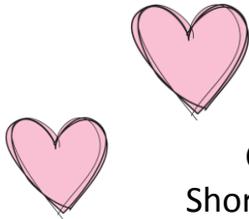




# Bringing

February 2016

# ASHDOWN



## In this issue

Upcoming Events  
Casino Night Photos  
Short Story Submissions

### UPCOMING EVENTS:

#### Wednesday 2/17: Showing of "Wild Tales" + Dinner

Location: Hulsizer room, 6:30pm

Laura, our Residential Scholar from Argentina, will be showing the 2014 Oscar-nominated Argentinian film "Wild Tales", a set of six short stories that explore the extremities of human behavior involving people in distress. It is both hilarious and a little tragic! Dinner will be served. Please sign up for the event at <http://signup.mit.edu/ArgentinianMovieNight>

#### Sunday 2/24: Ashdown Lecture Series/Live Piano Performance

Location: Hulsizer Room, 8pm

Please join us for the next Lecture Series, featuring a flutist and pianist and two discussions: "The Field of Teaching Artistry: From Arts Aware to Arts Alive" and "Prokofiev from the Inside Out."

### ANNOUNCEMENT:

#### Laundry Repairs

The inventory committee has taken an active role in reporting Laundry Room problems directly to the maintenance service company, ASI. In sending these reports, it helpful to know precisely what is wrong with the machine, beyond that it is simply "out of order". So, when reporting problems to Denise ([dlan@mit.edu](mailto:dlan@mit.edu)), please CC the Inventory Committee ([ashdown-inventory@mit.edu](mailto:ashdown-inventory@mit.edu)). Doing so will help keep our the machines in our laundry room up and running. Thank you.

Hi Ashdowners!

We hope everyone is staying warm as you settle back into the school year. Welcome back to those who were away over IAP. And for those who stayed, I'm sure you are two steps ahead in acclimating to the Boston winter.

The February edition is a short(er) version for the shorter month... and because Ashdown was a ghost town during IAP. This month, we are featuring photos from Casino Night and two short stories by your fellow Ashdowners: "Firewood" by Mukund Gupta and "The Voice" by Sakul Ratanalert.

For next month, we are holding a competition for the best mini-blog on your IAP activities. Whether you traveled half way across the world in search of adventure, or stayed in Boston and took interesting classes while enjoying the first snowfall, we would like to hear from you! Submissions should be 1-2 pages long with photos. The top three entries will be published in March's edition of the Newsletter and will receive a \$50 gift card. We look forward to reading your submissions!

Your Communications Officers,  
Tram Nguyen & Cody Karcher



# Casino Night

In January, we brought Las Vegas to Ashdown with an evening of casino games like Blackjack, Craps, Roulette, Trente et Quarante, and Baccarat Chemin de Fer. Ashdowners 'gambled' and won big when they exchanged chips for prizes such as a GoPro camera, LEGO Millennium Falcon, and a variety of electronics, toys, books, and board games. Thanks to our volunteer dealers and organizers who put together a fantastic event!



# Firewood

By: Mukund Gupta  
Ph.D. candidate in Climate Physics

It's a cold and dark winter night. Puffs of white breath precede the footsteps of a small girl scurrying on the snow-covered pavement. Arriving in front of a small brick house, she stops to climb the few stairs leading to the entrance, her shoes digging into the frost gathered in front of the door. She knocks vigorously.

"Is there anybody there?" she cries. Stunned silence. After a long moment, a light flickers inside, faintly visible through the hazy glass windows. She calls again and waits. Upon hearing the sound of slow footsteps approaching, she straightens up, her face bright with hope. At last the door opens, revealing a tall but frail figure leaning with one arm stretched upon the door's rusty frame. Looking ahead and squinting through his thick spectacles with an awkward grimace on his face, the old man does not notice the small child at his feet.

