Words, especially ones used frequently, hold a strange and underestimated power though meaning and subtle context: the number thirteen doesn’t connote a sense of good fortune, and the word “refugee” brings to mind some emaciated expat. But for Marquette University’s sole improv comedy troupe, the Studio 013 Refugees, these words boast a different meaning. They point to the group’s storied history at the University, a chronicling that dates back decades. But in the grander scheme, it’s a tip of the hat to our ability to invoke feeling—both sadness and uproarious laughter—simply through a collection of syllables, either uttered or written down. It’s a tribute to the power of words.

The group’s name comes from a time in the late 1990’s when the Refugees would hold practice in Helfaer Hall’s Studio 013, a lacquered dance studio with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on the walls, and bars to assist in dance positions. After being ousted from the studio, but before finding a new home in the auditorium at Humphrey Hall, the name “Refugees” seemed to hit close enough to home that it stuck. There is some scholarly speculation as to what the group was called before this exodus, and anyone’s guess is as good as mine. Improvisers are not, by nature, prone to keeping detailed records.

Our elaborate filing system is simply a box of random shit: that’s what we got from the graduating seniors when the mantle of leadership fell to me and my friend Bill. Presidents, they call us. Kings of discarded sticks of chalk and a juice jar filled with loose coins; the contents of our inheritance. The Fugee Box is the Studio 013 Refugees’ small cardboard hall of records. But beneath the empty case for a “Field of Dreams” DVD, we found something worthwhile: an old white binder with three rings and what I hope is a coffee stain on the front. This tome is known as the Big Book of Improv. A Bible for improvisers.
A short foreword outlines the nature of improvisational comedy. The three rules for coexisting onstage when nobody has any idea what they’re doing: *Don’t negate. Don’t ask questions. Say yes and add to it.* The foreword is followed by an endless list of improv games and exercises to practice all different elements of the craft of unscripted comedy. The Big Book is a tome for us Refugees. When we feel stagnant or uninspired during our four hours of weekly practice, we pull a page (figuratively. I would never condone damaging the Book) and try something completely new. Usually, it works. If not, we try to figure out why.

Each one of the thirteen Fugees (a happy coincidence, as we’ve never had that number of members before) comes from different backgrounds, with different skills that they bring to the table. Character work and scene building, pantomime objects, witty intellectualism, or just good old slapstick; all these are important elements of improv that no one person is perfect at.

Like most performers, there is a sometimes tongue-in-cheek clinging to tradition and superstition amongst the Fugees. We fear touching the fire door in our Humphrey Hall auditorium, logically because the fire alarm will go off if it’s accidentally opened, but it’s since been elevated to having its own mythos, reminiscent of Pandora’s Box. Unlike Shakespearean actors afraid to utter the word “Macbeth” for fear of accidental cataclysm, or using the phrase “break a leg” instead of “good luck”—because if everything goes completely right during a performance, we haven’t done our job—the number thirteen is a brazen display of moxie. It’s an unapologetic loogie in the face of Lady Luck as we opt instead to pave our own futures.

We weren’t much for luck when David, the other Newgee (new Fugee) taken into the group my freshman year with me and Bill, contracted Lymphoma. For the last four years his absence in the group has been a painful note, especially now that Bill and I have taken over the group as seniors, a title that is rightfully David’s as well. And in the face of his numerous
complications that occurred despite their comically small chances of actually medically happening, he recently took his first steps in twelve months. All the while, he’s been regaling us with the bittersweet hilarity of his cancer recovery stories each summer that we would road trip out to see him in Cleveland.

Without fail, almost every other improv group I’ve come across has a name that includes a pun or play on words, doubtlessly to flaunt the quick-witted cleverness needed to perform the craft. Others have words strung together that don’t mean much, but they sound random and wacky, which I suppose audiences seem to like. At the end of the day, though, it’s reassuring to be a part of something with so deep a meaning. It means a lot to me. The name of an improv group on a college campus shouldn’t be able to work as an interpretation for what it means to be human, but this is something I’ve decided to roll with anyway.

Right now, I’m lucky enough to be tossed in with a group of people who are willing to do something I love alongside me. That’s something special. The number thirteen can eat it. And in deference to our own stories, with their sidesplitting moments balanced precariously by innumerable tragedies, and every other beat in between, at least we can agree to call things by their proper name. We are all Refugees, and our shantytown is the human condition.