

April 26

**UNIQUE SLACKS:**

**BUT FIRST....**

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# Letter from the Editor

Judy Maroon  
Editor-in-Chief

Here it is. The second issue of Unique Slacks.

This time around things are a little more angry, a little more about relationships between people. Internal growth will always happen for those of us that seek it out, but focusing on our relationships can be an opportunity for growth as well.

Mike Alvarez is a new contributor for U.S., and he writes about what he sees as a major problem in our culture, and what he suggests we need to do to find our way through the darkness.

Gimpleg starts off his Top 5 for each quarter with his favorites from January to March.

Andrew Amherst returns to issue two with his commentary on the importance of communication in the classroom. It's not just an academic skill, it's the way we're able to relate to each other.

Ainsley Westbrook begins her multi-part saga about rekindling a past relationship, only to find it isn't as wonderful as she thought it would be. In fact, it may lead to her destruction.

Anon shares her story about childhood toys and their impact on her growth into adulthood.

There's one of mine in there too -- **Rummage Sale** is fiction, an imagining into what might happen in that space between life and death.

Tracy Evans shares her artwork, a tongue-in-cheek response to all the ICE around lately...

Finally, Mykel debuts their comic **Dancing Daisy** -- the relationship between a depressive and her dancing daisy who can't give advice without taking a dance break first.

It's difficult sometimes to see the light in all this mess lately. I get it. I feel frustrated, too. Sometimes the best thing to do when it feels like nothing I can do makes a difference is to create a little art. Write a story. Swear. A lot. Make a bigger mess. And then clean it up, because we're all adults.

Stay angry. We all deserve better, and so long as we hold onto that, we'll be able to resist anything trying to suggest otherwise.

Don't forget, reader. You're enough just as you are, and you deserve all the love, peace, and happiness you can stand.

Judy.

Unique Slacks



# What happened to kindness?

By Mike Alvarez

What happened to kindness?

In the current political environment, bravado, cruelty, and tough-guy, “hey! I’m walkin’ here” men lead the fold. Our country is run by an oaf who would soil himself if someone actually tried to fight him. Our military is led by a greased-up wino with enough bravado to make a horse vomit. There’s Marco Rubio... He’s a dweeb who did the jock’s homework and now that they’re not beating the shit out of him, he thinks he belongs. Stephen Miller gives vampires the Heebie-jeebies. What do all of them have in common? They have no empathy. None of them have the ability to be kind. None of them can do something for someone else just because it’s the right thing to do. Hell, I don’t know if they know what right is. They’re racist bigots who aim to score power and stature that is brought by being the worst person in the room.

And here’s the crazy part. I’m 38. I’m not young. I am close to the same age as Stephen Miller... I just threw up in my mouth... My mom was born in 1950. I was raised by baby boomers - they were the ones who built my understanding of kindness. We were told to say “please” and “thank you” not because we had to be obedient but because it allowed us to let anyone feel appreciated and welcomed. We were told to do right for the sake of doing right. Expect nothing in return, just do what’s right. We were told to tell the truth. Lying led to consequences that couldn’t be escaped. We were made to believe that kindness was a virtue worth having.

And now look at this shit - we got a president that can’t stop lying, men who couldn’t do the right thing if it was as easy as saying thank you, and a world that seems to feed off hatred. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not perfect. I think I’m pretty angry, standoffish, you might even call me a “dick.” But I want to do what’s right. I want to make folks feel welcome and feel as though

they have someone in their corner.

Maybe that’s why I’m a teacher. My job ultimately is just to support kids and give them room to be their best selves. I’m just a small part in their lives, but I want them to experience kindness, even just for that small moment.

I have kids now and I just want them to know that the world can be better than it is. That it’s good to be truthful, good to appreciate people - to welcome people, and it’s good to want to do the right thing. I want them to be kind - not because it makes my life easier, but because I think they’ll be great humans if they strive for that.

What happened to kindness? I’m hoping it makes a comeback.

