

Happenings

(a chapter from Boo Running, a novel-in-progress)

Heather Treseler

Anabaptism

Claire, startled from her book by the smell of gingerbread, realizes that it's Friday. At four o'clock on Friday afternoons, Mum and Grand Mum have their "Ladies Tea" in the kitchen, with a real linen tablecloth and the blue china teacups that were once a part of Mum's hope chest. Claire plants her book, face down, on her pillow, thinks the better of it—one must preserve the binding—flips the book right-side-up and puts her stuffed monkey flat across the page, as a giant bookmark. "Stay—" she says to the monkey, wondering what Jane Austen would say if she knew that some teenager was putting a monkey's buttocks right there in the middle of her characters' dinner party, the one in which Darcy and Elizabeth finally, clumsily speak their hearts.

Claire tip-toes down the hallway and into the green tiled bathroom, where she assumes her preferred eavesdropping position: sitting, legs akimbo, on the top-most portion of the toilet. From this perch, she can lean her head inside the towel cabinet where the sewer pipe, which runs down through the kitchen wall, acts like a giant stethoscope: she can hear her mother and grandmother's conversation as clearly as if she herself were in the room. *If you can't be a fly on the wall, fly into the bathroom!* She braces one foot against the radiator. Carefully keeping her balance, she opens the cabinet and sticks her head inside. In the past, the sewer pipe has been an excellent, reliable conduit for information about birthday and Christmas gifts, the well-being of Dad's business, and the general contents (or discontents) of her parents' marriage. Often, Grand Mum expounds on her psoriasis, her crooked feet (they're called 'Bunyans,' Claire knows, because lumberjacks drop heavy things on their toes) and shampoos to make your hair stronger, longer, and shiny as a bucket of pennies in the sunshine. She leans in close: it seems that Grand Mum is analyzing her very own skin and bones.

"Claire's nicely put together, Maria; she's your long arms and legs. Facial features, well, they can be *longer* in development."

Claire knows this is true: her nose has been growing arithmetically.

"They each came bearing different gifts," Mum says. "Claire, thank God, got a good noggin."

"Right-right," Grand Mum clatters her spoon. "If she can't marry Mr. Doctor or Mr. Lawyer, she might turn into one."

"Boo, an attorney? I think she's more of an Icelandic explorer, Mother. Now couldn't you see her, running for hours beside a dogsled—"

"Frostbite!" Grand Mum interjects. "My own Mum lost three toes in the Dublin winter of nineteen-oh-one. And when I lived in Buffalo, I nearly got gangrene of the nose. We don't have the *veins* for Antarctica."

“Well then maybe a botanist?” says Mum. “Couldn’t you see Boo up to her ears in wild flowers—”

“Bee stings!” Grand Mum says vehemently, to negate Mum’s silly idea.

The two women’s voices lower, and Claire stretches—holding her ear against the sewer pipe. The pipe is cold and metallic against her cheek. She wobbles on her perch: the toilet-top seems to have grown small. Or maybe her seat—what Dad calls “the rear door”—is growing larger? Before she can investigate, the porcelain toilet top cracks in two—like America departing from Africa—and Claire lands directly in the wet: baptizing her bottom.

Something about that toilet water. It contaminates her, or shakes up her hormones and gets things going inside. No less than two weeks after Mum fishes her out of the toilet-top (and Claire gives enfeebled excuses about how she landed there), her boobies arrive: little pink buds of flesh. She is alternately fascinated and disturbed. Under a tee-shirt, they stick up like thumbs trying to hitch-hike a ride. In the mirror, they look like tiny ziggurats, the Mesopotamian burial mounds in which all of a person’s belongings, including one’s wife and favorite pets, were buried along with your corpse. She has a nightmare in which her beloved orange tricycle, her purple running sneakers, and her favorite books—*Huckleberry Finn*, Emily Dickinson’s *Collected Poems*, and Aesop’s *Fables*—get buried into her new breasts. The next morning, they do look somewhat bigger.

A photo sits on Mum’s dresser of Claire and Charlie, bare-chested at ages five and one, playing in the alligator swimming pool. Claire takes it down and studies it—back then, there was no real difference in the look of their torsos. Is this what William Wordsworth means by “Childhood Innocence”? Is there a way to throw the lever in reverse and get back to Nature, to running around half-naked in the backyard with your little brother, and not caring two cents about it? Can Boobification be cancelled, postponed, returned to the addressee? She’d like to hang a sign on her chest: *no trespassing: kindly beware of my inner dog*.

