. The image of racehorses blurs past my eyes. The rainbow assortment of silks race toward the finish line, fighting for the gold.

"Kid?" Mr. Burke says. "Hey, Theo." My nerves jolt awake, the horses race out of my mind as my surroundings settle into focus.

"Oh, sorry, sir," I say, straightening in my chair. I hurriedly tug at the knot of my tie, my hands are shaking. "I didn't get much sleep last night with the new baby and all."

"Ah, I remember those days. I only lived on coffee and Redbulls for the first two years of Polly's life."

Guilt creeps up my spine. I should be spending my nights with my colicky baby, but I've been going to Gambler's Anonymous meeting down

at the church, or that's at least what I've been telling my wife. Aubrey has to know that I've been going to the casino every Tuesday night. Hell, I've been skipping lunch breaks to run to the corner store to get scratchy lotteries. Aubrey's the one that got me into rehab in the first place. Her growing belly, adorned with her sister's old maternity clothes; overalls and cinched dresses. Her hands full with ultrasound updates or paint swatches for the nursery. One Tuesday afternoon, two weeks before my release, a phone call rang through the clean white halls. "It's time," said Aubrey. Her labored breathing rang through the receiver, my own echoing in my chest. She had our firstborn alone in a cold hospital room. A nurse cut the umbilical cord. The midwife took pictures of a blushing mother with the new light of her life. A taxi drove Aubrey and baby Liza. I held my daughter for the first time during the following visiting hours at the center. Ten fingers and ten toes. Her eyes shone with naivety, matching my own. An expected feeling of love bubbled through my heart. Now, I'm gambling away her college fund.

"Well, I'll let you get to it. Can't wait to see the baby at the luncheon this weekend."

I laugh politely, glancing again at the clock. The race has begun. Shit. I haven't even placed my bets yet. Fuck.

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Coins weigh heavy in my pocket, clinking together with each step. The carpet pools with orange, red, and purple hues, easing my eyes to gently unfocus. My hands ache as I release my clenched fists. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with neighboring cigarette smoke, the familiar burn warming my blood. I'm home.

"Excuse me?" an older man interrupts my stroll to the tables. "It's my wife and I's first time, could you show us the ropes?"

"Maybe point us to your favorite slot?" the wife adds with a shy grin.

They share a glance and laugh with each other. They must be playing hooky today and want to have some fun. My shoulders tense. Despite others' experiences at the casino, I come to be with myself, my true self. All other conversations surround cashing out or asking for a refill of my whiskey and coke. I glance at the roulette table to find it sparse of attendants. The night is still early. I take a deep breath.

"Sure," I say. "Follow me."

A slow trek with the pair's aching arthritic joints leads us to the

very last room. The penny slots. I explain the basics: low bet, use most of the lines and they could win a little cash.

“And your favorite, sweetie?” the elderly lady asks.

I crack my neck with a quick jolt and my body goes rigid. I have a thing against sharing trade secrets. When I first started, I didn't even like to tell the attendants which machine I won on. I scan the room and catch a glimpse of old reliable. The machine's older than the very building it's sitting in. Erotic graphics of exotic, half-naked women cover the exterior while the mechanics show spinning fruit and gold bars. I've never won more than twenty bucks on it.

“You'll want to go to that one in the corner,” I say with a grin creeping across my face.

A series of thank yous erupt from the couple as they waddle to their rebellious afternoon slot machine. The journey back to the roulette table feels comfortable and meditative. A soft smile plays on my lips as I sit on the short velvet stools. A chuckle escapes as I glance back at the couple, pulling out their coins. Now the fun begins.

A quick \$30 bet on black, and I await the results of the roulette screen. The ball spins around the red and black circle at a dizzying speed. I feel its hypnotic effect. It lands.

“Red!” calls the artificial dealer on the screen. His electronic smile sends rage through me. My ears heat up, and my shirt collar is wet with sweat.

No problem. I pull out another coin.

Lost.

Another coin.

Lost.

And another.

Minutes turn to hours, and my pocket is no longer heavy against my leg. The electronic dealer does not falter. My fist tightens against my side, my nails dig into the soft flesh of my palm.