# Gimpleg's Top 5

## Jan - March

These albums are fairly diverse in sound- although most have roots in ska. While many of them are also tagged as punk, there is actually a fairly wide diversity month these albums. The Scrub Ups album in particular is one of the most unique arrangements I've ever seen. I like each of these albums for different reasons. These albums are windows into the artists' soul, but by sharing them, they become a window into my soul, and listening to them you get a glimpse into the way I view the world. I hope you enjoy them.

The Scrub Ups, "Thought Bubbles" self released on January 16. Nashville, ska, punk, and bluegrass?



Hans Gruber and the Die Hards, "Or" self released on February 17. Ska, punk, and Hardcore

FIVE ALBUMS THAT WERE RELEASED BETWEEN JAN 1 2026 AND MARCH 31 2026 THAT I RECOMMEND, IN ORDER OF RELEASE DATE: Issue Two, April 26



Sorry Sweetheart, "Warm Room Good Friends" Released February 27 on Bad Time Records. Pop-punk and skacore.

Jacob The Horse, "At Least It's Almost Over". Self released on March 20. Indie Punk.



Mega Infinity, "Harmonic Convergence" Released March 3 on Say-10 records. Prog rock, Indie, Hardcore, ska and punk.



# Communication is out of Whack

By Andrew Amherst

High School Communication is out of wack.

Working in a high school allows teachers to communicate with students using language that is familiar to young adults. However, that language changes dramatically every year, largely because of social media. As a result, communication between teachers and students has become increasingly challenging. In many cases, students struggle not because they cannot speak, but because they have never fully learned how to listen. As a seasoned educator, I have seen many different types of student and teacher dynamics. I chose to work with high school students because I wanted to support them as they prepare to enter the larger world beyond school. Yet today, many students seem to be communicating something different—they are not quite ready for life after high school.

In the not-so-distant past, students often based their communication on what was trending in social media. Shared trends allowed adolescents to bond through a common language. However, despite this shared language, many students still struggle to truly listen to one another. Miscommunication has become more common than meaningful interaction. Social media trends may shape how students speak, but they do little to teach effective communication skills. This raises an important question: what if students were given a safe space where they could learn how to communicate and truly listen to one another? In such an environment, students could practice expressing themselves clearly while also developing the ability to understand others. Ideally, these skills would bring people closer together rather than push them farther apart—assuming, of course, that the influences shaping student communication promote effectiveness rather than confusion.

Currently, I teach a communications and debate class designed to create that safe space. The purpose of the class is to help students learn how to communicate effectively, debate current events respectfully, and understand the art of listening. At the beginning of the course, expectations had to be clearly established so that the class could function successfully.

Fortunately, many students have been receptive to the environment and structure I am trying to build. One activity in particular helped students understand the importance of listening. In the exercise, students were allowed to speak for sixty seconds while their partner listened.

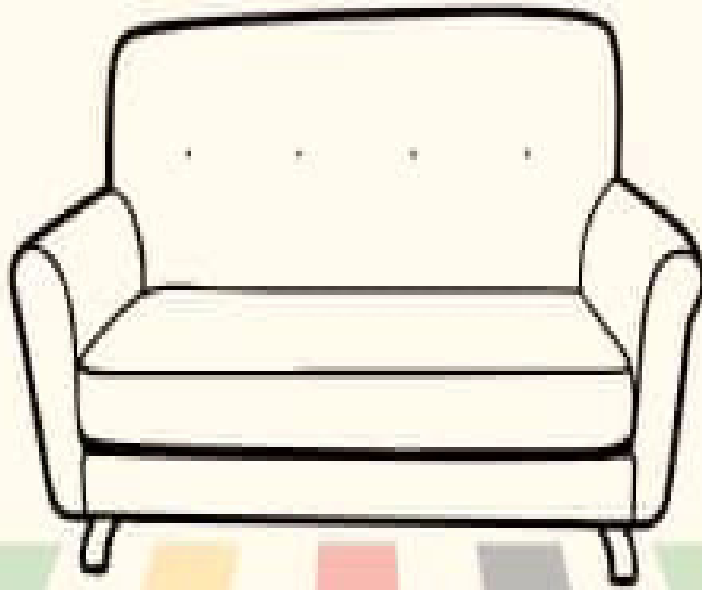
Afterward, they were asked to recall what the other person had said. Many students quickly realized how difficult it is to truly listen while thinking about what they want to say next. This simple activity helped several students recognize that they cannot talk and listen at the same

time. For some students, this realization was transformative. Even though the activity did not change everyone, enough students had that “light-bulb moment” to make the lesson successful.