She reads with great interest about the Amazons, mythical women warriors who chopped off one breast each to prove their fierceness to Ancient Roman soldiers. In another book about the Maoist Revolution, a clever young girl travels safely through the Northern cities of China by binding up her breasts and dressing as a boy. But, short of surgical amputation, or tying them down with the athletic tape Dad uses on his runners’ ankles, it seems that Claire is stuck with them. With horror and curiosity, she checks on their progress two, three, four times a day. Locking herself in the bathroom, she stands on the edge of the tub (she is very careful about holding onto the shower curtain rod and not falling in), and inspects her torso. There, above her no-stomach and rib-spokes, these little buds—pink baby boobs—are taking up residence, and without her having any say about it.

Means of Prayer

Claire and Dad start out at five in the morning: when the sun is an egg cracking into the blue of the horizon. They are out, running the road together before the birds and the newspaper boys, before the street sweepers and the crossing guards. They stride down the middle of the street, passing Mount Alverno, where the nuns are up praying their matins, and Temple

Emmanuel, where bearded Jews have gathered to chant the Talmud. *Lights are lit in tabernacles, prayers are being said and sung, the carpenters of good intentions are working already in the edges of my town, and though it's not yet day.* Claire is an acolyte in this ecumenical church of the early morning. Lately, she has dreamt of running in her sleep. She pictures herself winning the Olympic Marathon, striding into the Grecian stadium with bronze, silver, and gold sweat glistening from every pore, the whole crowd—thousands of people—rising, applauding, bringing her home on the roar of their voices. Dad's voice reaches her through the din of the crowd, drawing her forward, tying itself around her little heart-strings, bringing her into a higher speed, a flamboyant intensity never before achieved by an American woman. She wins: breaking the tape in the name of the Father, the Daughter, and the Holy Ghost of who she is.

But she has no intimation, jogging down the road with Dad in her blue silk track shorts and squirreled-up ponytail, that a Revolution might occur. She knows about Revolutions from Mum. In her college days, Mum protested the Vietnam War up and down Pennsylvania Avenue. She marched in the streets of Boston with her friends to protest the busing riots, when bricks were thrown at Black children going to 'White' public schools. When Governor Curley vetoed an Equal Wage law in 1972, Mum and other workingwomen went and sat right down on his office floor. They camped out like that, in their business suits (or in Mum's case, in her dancing warm-ups) for an entire day, protesting that Governor's Neanderthal Foolishness. Mum also slept overnight on the Statehouse stairs after the United States invaded Cambodia and it seemed the world was going to hell in Nixon's Hand-Basket. Revolutions, it seems to Claire, are terribly exciting, if likely to leave you stiff in the neck and maybe a little numb down in there, in the buttocks.

The sun is a well-cooked egg on the plate of a cloud by the time they finish their six miles. Dad and Claire, in tandem, turn from Commonwealth Avenue onto the middle of their street, Manet Road. Their feet slap hard against the asphalt in a one-two rhythm. Dad catches Claire's eye and she nods, agreeing to race the last 200 meters to the porch. Her legs are tired, her throat burns, her arms feel too heavy to lift. But with Dad alongside, the pain lessens—it's as if they're sharing it on one yoke, one axle—removing the hurt, making a strange headlong pleasure. *The mind rides the horse of the body:* Claire thinks, pulling on the reins, pushing forward. Dad pushes back. Claire-Dad, Dad-Claire, and again. They are racing at full-kilter. Her ponytail, his red shirt sail out behind them as they sprint, stride for stride, past the Martins' two-family, the Remnicks' ranch, and the Hausenbergs' Colonial. Jumping the curb, Claire edges ahead of her father. Pushing to the tops of her lungs, to the tips of her toes, she beats him to the porch.

"Poom!" she kicks her sneaker into it, to mark her victory.

"Nailed me," Dad says, his face a sheet of sweat. He reaches over and pulls Claire towards him. His arm slips down, around hers and his warm thumb tickles into her little underarm. "Lookin' strong there." His hand pats her side and slides down, over the rungs of her ribs. His hand cups and pats the high, muscled curve of her buttock; his fingers pinch into its thickness as if he were a farmer inspecting the haunch of a horse. "Getting stronger." He gives her butt another love-pat. Then he strides up the stairs of the front porch. "Killer agenda! Twenty phone calls! Gotta get a doctor to drain Stoe's sinus!"