"Excuse me, sir" she calls, with a voice as sharp as the clanging of a bell. The man lowers his gaze, readjusts his glasses and with a hidden burst of energy exclaims:

"Oh dear! I hadn't quite seen you there, little lady." Seeing her red face and teary eyes, he beckons her inside, gesturing with his gnarled fingers. "You must be freezing out there."

The girl gives a snort followed by a shy nod.

"Do you like hot chocolate?" the old man asks, before she has time to speak. She nods again.

"You just make yourself comfortable. I'll be right with you." the old man says, pointing to the worn out couch in the corner of the square space to the left of the doorway. The living room consists of a small table, around which is disposed the couch and an armchair covered in faded rags. A pile of books are strewn haphazardly on the floor and the cold fireplace is filled with grey-white ash. The little girl obeys silently and pushes herself up the couch. Leaving her jacket buttoned up, she crosses her arms and starts swinging her feet back and forth in an attempt to keep warm.

The old man disappears in the kitchen. After some rattling of utensils and the whistle of a kettle, he emerges back in the living room with two steaming cups of hot beverage placed on a ceramic tray. He walks carefully towards the girl and bends down with conscious effort to place the tray on the table. Handing the smaller cup to the girl, he picks up the other one for himself, before taking a seat on the armchair.

"I know I have seen you before" he says pensively. "I recognise your pink jacket. I saw you from my window playing football on the street with some boys from the neighbourhood. It was a few weeks ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes sir" she replies. "We used to play every week after school. But none of the boys are around anymore." A lengthy silence befalls the room.

"Is your father gone too?" he asks gently.

"Yes, they came for him at the end of September. It's just me and my mother at home now."

"Mrs. Hackabee?" he asks.

"Yes sir, I am Lani Hackabee" she replies, taking a light sip from her cup. Mukund Gupta January 2016

"Well, you have a very strong mother Lani" he says. "I have heard of the great things she has done in the village after all the men left. How is she nowadays?"

"It is for her that I have come, Mr. Harris. She has fallen ill and we need some more firewood to keep her warm. We will soon run out" As she speaks, a tear pearls at the tip of her eyelid, but she holds it back before it escapes. It is at this moment that Mr. Harris notices how profoundly un-childlike she looks, sitting straight and alert on the decrepit couch. The innocence with which she had played just a few weeks ago has left way for a stern look of worries on her young face.

Gazing at her awaiting eyes, he sighs internally. His chimney has been cold for almost a week now and the little stove in the kitchen is all he has to provide him with some warmth these days. Most of the rations of food and combustibles have been taken away from the villages to the battlefield. Yet, he feels like he has been sitting idle for too long. Ever since this brave girl stepped inside his house, he has felt a renewed spark of optimism light within him. He knows it is time to do something.

"You shall get your firewood. I will take care of it." He declares solemnly. "Go home now. It's already too late for a young girl like you to be walking alone on the streets."

She thanks him profusely and leaves the house after finishing her beverage. As the door shuts, the old man finds himself alone in the familiar silence again. Feeling determined, he grabs an axe and a saw that were lying next to the fireplace. They are heavy in his arms, yet he feels strength while holding them. He enters his bedroom and his eyes fall on the wooden cupboard by the bedside. It used to belong to his wife. He caresses its smooth surface and feels a stream of sweet memories resurface in his mind. Pursing his lips, he takes the axe with both his hands and hurls it down with all the strength he can muster. The wood cracks violently. He strikes it again and again until the cupboard and his souvenirs are reduced to a pile of rubble.

In the middle of the night, Mrs. Hackabee is woken up by a loud thumping noise. She looks around her, but sees no one except Lani sleeping beside her. Another thump. She gets up, wraps herself in a thick woollen cardigan and walks towards the front door, coughing occasionally. Laying on the front porch outside, she finds two large sacks that have visibly been dragged up the stairs from the street. Brushing aside the snow on the surface, she discovers large pieces of crudely cut wood chops. There is enough to last them a month! Elated, she pulls the bags inside the house, grabs two pieces and rekindles the dying fire in the living room. She then lies down next to her daughter and gives a small kiss on her forehead, before falling asleep again in the reassuring warmth of the fire.