Looking ahead, I believe communication between students and teachers should become a more intentional part of teacher training programs. The classroom dynamic should be strong, structured, and engaging, but it must also be built on empathy and understanding. Teachers need compassion, insight, emotional intelligence, and the ability to listen with genuine intent. At the same time, students must learn how to express themselves clearly. They should be encouraged to say what they mean, avoid hiding behind defensive behaviors, and resist making assumptions. Ultimately, both teachers and students share the responsibility of learning how to listen to one another rather than assuming the other already understands.

In conclusion, communication today often feels out of balance. Both students and teachers have work to do when it comes to improving how they interact and understand each other. Social media trends can sometimes contribute to misinformation and miscommunication, which only adds to the challenge. As educators, however, we still have the opportunity to guide students toward stronger communication skills. I may be just one teacher, but I believe meaningful change can start in a single classroom. If future teachers receive stronger training in communication and relationship-building, classrooms could become more productive learning environments, and many behavioral challenges might diminish as a result.

# The G'rage



long beach, ca DIY venue

@theg\_rage

# Love, Lust, and a 12-Pack of Angry Orchard

By Ainsley Westbrook

## Part One: The Detox

Five days after I checked myself into detox, they told me I could go home.

There wasn't anything dramatic about the decision. My symptoms weren't severe, the nurse explained, and the insurance company wasn't going to continue paying for my stay.

I nodded like that made sense.

In truth, the detox itself had been uneventful. I had spent most of the time sleeping. No breakthroughs. No emotional unraveling. Just five quiet days without alcohol after nine years of drinking every single day.

But when they told me it was time to leave, something inside me cracked.

I cried walking back to my room.

I cried while packing my suitcase.

I cried signing discharge paperwork.

By the time my mom arrived, I had wiped my face clean. I took a breath, climbed into the passenger seat, and thanked her for picking me up.

Then I reached for my phone.

Five days without a phone feels longer than it should. It creates a strange kind of silence, like the outside world kept moving while you were suspended somewhere else.

I opened my messages.

And that's when I saw it.

"This is Colton Nash. I was going through my phone thinking about certain people I used to love..."

The message cut off there in the preview.

My chest tightened instantly.

I opened it.

"This is Colton Nash. I was going through my phone

thinking about certain people I used to love and you crossed my mind..."

Colton Nash.

I met him when I was fifteen years old, on the first day of freshman year.

It became very obvious very quickly that I was very much into him and Colton knew it.

He was that kind of boy—the kind every girl noticed. Athletic. Confident. Effortlessly charming. The type of person who seemed completely comfortable inside his own life.

And still just kind enough to keep someone like me lingering somewhere on the edge of it.

The summer before college, he took my virginity.

After that, we disappeared into separate lives.

Twenty-three years passed without a single conversation.

But the moment I saw his name on my screen, something stirred immediately.

Actual butterflies.

Which is ridiculous, when you think about it. Twenty-three years is a long time to hold onto any feeling. But memory has a way of collapsing time.

In an instant, I was fifteen again.

And I answered him without thinking.

**“Colton Nash?  
Are you fucking  
kidding me? How  
the hell are you?”**

He responded almost immediately.

“Yes!! It’s still you. What’s up? Where are you? Let’s hang out.”

And I had to physically remind myself where I actually was.

Sitting in the passenger seat of my mother’s car.

Being driven home from detox.

The message had arrived at 2:37 PM on August 5th, 2025.

And from that moment forward, everything moved quickly.

We didn’t slowly reconnect.