She stands alone at the bottom of the staircase, watching him recede into the cool, dark shadows of the house. She'd like Dad to stay with her just a minute longer and say something—anything—with that electric brown-eyed intensity, that lavish attention he gives to his garden vegetables and his Olympians. She wants to know, for instance, exactly what she needs to do to

avoid Puberty and Fatness. Will running be enough to keep it off? How can she get to be like Stoe? She never tires of Dad's advice—how he tells her, his voice azure and deep, that she could use her talent like a car, and ride it to lime-lit places: to a college scholarship, to national championships, to the Olympics even. She wonders, in the quiet of her own mind, if she has half of the talent Dad imagines, but she also knows that almost anything can be accomplished with God's Help. And she wants, with the desperate thump-bump of a heart inside its twelve-boned cage, to be a Star Runner. To run so well, so beautifully, that her daily awkwardness—her chronic not knowing what to say, where to put herself—will be forgiven, erased in a blazon of speed.

From the Holy Trinity, she knows that three gods can live inside one longing, one named thing. It seems that Running could be a form of prayer, an expressive dance, and this intimacy with her father. This fills her with a heat—deeper than sweat—as if something inside her has broken into fever. Not everyone, she reasons, depends on the Father-in-Heaven. And what is 'faith,' but an ache solaced by one's own mind? By the action of your own two feet?

Her toes nod inside their sneakers.

Becoming a Heathen

Father Donnelley preaches "Christ the Good Shepherd, and We, His Chosen Sheep." Bored woolly, Claire roams her field of vision. She has a backward view of fifty heads: a wide sampling of haircuts and balding patterns. Indeed, the woman sitting directly in front of her has a blonde cowlick sticking off the side of her head. It reminds Claire of the torch on the Statue of Liberty—it is so awkward, so conspicuous. Filled with goodwill, she leans in close: if she exhales with force, with precision, she might flatten this unfortunate spurt of hair. Yes! Her anonymous good deed might save Miss Blondie from immediate hair-humiliation! There could be a handsome bachelor right here in the congregation, looking for a pretty, well-combed woman of his own religion. Claire wagers that if she works super-fast, Miss Blondie's hair will be flattened before Communion, which Dad calls the Apostolic Fashion Show: marching up and down the aisles while everyone else kneels in their pews, staring at your belly-button.

Huff! Puff! Puff! She blows at the sticking-out hair with the bravura of the Big Bad Wolf. The blonde hair wavers, but does not sit down. She tries again: *Huff! Puff! Puff!* On the third breath, the woman's hand springs up—and Claire sits back, terrified that she will be discovered. Miss Blondie scratches behind her ear.

Claire aborts her mission and looks to the pulpit where Father Donnelley is doing his Sunday best. "The Lord summons each of us, each of our souls," he booms from the lectern, "into the corral of Heaven!" He holds his arms up, and his long, white sleeves hang down like wings. "He wants us to unite in Him," Donnelley adds, raising his arms higher and waving his hands in a long swooping motion, as if to gather—to harvest—the souls from their bodies. "It is His promise: that our souls shall rise up IN HIM, into His shining goodness."

Excuse me, Father Donnelly, Claire thinks, *what if I don't want my soul to be IN HIM? What if I want it to be my private property—no trespassing and kindly keep out?* She takes a deep, defensive breath. She holds it. Holding, holding onto that breath, clamping her soul down inside of her, she watches her vision dim: a black frame closing in, shrinking to a smaller picture, as if a camera where panning out. Then the whole Church—the airborne souls, the granite walls, Father Donnelley flapping his wings—all of it twirls and spins, taking her down with it.

“Got *my* Ash Wednesday!” Claire jokes, seeing the five black stitches in her forehead. But Mum doesn’t laugh, guiding her daughter out of the Emergency Room. Indeed, Mum’s eyes shine unnaturally wide, as if she were the one with the level-two concussion.

After this incident, Mum amends the Family Rules. When they each turn thirteen, the age of hormones and ironic understanding, they will not be required to attend church.

“But we vowed, Maria,” Dad says that night in bed.

“The Doctor said it was ‘reactionary,’ a *psychomotor fainting fit*.”

