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Rewind of 2025: The Pop Culture Moments We Won't Forget

by Layla P.

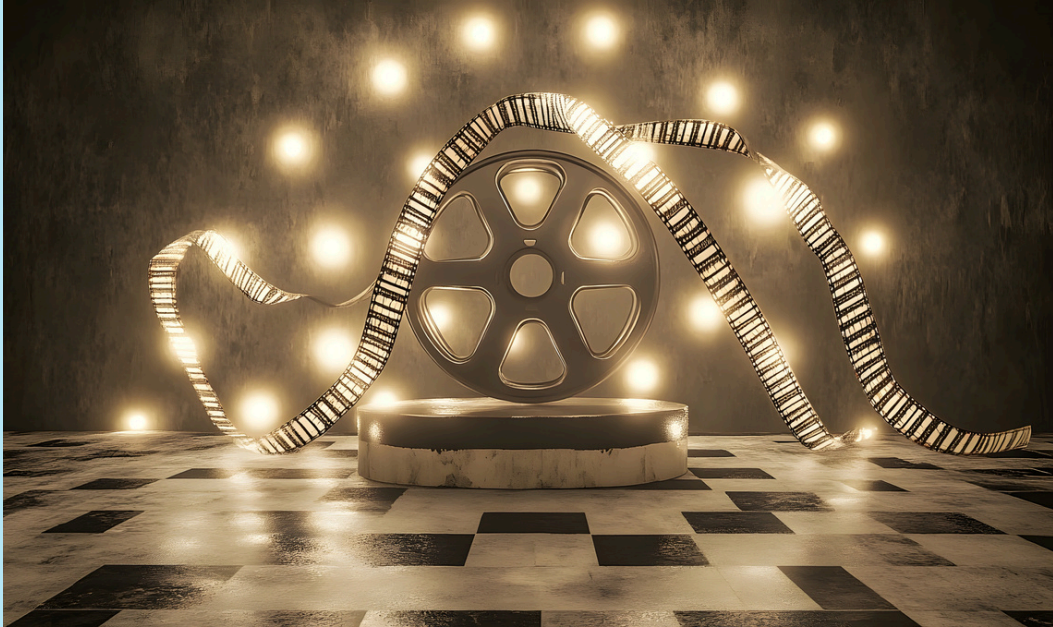


Image from Canva

2025: a year that's slowly, and maybe sadly, coming to an end. It's been a whirlwind of ups and downs this year that truly won't be forgotten. Sure, things like 67 and aura-farming may not be remembered too fondly, but so much else will be. So what are those things? From unforgettable albums to TV moments that broke the internet, pop culture this year has been a wild rollercoaster. So get ready for a hit of nostalgia (and hopefully some smiles) as we press rewind on the biggest pop culture moments of 2025.

Many might say that 2024 had better music than this year, but 2025 still gave us plenty of standout moments. We may not have

had one official “song of the summer,” but hits like “Love Me Not” by Ravyn Lenae and “Ordinary” by Alex Warner will continue to be played on repeat by fans everywhere. There were countless great releases, but let’s focus on the big ones — the moments in music that defined this year.

KATSEYE, the girl group formed in 2023, skyrocketed to fame with hits like “Gnarly” and “Gabriela” from their new EP, sparking viral dance trends all over social media. When Sabrina Carpenter dropped “Manchild” as the lead single for her new album *Man’s Best Friend*, it instantly blew up. When the full album released in August, songs like “Manchild” (#1), “Tears” (#3) and “Nobody’s Son” (#12) quickly climbed the Billboard Hot 100.



https://genius.com/album_cover_arts/1423836

And of course, there’s Taylor Swift. Everyone knows her – most people like her. *The Life of a Showgirl* marked a whole new era for her, mostly inspired by her recent engagement to Travis Kelce and how she feels about him. It has become an album we’ll certainly remember. The album shattered records from selling the most vinyls in a single week to breaking Spotify streaming milestones. Every one of its 12 tracks debuted in the top 12 spots on the Hot 100, something only Taylor Swift could do. “The Fate

of Ophelia” became the hit song of the album breaking the record of most streams in the first day which Taylor Swift had also previously owned.

Moving on to the movies and shows. This year, we laughed, sang and cried our eyes out to some of the best movies and shows—the kind that will go down as some of the greatest (and biggest record breakers) of all time. And when we say “record breakers” we actually mean it. *Kpop Demon Hunters* is a movie that many underestimated from the trailer. However it has now become Netflix’s most-watched movie of all time, surpassing 300 million in September, according to Netflix’s most popular movie list. The soundtrack has been just as huge. Songs have been dominating the Billboard charts, with “Golden” having been in the Top 10 for the past 20 weeks. “Your Idol”, “Soda Pop”, and “How It's Done” joined it too, making it the first-ever soundtrack to have four songs in the Top 10 at the same time.

Wicked, the highest-grossing Broadway film adaptation, became a massive sensation with Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande making us cry and fall in love with the magic all over again. While the first part of *Wicked* premiered last year, and the highly anticipated sequel, *Wicked: For Good*, came out this month in the US. This movie is a beautiful retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, letting us into Elphaba’s perspective. The soundtrack has also had hits like “Defying Gravity” which debuted at No.2 on the Billboard 200.

And of course, we can't forget the greatest TV show for many teens and adults this year. *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, finally

gave us a (sort of) ending – after years of heartbreak, love triangles and emotional damage. Ever since the first season dropped back in 2022, the show, based on Jenny Han's beloved book series, has been torturing us with its ending for years, until the final season. When it started airing weekly, Wednesdays when the new episode would be released, basically became a national event and went viral on the internet. Team Conrad, Team Jeremiah, Team Staylor and yes, even Team Anti-Belly (personally my pick), made every episode feel like a war zone on social media. It's bittersweet to say goodbye, but fans can still hold out hope – a follow-up film set in the same world is rumored to be in the works, possibly hitting screens in the next few years.



<https://www.showbizjunkies.com/tv/the-summer-i-turned-pretty-season-3-premiere-date/>



<https://today.ucsd.edu/story/why-are-people-lining-up-for-labubus-an-expert-breaks-down-the-pop-culture-craze>

Lastly, some viral moments and products from this year. Blind boxes became super popular with many teens and influencers collecting them. For example Smiskis, Sonny Angels and especially Labubus had people hunting them down in every Popmart like it was a sport. Labubus were on a whole other level though, with some selling for over hundreds of dollars and being almost impossible to find. And then there was Dubai Chocolate, the recipe of chocolate that every single person online had to

try. Does it actually taste that amazing? Maybe. But considering Lindt's Dubai chocolate bars were going for around 3,000 yen (about \$20), hopefully it really does taste good.

2025 gave us trends to laugh at, songs we couldn't stop singing, and shows and movies everyone talked about. The year might be ending, but the moments we loved won't just disappear. Pop culture will keep changing, new trends will come and go, and we will move on to the next big thing whether it's as weird as creepy, fluffy, monster shaped dolls. But the memories we made from this year will always be memorable and the ones that made this year pretty unforgettable.