We launched.

Messages flew back and forth all day. His life. My life. Memories from high school that somehow still felt familiar after two decades.

At one point he suggested we play twenty questions.

It started innocently enough.

Then it turned flirty.

Then it stopped being flirty at all.

At some point I sent a message that should probably have made me pause.

“Yes, I’m single... and I’m really looking forward to the day I get to have your dick in my mouth.”

I sent it without thinking.

He replied immediately.

“Oh... I like this version of you.”

And just like that, something shifted between us.

From there, the messages became constant.

Thirty an hour sometimes. Every hour. My phone rarely left my hand. I watched the three typing dots like they meant something.

Somewhere in those early conversations, he told me he was going through a difficult time.

He said he wasn’t looking for a relationship.

Just a friend.

Someone to talk to.

And if things naturally went somewhere, we could deal with that later.

I heard exactly what I wanted to hear.

Friend.

Sex.

No expectations.

Perfect.

I told him I understood. Told him I could be that person.

And just like that, I was in.

We made plans to see each other on Monday, August 11th.

At first, he suggested we go out to dinner. A date.

He asked me to choose a restaurant.

I shut that down immediately. If we were supposed to be just friends then there was no need for any sweetness or romance.

“No, no, no... don’t bother. That’s cute, but let’s be real. That’s just getting in the way of what we actually want to do.”

He didn’t argue.

“I respect your perspective,” he said.

Looking back now, that probably should have told me something.

But at the time, it just felt easy.

## Unique Slacks

I felt nervous immediately. Giggly. Breathless in a way that surprised me.

Then I heard his voice.

Low. Familiar.

It had been more than twenty years, but somehow I still recognized it.

We didn't talk for long.

But before we hung up he asked, "I know we said Monday... but what are you doing right now? Could you come over tonight?"

For a moment, I felt something close to power. Like pink power ranger power, when she would morph with the rest of the rangers into that one big giant bot.

I felt like I had been chosen.

But I told him no.

I had to be home with my daughter.

He accepted that immediately. No push back.

Which only made him seem more reasonable.

On Monday morning, I arrived at his house eighteen minutes late.

Standing outside his door, I felt strangely young again. Fifteen years old, trying to steady my breathing before knocking.

The lock clicked.

The door opened.

And there he was.

Exactly the same.

If he remembered me at all, he remembered the version of me from high school—ponytail, no makeup, jeans and oversized T-shirts.

Instead, I had arrived carefully prepared.

Dress.

Heels.

Full makeup.

Hair done.

The entire thing.

He told me I looked good. Said he felt under dressed.

I believed him.

We barely lingered in that moment. A quick smile. A brief moment of disbelief that we were actually standing in the same room again.

Then he led me toward his bedroom.

I kicked off my heels and climbed onto the bed, crossing my legs like I had some control over the situation.

He leaned against the wall, slowly sliding down until he was sitting across from me. And almost immediately, he began talking.

## He told me about his marriage first.

Sixteen years.

Then a divorce that, according to him, came out of nowhere.

Kids. A house. A life he thought was permanent.

Gone.

Then alcohol entered the story.

Not casually.

Formally.

According to his ex-wife—and the therapist he was required to see by the court—he was what they called a hopeless alcoholic.

He pushed back against that label.

Explained the stories differently.

But the details kept coming.

Nights.

Arguments.

Incidents.

His children know about it.  
A court date is approaching.  
And while he spoke, I found myself thinking something very simple.  
I understand him.  
Then he told me about Jayden.  
His ex-fiancée.  
And this is the part that matters now.  
Because even though I had never met her, I started to hate her.  
He described her as unstable. Controlling. Someone trying to destroy his life.  
There were accusations. Recordings. Bruises he explained away. A protection order.  
And through all of it, he kept moving closer.  
Sharing just enough vulnerability to make everything believable.  
By the time he finished, I had already decided who he was.  
Misunderstood.  
Wrongly labeled.  
Just needed the right person to see him clearly.  
Someone like me.  
At some point he asked about my life.  
I began to answer.  
But before I finished, he stood up and walked toward me.  
He placed his hands on my face and kissed me.  
Then he pulled back and smiled.  
“Relax.”  
He kissed me again.  
“I’ll take care of you.”  
And suddenly nothing else seemed to matter.  
We got naked and got into the bed. Hours passed that way.  
4.5 to be exact.  
Talking. Touching. Suspended in something that didn’t