“Boo’s always been melodramatical,” Dad says, plumping his pillow. “Happens, when you marry a dancer.”

Mum gives his arm a punch.

“OW! You hit my Not-Funny!”

“Your screw?” Mum asks, sitting bolt upright. (In College, Dad broke his elbow, and it was reconstructed with so much hardware that he now must show a surgical report to board airplanes.)

“One... of many... loose screws,” Dad says, chuckling, reaching over to encircle Mum’s little waist, twirling her towards him in the bed-sheets.

Gravity

“Frank’s hardly been home all year!” Mum declares.

“The Lord God,” Grand Mum says, with the gravity of prophecy, “Works in mysterious ways.”

“Then Frank must be the Holy Ghost!”

“When d’you think it happened?”

“Oh Mother, I don’t know. Frank was home on-and-off last winter. Dr. Caravanavitch says the baby is coming in August.”

Claire, lying on the floor, braces her hands against the stairwell and slides her whole torso out—over the edge of the staircase—not wanting to miss a word. But shortly after she attains this Optimal Auditory Position she hears footsteps on the porch. She has exactly three seconds in which to stand up, brushing the dust and the curious look off her face.

Indeed, she forgets all about Mum’s remarks until a warm night that May when, over lamb chops and green peas, Mum tells Claire and Charlie that she is “expecting.”

“A brand new one?” Charlie asks, two green peas—unchewed—slipping from the edge of his mouth. Claire watches them hit the table: Mum’s pregnancy is just that strange, just that coincidental. It is both a miracle (her parents *do* that sort of thing) and a matter-of-fact (babies actually happen, falling into the world through the bedtime ruckus of two people). Like the green peas that danced around in Charlie’s mouth just now, eventually, a kid or two fall out.

It is visibly alarming: the egg-shape that comes to live on their Mum. Her arms and legs thin out, as if the Being in her Belly were eating all possible resources. (Mum drinks two glasses of chocolate milk a day, trying to keep up.) When the time comes—in the middle of the night, in the middle of that August—Dad carries Mum down the stairs and right out of the house. Claire and Charlie wake up to the sound of him throwing open the bedroom door, and the sight of Mum’s pink slippers as he wisks her around the landing.

“Claire, Charlie, your Mum and I are going to the hospital! Clear the runway!”

They scuttle down the stairs and race outside without stopping for socks or shoes. Claire opens the doors to Bubba Van and Charlie puts a kink in the garden hose, interrupting the sprinkler. Carefully, Dad deposits Mum into the back seat, stretching the seatbelt across her wide baby-belly.

Bubba Van leaves the driveway with a spray of gravel. Claire and Charlie stand together in the wet grass, holding hands, watching Bubba swerve—her blue, matronly self—around the corner.

“It’s really happening,” Charlie says, looking somber. “Brother!”

“Exactly, Charles: a brother *or a sister*.” Claire scrunches the wet grass under her feet, trying—as she clenches her big toes—to take an indelible picture of this moment: the dark slumber of the neighborhood, the wan glow of the streetlights, the pink, swaying form of Mum, and Dad’s agile, sprawl-legged transport of her across the lawn. He’d had a wild, excited look on his face, as if he were about to make the Touch Down of the Century.

“We did it! And no Caesar Maneuvering!” Dad exclaims, arriving home the next morning. Apparently, little Patrick Spencer plopped right into the hands of Dr. Caravanavitch, giving a little ‘hrump’ as he landed—tiredly, firmly—like an old woman taking a seat on a bus.

This Direct Birth is highly unusual, since both Claire and Charlie were fierce, embattled Caesarians. But Claire herself is not surprised, having seen it prophesied in Charlie’s Green Pea.

Gravity has been on Mum’s side.

Here Still

Anna Nussbaum

I came home Christmas of my freshman year to the news that my sister Heather was pregnant. Her husband Brett told the entire family my first night back. I walked into the house, put down my bags, took a seat at the crowded kitchen table, and there it was. Heather and Brett had only been married seven months and already Heather was expecting a boy.

Probably because Heather is only two years older than me, the news sort of threw me. It was a lot to take in. It was hard to imagine her, a Mormon stay at home mother, and me, an apostate adolescent, when just a few years back we'd been so much alike.