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What is Déjà Vu?

by Kaeli S.

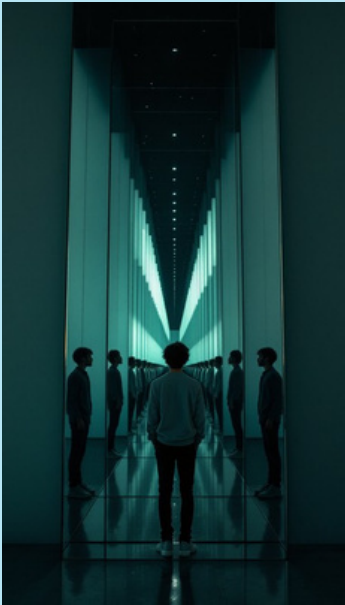


Image from Canva

Have you ever felt like you've experienced something before, even though it should be new? That's déjà vu. Déjà vu is French for 'already seen', which is exactly what it feels like – a familiar sensation, as if you have done something or been somewhere before, even if you haven't. What is déjà vu really? And is it something you should be worried about?

Déjà vu is actually your brain trying to remember something that never really happened, according to *BBC Science Focus*. This is caused by your brain trying to fix an incorrect memory, which helps you to remember real events better. Your brain wonders if something that has happened before is occurring again, or if a past experience is repeating itself. This is when you feel déjà vu.

Although déjà vu might feel like a mistake or something bad, it actually means that your brain is healthy and functioning properly. Senior psychology lecturer Dr. Akira O'Connor approximates that a healthy person experiences déjà vu about once a month. Experiencing déjà vu is good, and means that your brain's frontal lobe is working well.



https://stockcake.com/i/infinite-mirror-corridor_1531964_1175787

Often, déjà vu is experienced in younger people due to the fact that their brains are more active and they have a very good fact-checking part of their brain, according to O'Connor.

Although having déjà vu once in a while means your brain is working well, having it all the time is not natural. It is rare, but some

people do experience this constantly, and this is called *déjà vécu*, meaning 'already lived', according to *Science Focus*. This means that everything feels as if they have done it before. This might sound cool, but imagine talking to a friend and thinking that you have already had this conversation before. It would become quite boring. Furthermore, BBC states that *déjà vécu* can also be a sign of worsening dementia. According to the Cleveland Clinic, people with frontotemporal dementia, a type of dementia that shrinks the front and temporal lobes of the brain, can often experience this persistent *déjà vu*.

In conclusion, déjà vu, that familiar feeling, is actually your brain trying to verify whether or not you have been somewhere or

done something already. It is a sign of your brain being healthy, so it is not a bad thing. However, constant déjà vu, also known as déjà vécu, is not healthy. I hope you learned something new!

...Unless you think you've already read this article before?

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What Is Jamais Vu?

by Celine C.

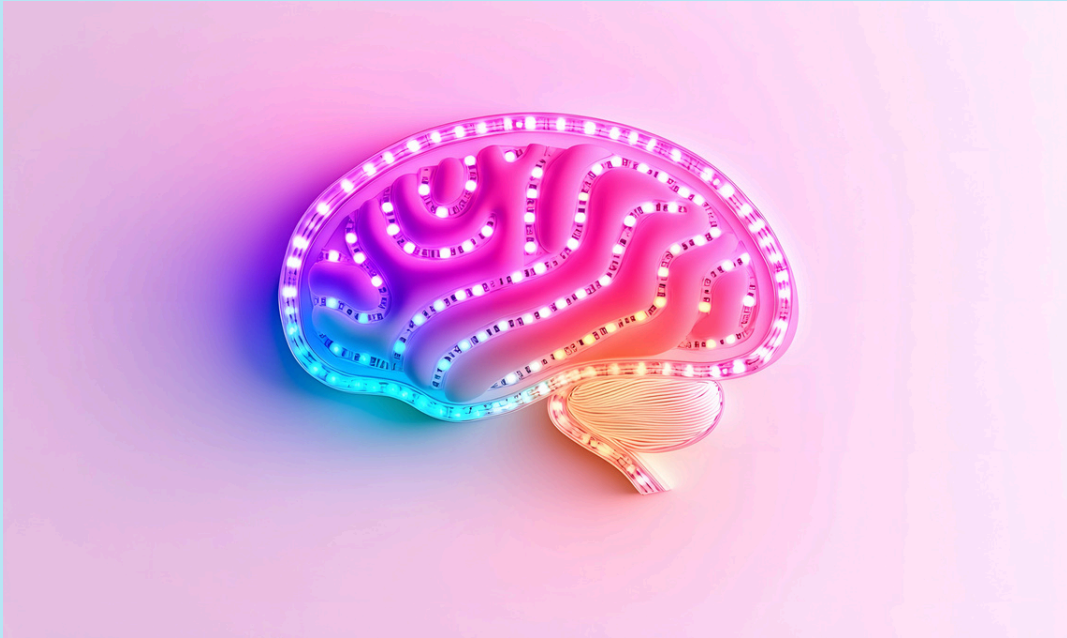
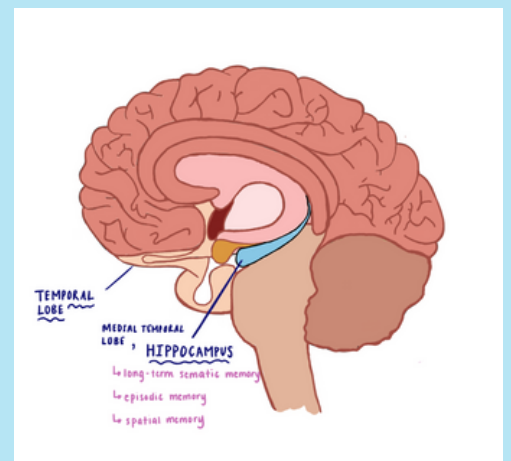


Image from Canva

How Does Jamais Vu Work?

Because the concept of jamais vu isn't well known compared to déjà vu, it is also less studied by scientists. However, we do know how jamais vu is caused, and how it works. According to Cleveland Clinic, a nonprofit academic medical center, when jamais vu occurs, two parts of your brain, the ones that control parts of your recognition (temporal lobe) and memory (hippocampus), are actually going through miscommunication, which leads



<https://www.scienceholic.org/post/neuro-navigation-hippocampus-s-role-in-spatial-cognition>.

to your brain playing tricks on you. This interferes with your ability to detect and recognize, which makes something that you see often seem unfamiliar, or even brand new and strange.

Jamais Vu in Everyday Life

Although jamais vu might seem like an extreme and rare concept, it was said by the National Library of Medicine, a government official website in the US, that jamais vu is observed in normal people, in ordinary everyday life. Most people probably have experienced it at least once in their lifetime, just without realizing that it was a feeling of jamais vu.