# The Voice

By: Sakul Ratanalert  
Ph.D. candidate in Chemical Engineering

That voice again.

I groan and sit up in bed. Her voice calls to me in the darkness, warning me of danger, false promises.

Closing my eyes, I scan the building with my mind, trying to discern who roused me from slumber at this ungodly hour. Faceless and nameless, I curse them under my breath anyway. This wouldn't be the first time, and certainly not the last. Why does this keep happening? "...complex..." The Voice says, as if to answer.

Due to my sleep deprivation, I drift off again into a delusional half-sleep. My dream shows me a girl, preparing some brownies for a late night snack. She starts up her electric mixer to scramble the batter, but suddenly she remembers something supremely urgent and leaves in a hurry. In her absence, the electric mixer transforms into a power drill and begins to attack all passersby. With no one to tame it, the drill wreaks havoc on the residents of the building.

"That witch! Her carelessness has sent the building into frenzy!" one student warns as he runs in a panic.

"That's no drill!" another student protests. "It's—"

"...leave the building," the Voice instructs, jarring me back to reality.

I wonder if that guy down the hall started this. An outdoorsy fellow from Middle-of-Nowhere, USA, he'd have abhorred this Australian December. He'd have grown up with feet of snow to play in by day, a freshly chopped tree and a crackling fire to roast in by night. But, alas, being unable to travel this year, homesickness would grip him, compelling him to buy pine-scented candles as a cheap facsimile. But no, he wouldn't light them, for that was a forbidden act. The waxy smell would be sufficient. Or would it?

The Voice has begun to chant again, repeating her message. It wasn't her that I growl at, no, for one should never shoot the messenger. But still, the number of people she affects with her speech has so far been substantially disproportional to the severity of the problem. Such is the way of a binary system, I suppose.

I toss my unfortunately cayenne-scented blankets away, and with them, their soft warmth. I shiver in the night air and exchange my sleepwear for street clothes, preparing for the worst. I should have about a 20% chance to be selected, but it seems as if the worst offenders live in the floors above me, making the apparent rate closer to 95%. The faded pungent smell on my comforter makes my sleep-addled brain flash back to helping a roommate cook for the first time several months back.

"I was taught that if you think you've added enough spice, add a bit more," he had said.

"But hold on, doesn't that lead to a positive feedback loop where you just keep adding more spice than you did last time?" I ponder.

He shrugged and tipped the bottle of cayenne over the sizzling chicken. The cap fell off, and he emptied a spice mountain onto his poultry. "Oops! Oh well," he said, leaning over to blow the excess off.

"Wait, no!"

The peppery plume wafted into the air. My eyes began to sting, and a distinct acrid smoke spread, catching in my lungs.

The smoke detector began to beep. "I'll open the window! You close the bedroom doors!" I directed. No need for our linens to smell like cayenne for months, after all. I dashed to the window and opened it the four inches it's allowed. "This is all I can do!"

"Don't worry, I got it!" he replied. I check behind me and freeze with horror. It turned out that he had opened the door to the hallway, clearly a bigger hole to vent air through. I leapt across the room and slammed the door shut. "What?" he said, eyes wide with surprise.

"You can't do that!" I cringed, awaiting the Voice. After a few moments of silence, I breathe a sigh of relief, regret it immediately with the airborne spice still permeating my lungs, and resume my post fanning the air out the window. "That'll make everyone evacuate the building, if the hall detectors go off," I explain. He has since left my apartment, but I wonder if he has made the same mistake again and roused the Voice.

At last, the Voice finishes her speech. I stand with bated breath, waiting to hear a signal. Several silences pass, and the coast is clear. I hop back into bed like a sleep-deprived graduate student who's had a chance for a full night's rest for the first time in months. Tonight, I won the lottery. Little did I know that I would lose two times later this month. As I collapse back into dreamland, my thoughts drift to the unfortunate residents who lost the coin toss. For all my grumbling, I really do hope that the emergency is small. Just a drill.