Of course my father was thrilled. He's always wanted a grandson. Even when we were growing up he seemed intent on adding men to the Wilson family. "One more Wilson for Heaven!" he liked to say each time my mother conceived. But after she gave birth to my brother Connor, who was born autistic, the baby train just sort of stopped. I guess six kids for heaven were enough; five, not counting me.

When I was little, the thought of all of us up there in our very own heaven, crowded on a cloud or something, would make me smile.

My mother was too excited about Heather's baby to finish her spaghetti and meatballs, either that or she was dieting again, but I think she was genuinely excited. She just pushed the pasta around her green paper plate with a plastic fork and kept saying "oh my goodness Heather," and "Sweetie, you're going to have a son."

Women are supposed to produce in my family. We all understand this, even though it has never been said.

My father got emotional after the announcement and offered a 7-Up toast to Heather and Brett. "To children and family, and to new families," he said. "Merry Christmas!"

"Hear hear!" my mother chimed in, as we all pressed our red plastic Christmas cups together.

"We're so blessed to be together this time of year," Grams said, tearing off a piece of garlic bread.

"This time of year," I said. "That's such a weird expression. I mean, isn't it always this time of year, technically? It's just a weird expression like that, you know, cause it doesn't mean anything--" but no one seemed to hear me, so I dropped it mid-thought.

My younger brothers Mike and Trey were talking excitedly, picking out names for the baby, Mike and Trey or some combination of the two being their obvious favorites, and my married sister Alyssa, already a mother with two baby girls of her own, was kissing Heather proudly on the cheek.

No one seemed to notice Connor or me, and while I desperately needed to be noticed, acknowledged, welcomed home, Connor, who Mom has always called our special needs child, didn't seem to mind being unnoticed at all. He sat beneath the kitchen table playing happily with his favorite toy, a green and purple plastic dump truck. I peeked under the table to see if he was okay, which he was, and thought about how it feels to be alone in a crowded room.

Connor seems to prefer his truck to the rest of us most days, and though usually this fact is annoying, at the moment I found it charming. I wanted to sit under the table too. The doctor told us once that Connor thinks in pictures rather than in words. I think in stories, coiled like serpents, telling and un-telling themselves in my head. Lately, I think in uncertainties piled up like papers on a desk.

After dinner and dishes Alyssa and Heather went to their respective homes, Connor went to his room, and Mom, Dad, Mike, Trey, and I sat around and played Risk, my father's favorite game, the Game of World Domination. It was Tuesday, Family Game Night. And of course, the first question my mother asked me, an hour into the game, was about Kip, my technically Mormon boyfriend. Almost immediately, I knew I was sunk.

The narrative that I had carefully constructed in phone calls and e-mails all semester long couldn't withstand much questioning. Had it been written out I might have called it something like *Amber, the Self-Reliant First Year* or *Amber, the Faithful, Tackles the Godless University of Utah*. But in truth my life had begun to fall apart and as Family Game Night progressed it became increasingly clear that even my best fiction couldn't tolerate much scrutiny. I certainly couldn't. I wanted to be seen by my family, but not like this.

The question about Kip made me squirm. "He's fine," I lied, avoiding my mother's heavily lined eyes and trying not to cry. Even her most well-intentioned prying sometimes had this effect on me. It was like she was psychic when it came to my failures. How did she know I'd let her down?

Kip and I had broken up. Last I heard he was dating my ex-best friend. I had no marriage prospects whatsoever. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to get married anymore. My grades were less than perfect. I hadn't been to chapel in three months. I'd quit choir, and the weekend before last I'd slept with a cute guy from theater arts named Greg who, I think, was Catholic. There it was, and all of it had to remain inside me like fish in a tank.

That night I lay awake in the girls' room and stared at Heather and Alyssa's empty beds. I missed my sisters. Since they'd gotten married things hadn't been the same. We never talked like we used to. My first night back I had trouble falling asleep, I'd grown used to overheated dorms and was no longer accustomed to a thermostat set at sixty-two. Shifting and shivering in my wintry sheets, there was nothing to do but obsess.

I lay on my side and stared at the wall. This is it Amber. This is as far as it can go, I thought. You're almost out of the family now, possibly even out of God's family, assuming He exists. You've really messed up your life. I kept going, you are the prodigal daughter Amber, except worse, because you're not sure that you're really sorry for what you did two weeks ago or all semester for that matter. You're just hurt and scared, not actually remorseful, just wounded and confused, which is really selfish of you since you're the one who has messed up your life. Get yourself together Amber, I told myself. Go to sleep.