Here are some examples of jamais vu:

- You walk into your room or house, and feel as if something (things like lighting or flooring) is new or has changed, even if it did not.
- You write down a common word, but it suddenly looks wrongly spelt, or even unrecognizable.
- You get lost or forget your way to a familiar place, such as your own neighbourhood, workplace or schools.
- You stare into a mirror for a long time, and suddenly feel as if it isn't your reflection on the mirror isn't you yourself, even though it is your own face.
- You don't recognize a piece of clothing in your closet, and do not think of it as your own.
-

All of these examples are commonly observed examples of jamais vu. They might seem similar to memory loss or disorders

like Alzheimer's, but it is actually pretty different. While memory loss is having temporary or permanent troubles recalling something, such as forgetting your pet's name, or not being able to recall what you did on the day before, jamais vu is simply just a momentary feeling that occurs for only a short amount of time. But if jamais vu lasts for a longer time, or occurs more frequently and consistently, it might not be jamais vu anymore, and might be a concerning sign of danger. The article from Medical News Today states that, "If someone experiences jamais vu repeatedly, Dr. Merrill said it would make sense for them to ask their primary care doctor about seeing a neurologist and having a medical evaluation related to their brain activity."

Causes and Effects of Jamais Vu

According to Dr Trinh, the Chief Medical Officer of Healthy Brain Clinic, "Jamais vu can occur during periods of stress, fatigue, or sleep deprivation." The Cleveland Clinic also states that when our body is exhausted, our brain tends to falter and process things slower than how it normally would. Lack of sleep is also one of the main, common reasons for experiencing jamais vu. Sleep is needed for both our short and long term memory, and when you take less sleep, it is harder for the brain to recall or recognize things. Other causes mentioned by the source are stress and anxiety. When going through a lot of stress, it can change how the brain interprets environments around you. It is the same concept of how people react more sensitively when stressed.

Although there are many causes of jamais vu, there isn't distinct

evidence of the effects of jamais vu. Since jamais vu is less seen in individuals compared to déjà vu, there isn't much information on whether it is physically harmful to the human body either. But considering the causes, it might not be that helpful or necessary to our brain either; it simply just might be a sign that our brain is overworked or tired.

Whether you have personally experienced jamais vu in your life or not, now you know the conceptual feeling of jamais vu. Though there is no evidence that it is harmful to our bodies, again, it might be a sign of exhaustion, so try considering your current body status when you experience jamais vu. Jamais vu is just one example of how unique our brain can be. Similar to the déjà vu, but also its complete opposite, it is fascinating how jamais vu shows how our brain connects to our daily habits and experiences, and how detailed our bodies can be. In the future, it might be easier to recognize signs of jamais vu, and notice why it occurred. With this understanding, you can also better recall what your brain needs, which can be a great help to your health.

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Celebrating Winter: Holidays from Every Corner of the Globe

by Maya F.



Image from Canva

Winter is an important time for many cultures to celebrate hope and light in dark times of the year and to show gratitude for the harvest of the crops returning and being able to harvest. These celebrations help bring together communities and families, and help them reflect on all they they get to help them be grateful.

Bodhi Day, Dec 8

Bodhi Day is a Buddhist holiday that celebrates the day Siddhartha Gautama became the first Buddha. It's celebrated in parts of Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. The Mainichi Newspaper says that Bodhi Day honors the “Moment of Awakening”, which is the moment when the Buddha



<https://buddhaweekly.com/bodhi-day-awakening-day/>

understood the truth about suffering, karma, and how to reach Nirvana (freedom from suffering). Some call it the day Buddhism was born. It is celebrated by reflecting on the year, meditating, reading/listening to the Buddhist

teachings. People also eat simple meals that often include rice and milk, which is said to be the Buddha's last meal before enlightenment. Buddhists will also decorate Bodhi trees with lights to symbolise enlightenment shining in the dark. The Bodhi tree represents wisdom, peace, and compassion.

Feast of our Lady Gaudalupe, Dec 12

The Feast of our Lady Gaudalupe, or La Virgen de Guadalupe in Spanish, is a major Catholic celebration that honors the appearance of Virgin Mary's image in Mexico in 1500. According to Britannica, it is told that in December 1531, the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to a poor indigenous man named Juan Diego on a hill called Tapeyac, near Mexico City. She told him to build a church there in her honor, and he in turn told the village bishop. However the bishop didn't believe him and wanted proof. Juan Diego told Mary of the bishop's request. Mary was told to have given him a miracle as proof. The miracle that she gave was that she made roses blooming in winter and she imprinted an image of herself on Juan Diego's cloak. The cloak still exists and is displayed in the Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. This day is celebrated with pilgrimages

to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, masses and prayers often at dawn, traditional dances, music, and parades. Altars are put together and feasts with family and community are also held. According to Britannica, Lady Guadalupe is a symbol of faith, hope, and protection, seen as a powerful cultural symbol of Mexican identity and unity.

Saint Liucia's Day, Dec 13

The story of Saint Liucia is about a young Christian martyr from Syracuse, Sicily, around the year 300 CE. According to the stories, she disobeyed orders and secretly brought food to persecuted

Christians hiding in Roman catacombs. She was told to be wearing a wreath of candles on her head to free her hands. She was later killed for her faith and became a symbol of courage, faith, and light overcoming darkness. Saint Liucia's Day is celebrated primarily in Scandinavia, Norway, and Sweden, with a Liucia procession led by a girl dressed as Saint Lucia. She wears a white robe and red sash for purity and wears a crown of candles. The procession is followed by children in white, singing and holding candles. Families enjoy breakfast of Lussekatter (saffron buns shaped in a S), Pepparkakor (ginger cookies), and hot drinks. That night concerts, festivals, and candlelit celebrations will occur.



<https://visitsweden.com/what-to-do/culture-history-and-art/swedish-traditions/christmas/lucia/>

Yule, Dec 20-23

Yule is an ancient winter festival from Norse and Germanic traditions that honors nature, family, and the cycle of the seasons. According to Britannica, It marks the winter solstice — the darkest time of year — when people celebrate the return of the sun and the hope of warmth and light. Old Yule traditions included burning a huge log for twelve days to bring good luck and keep away bad spirits, bringing in pine, fir, or holly branches to symbolize everlasting life, sharing food and gifts to celebrate survival, and lighting bonfires to welcome the sun's return. Many modern Christmas traditions come from Yule, like the Yule log cake, using evergreens for trees and wreaths, and decorating or burning small wooden logs to symbolize hope and light. Overall, Yule focuses on gratitude, renewal, connection to nature, and the idea of light overcoming darkness.