Aubrey must be home by now, greeted with dark rooms and emptied drawers. A burglar maybe, but she knows better. Liza bounces hurriedly on her walker bumping into barren walls in an empty room; her own toys sold to a new mother in a town over. The cash burnt to ashes for the neon communion of my church.

A scream sounds to my right with a celebration of a jackpot. My skin is on fire. I scratch my neck as the itch travels through my body. My leg bounces unsteadily, and what's left of the coins chime, an alarm of misfortune. The elderly couple walks behind my chair with cheers following

close behind them.

“Oh, Honey!” the grandmother cries. “It’s him — the young man who helped us to the machine.”

“Please, let us buy you a drink,” her husband follows. “You just won us a fortune!”

My throat is too dry. I stare at the grandmother’s eyes, they twinkle with the light of the first win, and all I want to do is slap the innocence out of her. Only a moment passes before I have a rum and coke in my hand. They laugh and share how they will be spending their prize.

“A trip to the Bahamas!”

“No, first the grandkid’s trust funds.”

My knuckles turn white with my grip on the glass. I take a shaky breath. My heart travels to my throat, my face burns, and tears threaten to drop around my cheeks. The buzzers, the drop of a coin into a slot, and the clack of high heels make my ears ring. I can’t think. I can’t breathe.

Before I know it, I am standing over the elderly man. His eyes hold an empty stare at the ceiling and his chest is still; a halo of blood circles his head. Broken glass shards glitter against the neon carpet. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, and the screams return. My hand aches. I look down and find glass embedded in my palm. Dark blood trickles down my pale wrist, falling to the carpet and staining the neon yellow carpet strips. The mystic air blows away, the curtains of magic lift.

I wake when cold metal tightens around my wrists, and I am hit with muggy Florida fall air. The automatic doors open to reveal a pair of medics wheeling a black body bag down the entrance. His wife struggles to walk even with the assistance of a paramedic. Sobs wrack her small frame; she loses her strength. I look toward the sky, unable to watch her violent grief. Two stars appear south of the moon, and I’m reminded of my girls. I pray they forgive me. God doesn’t hear me.

My stay in jail stretches with my sentencing repeatedly postponed. Aubrey and Liza don’t come to court. I don’t expect them to. I’m inevitably found guilty of murder in the first degree despite my lawyer’s best efforts of trying insanity based on a gambling addiction manic episode. I got twenty-five years and state-issued counseling. The judge says I’m one lucky bastard to see the light of day. My luck has long since run out.

Not a day goes by that I don’t hear the laughs and screams. My eyes burn with the images of his lifeless body. Still, I sit and imagine my release: flashing lights, beautiful bar ladies, and most of all, the winnings. It’s the very blood in my veins. Roll call breaks my daydream, and I am back in my cell, staring at the cold gray cinder block walls. The barred windows have a

way of messing with time: days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months, and months turn to years. My hands ache as I stretch to unclench them. Blood pearls over my palms from my nails breaking skin. Red shines on the stained orange cuffs of my jumpsuit—twenty-three years of scars built on these palms. Pale pink indentations mark my fall. That very last night. I can still feel the glass in my skin. It's the only thing I feel anymore.

Parole releases me on good behavior and the promise of seeing a psych. Good behavior is questionable. Sure, I didn't get in any gang fights and I even worked well in the laundry room, but nothing about me is good. I don't even remember how it feels.

My jeans hang low on my hips. A metal gray 1998 derby shirt flows loosely on my body, picking up the low tide winds. I timidly walk across the pavement, not able to shake the feeling of reprimand for being outside the gates. I'm out. I'm out. My possessions are given to me in an expandable cardboard box: my wallet, a few casino chips, and a picture of baby Liza.

I extend my arm and call for a taxi. The motion feels foreign in a body used to confinement. The yellow cab pulls along the curb; the driver doesn't blink at being outside the gates, he must do pick-ups here all the time.

"Where to?" the driver asks.

"300 Florence Avenue," I say without missing a beat.

After a quick drive, I arrived home.

The neon lights warm my face. Cigarette smoke fills my lungs, and the familiar buzz creeps through my head. My heart starts beating for the first time in decades.