feel casual.  
And that was what made it dangerous.  
Because it felt important.  
Eventually my alarm went off.  
Reality returning.  
I had to pick up my daughter from school.  
As I gathered my things, he stood up and said casually,  
“We should probably have sex before you go.”  
And strangely, it didn’t feel strange at all.  
That was the first time.  
**And it didn’t feel like  
“just sex.”**  
**It felt like something  
else.**  
Which, in hindsight, should have been my first warning.  
Eight minutes later, sitting in the school pickup line, my phone buzzed.  
“Do not. stop. thinking about me.”  
And I didn’t.  
Not for a second.  
And if I’m being honest, that’s when I should have known.  
I was about to let this man ruin me.

# Girl Toys

## By Anon

I can't remember how old I was when I first received "Michael." He was a life-sized, anatomically correct, newborn baby doll. Both of my parents made it very clear how expensive the toy had been, and I knew better than to act as though I didn't like it, though I had never asked for anything remotely like it before. I felt both my parents' eyes on me as I faked my enthusiasm unwrapping the doll. I'd already been trained to act outwardly grateful for every gift bestowed to me. I would have time for a private reaction later, when I was alone with my sisters. My father usually got it right when it came to gifts for me - I was certain this misstep was entirely due to my mother.

I noticed her particular interest in my reaction as I opened the gift. Silently, I groaned and my certainty grew that the life-like toy had been her idea. I resented her sudden attention, so rarely given to me, and the smirk on her face, as I strove to act interested in the doll. I interpreted this unasked for gift as her pushing me toward a future I hadn't even considered yet. A future as somebody's mother. No, thank you, I thought.

I ran my fingertips over its plastic and rubber "skin." Nearly every inch was covered in wrinkles and lumps, like a Benjamin Button version of a newborn. The doll's fingers and toes were strangely splayed in opposite directions, too,

like a tortured baby, frozen in time. Are real babies this wrinkly?? I wondered (when I had my son many years later, I noticed he had very few wrinkles, and was, in fact, generally very smooth.) Neither of my sisters seemed in the least interested in Michael either, which was a deciding factor for me. If my sisters didn't want to play with it, and I couldn't see myself playing with it alone, then it was doomed to live in the closet.

It was important to me, at the time, not to hurt my parents' feelings. I was very attuned to the emotions of the adults around me, and was careful not to instigate anyone's anger if I could help it. When in doubt, I would avoid talking about upsetting things and hide away toys I didn't want to deal with. I would see the doll in my closet and powerful surges of guilt would pulse behind my eyes, making me feel nauseated. It wasn't just the guilt - I felt the weight of my mother's expectation for me every time I saw it, too. If playing "mommy" was not a game any of us wanted to play, perhaps it was because the example we had to draw from didn't spend much time with her children. Soon the doll became symbolic of my rebellion against my mother's wishes, and marked the dawn of my refusal to go along. I was never going to have kids someday.

My stomach warred over the guilt at neglecting the expensive toy and my refusal to buy-in. The doll would make me queasy on sight. The doll was deeply unsettling to me when I was a child, and honestly, I am still unsettled by it - that uncanny valley representation of infants. It was a poor simulation in more ways than one, both in that it really didn't look like a regular human newborn and also because it arrived without my consent. If my mother wanted to convince me taking care of babies was fun,

this was not the way to do it.

In a wholly unexpected twist, I became obsessed with the Sims as a teenager – a game that is really just creating a family and forcing them to do mundane chores for hours. Somehow, I felt the first real twinge of interest in having children as I played the game.