<https://www.almanac.com/content/what-yule-log-christmas-traditions>

Yalda Night (Shabe Yalda), the Winter Solstice



Yalda night is a Persian holiday, from a Zoroastrian tradition that marks the victory of light over darkness. Ancient Persians believed that the sun god, Mithra, was born on this night and brought back light to the world. For this celebration

<https://irandestination.com/yalda-night/>

families and friends stay up late together all night. They eat, read poetry (especially Hafez which is a mix of Persian and Iranian food), and share stories. Traditional foods include pomegranates, watermelon, and nuts, which symbolize life and good health. People often light candles or fires to keep away darkness and evil. The idea of light vs. darkness represents the triumph of good over evil, the pomegranates and watermelon stand for the red glow of dawn and the sun's warmth returning, and the fire and candles symbolize hope, warmth, and the victory of light.

Las Posadas, Dec 16-24



<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Las-Posadas>

Las Posadas is a Mexican version of Christmas that tells the story of Mary and Joseph searching for a home before having Jesus in Bethlehem. According to Britannica, to celebrate, every night of Las Posadas people act out Mary and Joseph's search for shelter: they walk from house to house with candles, singing songs asking for a place to stay. Finally, one house lets them in. Everyone celebrates with food, music, piñatas, and prayer. On Christmas Eve, it ends with a big feast and sometimes a church service. Mary and Joseph's journey represents faith, hope, and trust in God. The candles and lights symbolize the light of Jesus coming into the world and the piñata, which usually is shaped like a star, it stands for the Star of Bethlehem and the victory of good over evil.

Boxing Day

Boxing Day began in the UK hundreds of years ago and is still celebrated in countries that were once part of the British Empire, like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. According to Britannica, many people believe the name comes from the tradition of giving boxed gifts or charity “boxes” to servants, who had one of their only days off, or to those in need. Today, it’s a day focused on charity, family time, and sports. Overall, Boxing Day symbolizes gratitude, generosity, and taking a moment to rest after a busy Christmas, staying true to its original purpose of giving back and being thankful.

Kwanzaa, Dec 26-Jan 1



<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-kwanzaa-2834584>

Kwanzaa is a week-long celebration that honors African American traditions and culture. According to the National Museum of African American history and Culture, it was created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana

Karenga, a professor and activist to help bring the African American community back together after the Civil Rights Movement. The name comes from the Swahili phrase “Matunda ya Kwanza” meaning the first fruits. Each day focuses on 7 principles called the Nguzo Saba. The principles are; Umoja(unity), Kujichagulia (self determination), Ujima (working together), Ujamaa (supporting each other economically), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith). It is often celebrated by lighting a Kinara (a candleholder with seven

candles). On the Kinara there are three red candles, one black candle, and three green candles. The red candles represent the struggle and bloodshed in their fight for freedom. The black candle represents community, identity, strengths, and unity. The three green candles represent the future, growth and new hope. All three together show the past, present, and future of their people. People also celebrate by sharing meals, music, stories, and giving meaningful handmade gifts. Kwanzaa symbolizes family, culture, creativity, and community strength.

Zartosht No-Diso, Dec 26

Zartosht No-Diso is a Zoroastrian holiday that marks the death anniversary of the prophet Zarathustra, the founder of the Zoroastrianism faith. According to Wikipedia, it is often celebrated on Dec 26, but depending on the calendar and different communities they might celebrate at different times. Most Zoroastrian Parsi and Iranian communities celebrate in March or May. It is a day of remembrance and respect. People visit fire temples, which are places of worship, recite prayers and hymns, reflect on their religion and teachings, and take part in charitable acts. It is a day to choose good thoughts, good words, and do good deeds and to honor Zarathustra's message

Lohri, Jan 13

Lohri is a holiday that is celebrated in Punjab, India. It marks the end of the winter and the return of the harvest of crops. According to Wikipedia, on January 13, families and communities gather and light bonfires, throw sugarcane, popcorn, and sesame

seeds as offerings, Everyone sings traditional songs, dances bhangra and gidda (traditional dances), and eats special foods like makki di roti (corn bread) and sarson da saag (mustard greens). The fire symbolizes warmth, light, and the sun's energy returning after winter. The bonfire offerings show their gratitude to God for the return of the harvest. The singing and dancing celebrates the community, joy, and new beginnings. It's a time to thank nature for a good harvest and to welcome longer, warmer days.

As you celebrate the holidays this year, maybe take a second to think about all the different holidays celebrated around the world and recognize that even though different cultures and parts of the world may have different traditions or may look different, in the end they all share the same wishes for light, joy, community, and new beginnings.

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Brainrot 2.0: How AI Started to Fuel Entire Addictions

by Ai L. and Claire P.



Image from Canva

If a person tells you the term “brainrot”, what may come up in your mind? It may not be recognizable to everyone, especially for the generations before Gen Z who might see it as something similar as “memes”. Memes started to be recognized through simple, humorous jokes on the internet, but the term "brainrot" has been around for over 100 years in the English language. Over time, it has become a slang word and the way it has been used has changed over the years. According to Bitedefender, its usage was first introduced in 1884 in the book *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. However, it did not have an upsurge in use until the year 2017, Oakmonitor states. According to Oakmonitor Online, some of the “brainrots” that sparked this present-day culture is

the old YouTube show “Annoying Orange” and the meme “Troll Face”. In 2020 during the pandemic, the meme Amongus became very popular. The more recognizable ones to recent generations are the words “skibidi”, “fanum tax”, and “gyatt”, created in 2023. However, terms associated to brainrot are constantly updated by the use of newer generations. Now, it is typically associated with "67", "mason", and “italian brainrot.” There are multiple ways in how brainrot has been affected by the use of newer technology, such as artificial intelligence.

What Is Brainrot?

According to Qustodio, "brainrot" is a term which refers to photos or videos which are short, repetitive, and bizarre, usually made in order to grab people's attention. Clips made up of brainrots are often stitched together in quick succession, bringing a random feel to it that can be often very overstimulating. The media of brainrot can be short-form video platforms, such as Instagram reels, TikTok, and YouTube – specifically Youtube shorts. Content like brainrot is shared rapidly among young viewers and plays a huge role in their daily life as it plays out during conversations, inside jokes, and even games, either physical or online. To adults, brainrot can often seem useless, pointless, and even overstimulating, but to kids and teenagers, the experience is different. The source Qustodio talks about these kinds of videos being oddly satisfying. "They are short, easy to digest, and provide individuals with an instant burst of entertainment." These videos often are unpredictable, therefore keeping viewers wanting more and more of it. They

feature loud sounds, strange senses of humor, and finally, weird concepts that tend to draw you in. With brainrot, it is very easy to create trends. So, to adults, although this kind of content seems pointless, for younger audiences, these videos are oddly entertaining.

AI and Modern Brainrot

Nowadays, there are a plethora of characters and phrases that are all under the term “brainrot”. It may be incomprehensible as to why some of them are so popular. An example we can take a look at is a ballerina with a teacup for a head. This is precisely talking about the character "Ballerina Cappuccina", who,



<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/30/style/italian-brain-rot-ballerina-cappuccina.html>

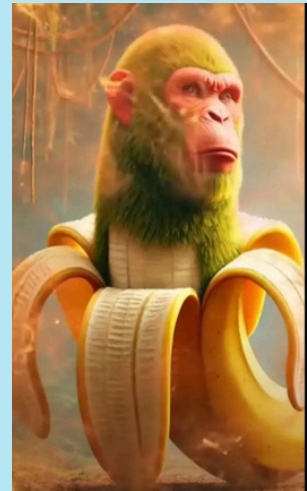
according to Euro News, is a character from “Italian Brain Rot, a series of memes that exploded in popularity this year consisting of unrealistic AI-generated animal-object hybrids with absurdist, pseudo-Italian narration.” It may be baffling to parents how this is a thrill for

young tweens and children. However, Italian Brainrot isn’t the only thing that baffles older generations with unexplainable memes. The term “67” has sparked new interest for a multitude of children. According to Weblio JP, “6-7 (six seven) is an internet meme which originated from the repeated lyric "6-7" in the song "Doot Doot (6 7)" and skyrocketed popularity after being used in video edits featuring professional basketball players.” From an adults’ perspective it may seem like regular numbers, but from that of young children and tweens it is a new spark of interest that may be blurted out in classrooms when they come across

anything consisting of the numbers 6 and 7.

Impacts of AI on People and Younger Generations

A banana with a green, banana-shaped chimpanzee head stands in what seems to be a jungle setting, looking out to the light. A blue shark standing on 3 elongated side fins which create legs; Nike shoes on each one of them, standing in a beach setting. What am I saying, you may ask? Well, those are just some of the major "AI brainrots", which both currently



<https://www.soapcentral.com/pop-culture/who-chimpanzini-bananini-exploring-viral-tiktok-brainrot-character-s-origin>

flood the internet and sparks interest in many people ("chimpanzini bananini", "tralalelo tralala", respectively). These things may sound like a mix of completely random and confusing visuals, but that is the point. As bizarre as it may sound, we can observe that with this content millions of people seem to be mindlessly glued to their screens. We can see just how quickly AI brainrot can spread through society, and why it influences the way we act and say things, through its high success at capturing the attention of people worldwide. Regarding the content of brainrot, "AI slop" is flooding the internet. Brainrot doesn't just waste our time, but also hurts attention spans, too.

According to Cogni Down Under, on The Medium, recent neuroimaging studies show that excess digital engagement triggers significant changes in brain structure and function. For example, the mesolimbic reward system, which is responsible for the way we process rewards and motivation, ends up

dysregulated through continuous dopamine stimulation which can come from additional screen time, specifically with the AI brainrot sensations that are filling up the internet. What is seen in this study is that surplus interaction with this kind of "brainrotted" content can create patterns in behavior, with users experiencing dopamine deficits when not engaged with technology, which can even be compared to something as far as withdrawal symptoms observed in addiction to substances.

This source also mentions how there are neurochemical processes resulting from interacting with too much AI entertainment which involve: first, dopamine spikes from the engagement given, second, the downregulation of dopamine receptors, third, below-baseline dopamine states when not using technology, and finally, fourth, compulsive seeking of digital stimulation, in order to restore normal functions. This shows that our brains feel like they are constantly in need of seeing new brain rot content due to the joy and entertainment. Facing these kinds of problems, which stem out from something so minor, makes us realize how truly dangerous overexposure to some sorts of media can be to us, even if they seem harmless.

Conclusion

Brainrot has grown from just a niche internet joke to something which could be as big as a cultural phenomenon. So, at the moment, we seem to be facing a new challenge – we wonder, how can we live our lives online, while still protecting our balance of social media and life, focus, and overall well-being? For younger generations, it has been more widespread especially

after AI has come into contact with it. So something that just started as obsessive, repetitive trends online eventually grew into a cycle of wanting more videos of brainrot thanks to algorithms, ongoing stimulation, and the quickness of entertainment online. Because of the way AI makes brainrot easier for us to create and spread with others, its influence and impact specifically on people on younger audiences has become something which is now impossible to ignore. As a whole, "brainrot" shows us just how quickly silly, random ideas can take over our attention, “rotting our brains”; not by force, but through endless repetition.

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The Elf on the Shelf

Zora S.



Image from Canva

Warning from the editor: This is an original horror story about a very unhappy Christmas elf. Santa makes an appearance, but he is not very jolly, either.

Christmas. Like many others, my family and I celebrate the holiday full of joyful people and cheer. My name is Sam Miller and I thought Christmas this year would be full of baking cookies, spending time with family, opening presents—the usual you know? I thought it would be normal and nothing out of the ordinary would happen...But boy was I wrong.

It all started on Sunday December 23rd. The day I found the book. The day I saw the elf. The day it all began. On that day, I

recall my grandmother visiting and my parents kicking me out of the room because they all needed to have a conversation that I apparently couldn't be a part of, even though I hadn't seen my grandmother for over a year.

Bored out of my mind, with no siblings at all to hang out with, I decided to venture to our attic on the third floor of our house. Yes, the attic. The attic no one ever goes in for fear of clutter, and maybe some rodents that I'll spare you the names of. But what can I say? I was bored! So I pulled on the string, and the attic ladder came tumbling down. I climbed up and poked my head through the attic entrance.

Darkness.

I was met with utter darkness. Nope, I said, and immediately fumbled for my phone light. Here were my observations while scanning the room: bags, among bags, among bags. And did I mention bags? The room was full of them, along with random furniture including a creepy rocking chair, a broken table split down the middle and a dusty old book shelf.

I also saw a book on the floor no more than an inch away from me. For some particular reason I felt drawn to it, like something wanted me to read it. No, it wasn't a photo album which I think you'd assume because that's usually the type of books you'd find in an attic or basement. It was actually a regular old book but with a leather cover and engravings on the spine. I couldn't tell what the engravings were but it probably didn't matter...right?

Anyways, I picked it up and flipped to a random page, coughing at all the dust it was producing. I opened my eyes and while squinting, read the first line I saw:

“In order to free thee on Christmas Eve, thou must hide and go seek he who tricks and lies for that is the key.”

I blinked. What a bunch of nonsense, I said, and slid the book across the cluttered floor. I scanned the room once again but my mind soon came to the conclusion that there was no fun or pop of color in this attic that would save me from utter boredom. I stared at failure straight in the face, admitting defeat. But before I could climb down the attic ladder and forget about this whole experience, something caught my eye.

There.

One of the pieces of items tossed up here did have a pinch of color but only a pinch. I didn't notice it at first, but as I shined my light brighter I realized it was an object sitting on the piece of dusty furniture. No, it wasn't the creepy rocking chair, and no it wasn't on one of the many bags spread across the floor. It was placed, or rather sat, on top of the bookshelf, lifeless.

Or so I thought.

Curious, I pulled myself up and fully entered the attic, walking across the creaky floorboards and straight towards the bookshelf.