I created my Sim as an idealized version of me – I gave myself purple hair, a slim build, and was talented, charming, and popular. I then created an approximation of the man I dreamed of marrying some day – he looked very much like Motel the Tailor from Fiddler on the Roof.

I wanted my Sim to have a family, so she had twins. I named them Rand and Mierin after characters in Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series, a book series I'd read obsessively at the time. Perhaps that was at the core of my attachment to these video game characters – the names and appearances I gave them. I wanted to believe I could manifest them into my real life, but in the meantime, I'd take the simulation.

I played with my pretend family until the kids grew up and had kids of their own, growing my Sim family through generations. When my Sim husband eventually died of old age, my Sim mourned him, and, to my surprise, so did I. I found the cheat code I needed to bring him back to life. Then, I reverse aged my Sim and her newly resurrected husband, further ensuring they would never age and grow old again.

This glimmer of happiness not only as a mother, but also as a wife, was the first time I considered it as a real possibility. Unlike playing house as a child – which wasn't something I did, but I understood

the concept— which necessitates cooperation from other kids, I didn't need anyone else to play the Sims. It was a personal, private experience and I could grow without anyone being the wiser. There is so much spectacle in being a little girl with a baby doll.

I wouldn't say either toy prepared me for marriage and parenthood. I became a mother for the first time in my thirties, unlike my mother who started having children when she was a teenager. I think at the center of our differences is the idea that parenthood, for my mother, was inevitable. She was too young to properly make the choice when it started, and she internalized her acceptance that being a mother was just the way life would be for her – even if she didn't know what she was doing, even if she was horrified by the experience.

I only started to come around to the idea when I saw it as a choice I could make. I could find my own Motel the Tailor (still haven't, unfortunately) and birth a child I very much wanted to have (and I love him dearly). Like my mother, I can't help but bring my experience and hopes into my mothering, even if it's not always something my child wants.

I'm realizing these lessons might not have been meant for the child I used to be, but rather for the adult I would eventually become.

# Rummage Sale of Lost Things

By Judy Maroon

Purpled lips and fingertips, either I am suffocating or I've been Wonka-ed by some deceptively sweet treat that will only leave me deformed. In the pause before I move on, I am eye to eye with a guardian. Dreamy, I suppose, but there is a lifetime of withheld judgements lighting on the freeze frame of his face. I see all his imperfections, but I want him all the same. Unexpected birthmarks dotting the curve of his ear take me by surprise and I am dazzled by this reassurance that he has, without doubt, been born at some previous time.

If my bubble universe shifted too far into his, our thin, sensitive membranes delicately absorbing one another, would someone put a stop to it?

Stepping past this charismatic guard to the past, shadowed light plays on the clutter of uncountable knick knacks before me. A rummage sale, perhaps, or some other warehouse for the safe-keeping of objects the living cannot bear to continue without. I stepped into the misty darkness, beams of lighted dust lighting my way.

Silver glows in the semi-darkness. Amidst the clutter of old things special for having existed while I did not, my hands find a looking glass. Ornate, cold silver sheathes a dirty mirror, my reflection muddied by its grime, but the metal is untarnished. Unmindful of contami-

Abandoned in the darkness and turning useless by neglect, I am convinced my love would maintain the silver and the glass.

I turn, leaving the gloom at my back and begin to retrace my steps to the exit. Weight suddenly drops from my hands, memory battling with reality as I reenter solid light. Some switcheroo has taken place, as if I were a pedestal recently home to a glorious treasure some adventurer has carelessly replaced with sand. My palms gently vibrate with absence, confused by the sudden loss.

Of course I noticed! I want to cry, speaking for all pedestals having lost our treasures. I've known my prize for an eternity. I hope you are destroyed by an eternity of oversized boulders, you stupid adventurer.

"Can't I stay here?" I ask, approaching the guard of lost things, love and loss at war within me.

His eyes tell me I am merely a guest. I step again through the threshold, looking glass lost but never forgotten by hands that held it with the intention of keeping it always.

**BUT FIRST.....**

*melted*  
**ICE.**



*WFB '26*