That pinch of color, as I got closer, turned out to be an elf. A Christmas elf. Not one of those stuffed animal types, more of a... no it was for certain: An elf on the shelf. It was wearing a green suit with striped stockings, and those little weird elf shoes that looked like they were stolen from Tinker Bell. He had rosy cheeks and pale skin, and those blue eyes could have you lost in them for ages.

I stared, and stared, and stared.

“Will you stop staring?!” A shrill voice asked.

I yelped and looked around frantically. “Who-Who’s there?!” I called.

“Are you that blind, human?! You’re looking right at me!” The voice replied.

You’re looking right at me. You’re looking right at me? Is this the day I finally went insane? What on earth is this voice talking ab – I suddenly stared at the elf. It blinked. It actually blinked.

“I told you to stop staring at me! Why do you kids never listen?!”

I gasped in disbelief. “What...YOU CAN TALK?!” I screamed.

“Yeah yeah I can talk blablabla,” the elf said in a mocking voice.

Okay, I’m no fan of scary movies, but from the limited selection

I've watched, one thing I've learned is that this is not normal. Dolls aren't supposed to talk. Nothing inanimate should talk. I don't know what this thing is capable of, so I guess the only thing left is to play with my remaining cards. I played dumb.

"You-you must be Santa's helper right! C-come to hear my wishlist right? What's your story? Who are you?" Act dumb. It will never know. Act like the kid it's used to. Hopeful, annoying, always wanting things. I thought I played the right move, but sheesh again, I was wrong. This elf started into a full monologue as if it hadn't spoken to anyone for over a year. (Which it probably hadn't)

"Listen kid, one thing you're gonna learn about me in our time together is I hate Santa. Your little fantasies about how he treats everyone with kindness giving gifts to everyone? Well you know what, back when I worked for him he was such a forgetful person. Always saying my name wrong during attendance, tripping over my neatly stacked toys and always messing my hard work up. He even forgot my birthday once! And sure I let him off you know because we all make mistakes – some more than others *cough. But soon something started to pluck at my temper. The things he "accidentally" did started to get annoying. And finally after seeing so many creations of mine being destroyed "accidentally," I felt myself reach "the last straw". I didn't flip out. I didn't yell. I didn't scream. I wanted to. I wanted to. I wanted to. I could have. But I didn't. You know what I did? I talked to him. And you know what he did? He apologized and welcomed me with

open arms, you assume? Heh. Nonononono. He messed up my name. He used that old excuse and said that he didn't have his glasses. Excuses. Excuses. Excuses. I am done with excuses. I am done with being forgotten and neglected and treated like someone who people shouldn't take seriously. Treated like someone who people think that they don't need to apologize and be honest to. I am done. And I quit. So you ask me why I hate Santa? Why do I hate my co-workers? Because they laugh, they make excuses, they mess up my name, they just-they don't give me the respect I deserve. They don't give me the respect that should be given to any other person. So kid, I hate Santa and I dislike you. And that's because you're number one on the Nice list, so I'm gonna ruin your life. Just like he ruined mine."

Once the creepy elf had finished I thought about his story. I felt bad a bit for the thing, but my brain was still trying to understand how this piece of plastic could talk. "Well at least I'll be rid of you after Christmas," I muttered.

"What was that?" the elf asked.

"Nothing. What happened to you actually seems a bit sad and I hope your days get brighter. But please, you can't stay here! This is my house. And I don't need you teleporting around it causing trouble. My parents already expect so much of me, and I already have so much on my plate so please, leave!"

If there was a word to describe when plastic dolls dressed as elves were mad, all I can say is I felt a prickle down my spine.

Maybe I had struck a nerve too deep but it was too late to take back the words now. The elf glared. I mean really glared. It was worse than when teachers give you “the glare”. Worse than the glare you get when you make a dad joke – or maybe that’s just me but you get the point. A glare that would be forever burned into my memory. Then, the elf jumps off the shelf – and I mean really jumps. It sits on my shoulder, and it whispers in my ear: “You’re lucky I arrived a bit off schedule but let me just tell you: It’s December and you know what that means? Every day when you wake up – I’ll be there. Every birthday I’ll be there. And every day until Christmas – I’ll be there. Are we clear?”

“Can’t – can’t breathe,” I tried to choke out. It was as if an invisible force was cutting off all my airways.

“I SAID are. We. Clear?”

“No, it's a bit misty,” I joked.

I felt him grip my shoulder.

“Yes! Yes we're clear.”

“Good,” he said as he let his tiny plastic hands drop from whatever trance he was in. “The name’s Twinkle Toes. Now go on before I change my mind.”

I burst out of the attic gasping for breath. Twinkle Toes. Twinkle Toes. TWINKLE TOES?! WHO has a name like that?! Who does

that elf think he is invading my house like that!?

I couldn't sleep that night. I knew I would never be safe as long as Twinkle Toes was in my house. I needed to do something. I needed to act! Before it's too late...Of course! I thought suddenly of the book I had found in the attic right before I first saw Twinkle Toes. One of the lines in the page that made no sense said: "In order to free thee On Christmas eve, thou must hide and go seek he who tricks and lies for that is the key!!"

For the people who don't know the tradition: Typically an elf on the shelf's job is to report to Santa about the kids each night, and return to the house hiding in a different spot in the morning. Keeping that and the book's mysterious line in mind I realized what I needed to do. I needed to figure out where Twinkle Toes's next hiding place was before he moves to it within the night! That way I can trap and ship him back to the North Pole where Santa can deal with him! The book meant that I am the seeker and Twinkle Toes is the hider! I'm sure of it! If I find him before twelve on Christmas Eve, I'm certain everything will be back to normal. I'm a genius! Fortunately it's only Sunday today. I think things are starting to look up for a change. I murmured as I slowly drifted off to sleep. Little did I know they were about to go much, much, much more downhill...

Beep! Beep beep!

"Honey, wake up! It's time for school!" my mother called.

"Uggg coming!" I groaned. Wait. No. No. Nononono. If I have school....that means it's already Monday! Christmas Eve is today! I have to stay after school for orchestra, and my parents insisted I go to bed early tonight. By the time I get home from school it will be too late! Twinkle Toes will have chosen the best hiding place and I will lose and he will remain in my house tormenting me until the end of time. I got ready for the day and ran to school. After more than six hours, it was finally over. I skipped orchestra practice and went straight home. I got home late. 10:00pm the clock read. My parents were asleep. I ran into the living room where my family and I had set up our Christmas tree. Presents under the tree! Already? I thought as I chewed my nails. Suddenly I heard...was that munching? Aggressive ASMR? Someone chewing... and was that the smell of cookies? Wait a minute. Someone eating cookies at 10:00 o'clock on Christmas eve...? Who could that be? I turned and caught the one and only: Saint Nicholas. Who was snacking on cookies and spilling crumbs everywhere!

"What – Santa Claus? Is that you?" I asked.

"Busted," he said.

"What. Who? Why? Forget it! You need to help me Santa! You're elf Twinkle Toes has gone insane! He won't leave no matter how hard I try! What did you do to him?!" I asked.

Santa stared at me for a long while. He then took a bite of the half-eaten cookie in his hand and spilled even more crumbs

which fell on his beard.

“That’s a good question. A really good one. But uhh, I’ve got many houses I need to go to with presents to deliver, and I only stopped for a quick snack and you weren’t supposed to see me...” He trailed off avoiding my eyes while awkwardly inching away and heading towards the window.

“Wow. Hold it! You’re just gonna leave me here?!” I asked.

“No, no, I’m just uh – I know! What if you just turn around and count to three. I promise I’m not gonna do anything.”

I was caught off guard.

“Why?” I asked in disbelief.

“You want to be stuck with this elf?” he asked.

“Fine,” I pouted.

Usually If it was any other adult, excluding my parents, I would never listen to them. But I mean it was Santa! The kind, the brave, the guy who spreads Christmas cheer and has an oh so joyful laugh! This was probably a once and a lifetime opportunity to even talk to him!

I trusted him. And he would never do anything...unexpected.
Right?

“One...Two...Three!” I quickly turned around and...

He was gone.

A note was left on the spot he was standing.

“I owe you one. “ I read.

Silence.

Did Santa really just...ditch me?

“I CAN’T BELIEVE HIM! WHY DID I FALL FOR THAT” I yelled out loud.

I took a breath. I’m running out of time!

I frantically searched the house, scrambling through book shelves and small corners, desks, and bags – I even checked the attic. 11:30pm. I couldn’t find him. Where is he? Where is he?

“WHERE IS HE?!” I screamed.

I heard a cackle. From above? To the side? No no, it was from all directions. It was Twinkle Toes for sure.

“Where are you!?” I shouted not knowing where to face.

“I saw you met Santa! But look around you, where is he? You're

all alone. You never really stood a chance. You thought you could get rid of me kid? You thought that dusty old book I gave you would be the answer to kicking me out? You really thought that was the answer? I intentionally left that book, made you chant the words! And now look where that got you!”

I turned and there was Twinkle Toes leaning against the window.

“No. No. No.” I said in fear. “So, was it all a lie? The hide and go seek part? That even if I did find you in your new hiding spot – it wouldn’t matter? Even if I found you at 12:00 o’clock?” I asked.

“No, all of that was correct. But you got one thing wrong.” He said.

“What?” I asked in fear.

“I am not the hider. You are a deer who will soon be caught by my net,” he said.

“And you have 30 seconds before it's time to hunt.”

I tried to run, but it was too late.

The. Clock. Struck. Twelve.

“Found you,” he whispered.

The Colors of the Stained Glass

by Lynn U.

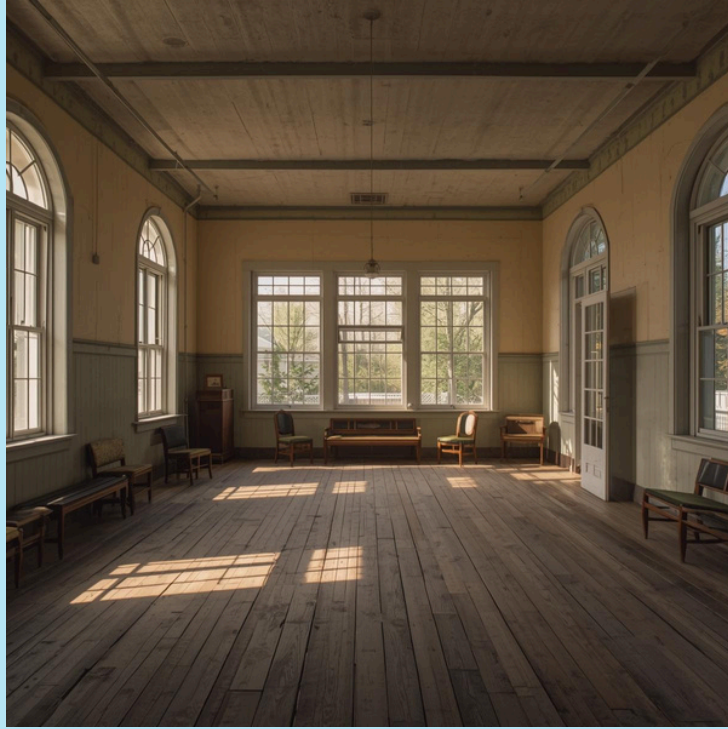


Image from Canva

Note from the editor: This is an original story inspired by the Five Goals of our school.

Snow, that's what it was. Cold, lonely snow, falling like dainty angels in the quiet alleyway stained with shadows. The frigid zephyr lilted past where I lay, leaving a stinging pain that bit into my skin like the fangs of winter. My eyes were closed, a dull drowsiness overwhelming my senses. *1...2...3...* I counted the seconds to distract myself from the fact that it was mid-winter here in England and I was wearing a t-shirt so smudged in dirt one had to assume the t-shirt was originally brown. I couldn't afford anything more— it was a used t-shirt I found dumped in the dirty corners of the city and I had no other choice. I felt

grateful that at least I was wearing ankle-length pants; at least my legs would stay warm.

Laughter and chatter wafted from the road past the alley, and it caused a sense of bittersweet loneliness seizing my heart in a painful way. I stared down at the snow and traced a stick figure on the pavement. I jabbed the snow two times for the eyes and paused before drawing a straight line for the mouth. I stared blankly at it for a few seconds before saying, "Hi."

My voice was raspy from not using it recently. However I managed a proper greeting, which for some reason brought me a sense of pride. The stick figure stared back at me, and for some reason it was enough of a response for me. I smiled a bit, bringing temporary warmth to my heart. I turned to reach into my pocket...what I pulled out was a quarter loaf of bread. I stood up, wincing at a knee injury I had inflicted on myself earlier after tripping. *Don't be scared...I know you're alone, but you have yourself. And you're strong, right?* Gulping down my fear as usual, I tiptoed out the alley. *Right...or left?* I decided to turn left; there was no real meaning behind that choice.

The snow was cold against my aching feet, but the sun bright in the sky was a bliss to my freezing body. Although a quite decent amount of people were outside, the alluring whiteness of the city dazzled the world into a strange silence. The color of the buildings were all a dull red or brown but strangely seemed colorful from the lack of other colors around them.

After a few minutes, I saw the first homeless person. He looked to be in his 40s, and bruises bloomed on his cracked, dry skin like ink stains. He weakly raised his head to look at me, his eyes emotionless and tired. I tensed up a bit from the stare, but I shook my head and ripped a chunk of the bread and gave it to the man. The man instantly jerked up and devoured the bread, and thanked me while crying, “Thank you, thank you so much, may God bless you.”

I panicked at the sudden interaction and stammered, “Th...” I wanted to say ‘thank you,’ but my mouth would not make out the words. Awkwardly, I turned and kept walking. *I wonder what ‘God’ is. Is that a person? His relative? Does ‘God’ have blessing powers?* Although I did not know what the man meant when he said those words, it gave me a gush of happiness.

“Please...food...give me food...”

I perked up a bit from the sudden sound but turned left and saw three people on the ground— a mother and her two children.

"Ch...children...they're starving—"

My eyes widened in panic as I crouched, saying, “It’s okay, alright? I’ll give you guys food.” I frantically took out all the remaining bread and placed it in the mother’s hand. “Y...you can have all of it,” I said, trying to be reassuring. *...it’s okay...it’s okay...* The older of the two children saw the bread and her eyes lit up in joy. The younger of the two was still too young to realize what

was happening, but seeing her older sister's reaction, decided it was something good that had happened and smiled too. I turned and walked away a bit fast before my existence could ruin their moment.

The mother yelled, "May your family stay safe through the winter!" I froze, slowly turning to look behind me. ... *I'm not sure what "family" is, but people are so kind.* I walked past an old woman buying groceries. Snow started falling from the sky again.

"Wait, young boy." An old woman waves kindly, making sure her palms were visible to show that she held no weapon.

I froze. *Does she want bread too? What does she want?*

The old woman tapped my shoulder gently and smiled, "You. Even when you were starving, you gave all your bread to others in need. That is a true act of kindness."

...really? The old woman took my hand. I felt fear rush through my limbs but I pushed it down to my stomach, where it fluttered around like a butterfly. *I'm scared. Where is she going to take me? I'm really scared. Is she evil? Is she bad? ...no, push your fear down. Fear is useless. I need to believe that she's good...or spreading kindness will be impossible.*

"You're starving too. You look like you can use a nice feast," she murmured, and proceeded to lead me into the alley, past the alley and even more alleys, and eventually into a place full of nature that I've never seen before. Standing clumsily at the edge of the forest was a one-story home, with white walls and a

brown, worn-out roof.

I stiffened a bit, looking up at the old woman. Where are you taking me? I felt a bit scared, getting pulled somewhere by a stranger who I don't know is good or not. *NO! No, don't think that. She's nice. She must be. Kindness exists in this world. Kindness does exist in this world.*

The door of the house opened and out came a girl. Her hair was silky chestnut, reaching to her elbows, and her mesmerizing eyes shone like emeralds in the golden sun. I felt a sense of awe wash over me as I looked back up at the old woman for some sort of answer. *Oh...it must be it. I probably died. How else am I feeling so warm in my heart right now? I stared at the ground. At least I helped people. No one would care if I died anyway so I guess it doesn't matter. I felt a bit sad. At least I would have liked to know what the word "family" meant. There's so many words and things I don't know and I wish I could have learned them all.*

The girl tugged on the old woman's sleeve as she asked, "Who is this person?"

The old woman said, "He will stay with us today for dinner." She turned to look at me, "What might be your name, dear?"

Name...I started rummaging through my memory to recall what my name was. ...*Name....uuuummm...*I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to remember. *A....a...all...* I vaguely recalled a voice calling my name, all those years ago, with hair like silk and eyes as kind

as the soft sunlight seeping into the cold block, bringing warmth.

“Allein, here, come to me.” “Allein, don’t cry, your mother’s here alright?” “Allein...I’m...so...sorry...”

I froze. Then I took a shuddering breath and stammered, “A... Allein.” *I can’t believe that I had forgotten my name already. I don’t see clarity in my identity. Maybe I’m not even Allein. Maybe I’m just some creature ordered to give, give, keep giving to people till they fall. It’s not as if I don’t like giving. It’s just that... sometimes, I wish I wasn’t alone. I wish I wasn’t alone in this path I’m taking, I wish there were others to support me, to tell me, ‘Allein, you’re doing the right thing’. But I probably don’t deserve it.*

The old woman took my hand. “Come on,” she said, as I tentatively followed her to the house.

A waft that lifted my senses entered my nose as I perked up naturally, wanting to ask, What is that? However I kept my mouth shut as I thought that if I spoke, I would be thrown out of the house. I knew the old woman wasn’t probably that mean, but the possibility still scared me. I felt a faint sense of dizziness hit my head, but I shook it off– if you pretend it doesn’t exist, it might not exist at all. Especially when it comes to just a simple sensation of nausea.

My eyes widened when I saw all the food placed on the table. It was clam chowder, and although many wouldn’t consider it a

feast, the generosity they had to give me this made my eyes wet. I tried to blink my tears away but they came trickling down. I quickly wiped them away, smiled, and whispered, “S-sorry...”

The girl looked at me and I froze, feeling a tingling sensation of warmth erupt in my chest, but I ignored it and attempted to maintain eye contact with her. She asked, “Where did you come from?”

I looked over to my right, doing nothing in particular, as I shrugged. “From around here,” I said, not very sure where I came from myself. I sat at the table and tentatively started eating the dinner. It was warm and it made my chest feel bubbly and full, a sensation I hadn’t had in a long time. I said ‘thank you’ each time I took a bite and each time before that nervously stole a glance at the girl and the old woman, just in case I wasn’t allowed to eat.

Before I noticed, we were all done with our meal.

The girl then wiped her mouth and turned to the left to stand and said, “Grandma, can I take him somewhere?”

The old woman smiled and said, “Sure,” as the girl pushed her chair and stood up, walking over to hold my hand. The warmth sent goosebumps through my hand. She pulled me up as I tentatively followed her outside. Through the undergrowth and snow I followed her a short distance into a small hill. It was a close enough distance from a small town recently abandoned from a fire that destroyed every home. On the highest point of

the hill was a building, one that seemed different from those that I have seen before.

The bricks were ginger-colored, stacked on top of each other in a way that it seemed like a miracle that it was still standing. Verdant vines twisted through the cracks of the walls, and the dull colors tried to reveal themselves through the dust and dirt. The girl's hand felt soft and warm, contrasting to the glacial land surrounding the interestingly shaped building like a white illusion, alluring and distinct from the withered leaves underneath. The door was rusted metal and when I opened it, it felt cold to the touch and a shiver ran down my spine. It was not from the cold but from the aura emanating from the room, the feeling you get when you're in a crowded space, however there was no one there. I opened the door and crept inside, the silence loud, the vacant seats seeming already taken.

The girl ran inside past me, grinning, her footsteps echoing like a timpani. She said, "This is where Grandma used to work! She told me that this was a place where everyone comes when they feel sad, angry, unsure, so they can feel hopeful again. She said this is where kindness originates and spreads towards one person to another, she said this is where hope is born. She said that this was the place that brought the community together."

She traced one bench, brushing dust off the armrest. "Grandma sat here when she first found out I've been sneaking to this church. She scolded me as I could have gotten hurt, but she also told me that this building is here to remind us kindness still exists,

within our hearts, and our job is to spread that kindness.”

I asked quietly, “You think so too?” I felt a warm feeling bubble inside me, a feeling that seemed to soothe the restless thing moving around deep in my chest. “Really?”



From the editor: The story will continue in our next issue of *The Student Outlook*

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