But I didn't go to sleep, I thought about Kip. I thought about how he had freely admitted to being ambitious, and how my dad had sort of liked him the one time they'd met. He was cute and reliable and baptized Mormon too, but he was too much. Kip liked to brag about his SAT scores. I think he liked numbers more than he liked me. He used to talk about his IQ and the advantages of standardized testing incessantly. Once I got so sick of it that I told him he was boring me and that I wasn't impressed by a talent for multiple choice tests.

I guess I sort of drove him away when I told him there was more to life. "Really Amber," he had said incredulously, "like what?"

He thought I was jealous of him. Maybe I was, but not so much of his test scores as of his whole worldview, his faith in tests, church, family, people from the ward, everything I had begun to doubt.

I lay in my old bed and tried to remember the good feelings, the way I'd felt at sacrament meetings growing up, safe and loved, the way I'd looked forward to early morning seminary, but the feelings wouldn't come back. I could picture the carpet and the pews and the quiet goodness of the people but the mystery was gone.

That night I dreamt of being cast out into utter darkness. In the dream, I wasn't scared, just sort of lost and resigned. Everything was dark and cold and unrecognizable and unintelligible and then, out of nowhere, I was wearing a pink bandanna and sitting in a coffee shop floating someplace in outer space. And Greg was there too, reading a play in the corner, smiling.

"Out of bed sleepy head!" my father yelled into my bedroom the next morning sometime after six. That was another thing I was no longer accustomed to: waking up at dawn.

"What time is it?" I asked as I made my way to the bathroom, rubbing my eyes. A line had already formed outside the door.

"Welcome home," Mike said, standing in the hallway in his monogrammed blue bathrobe. "Not used to getting up early anymore are you?"

"No," I said. "I'm not."

"That's okay," he said, "You'll get back into the swing of things in no time."

Not yet fully awake, I managed to nod.

"I don't have to go to seminary anymore, do I?" I asked.

"No," Mike said, "But we all get up at the same time now. Dad thinks its best."

“He would,” I thought, unkindly.

A few nights later we had a Christmas party at our house. My father invited all our friends from church. He seemed happy and in his element, filling veggie trays and taking people’s coats. My overworked mother on the other hand seemed anxious the day before, and all evening during the event as she frantically tried to cook and clean and organize and entertain all at the same time.

The guests couldn’t tell it, but I knew she just wanted to go to bed. I tried to help her in the kitchen but soon felt myself being drawn into her almost magnetic anxiety, and having plenty of inner torment of my own, I couldn’t stand the competition.

I saw Alyssa’s daughter Caitlyn toddling across the linoleum floor, scooped her up into my arms, and made my exit into the living room. I walked through the party that way, as long as Caitlyn would let me, holding on to her like a life vest, and kissing her on the head.

“So where are you these days Amber?” Mrs. Peterson, one of my mother’s friends from the Relief Society, asked.

“Oh, I’m a freshman at the University of Utah.” I answered.

“Really, why not BYU?” she said, looking far too concerned for a woman wearing a seasonal sweater.

I shifted my niece from one hip to the other like the picture of domesticity and smiled with closed lips. “Well, Utah just felt like a better fit,” I said, and then a moment later, “Will you excuse me? I think Caitlyn needs a bottle.”

Safely in the kitchen I almost whispered thank you into Caitlyn’s ear. “You really saved your Aunt Amber,” I said. Plopping Caitlyn on the counter with one hand, I put a formula and water mixture into the microwave with the other, and turned it on high.

A few hours later I made a call to an old friend and escaped again, this time from the house. Megan showed up at the front door decked out in a puffy baby blue parka with a faux fur trim. Her wispy blond bangs, curled perfectly under, seemed to orbit the front side of her head.

“Ready to go?” she asked, stomping the snow off her boots.

“Yeah, let me just grab my jacket,” I said.

We walked across the street, hopped into her pickup, and drove slowly through the streets, just watching it snow. “It’s so good to see you,” I said, still in party mode. “You too,” she laughed softly.

My shoulders relaxed.

I’d always liked Megan, something my parent’s didn’t understand. Some people didn’t give her a chance, but beneath the glittery pink eye-shadow there was something substantial about her. She was different from the other people I’d gone to high school with. There were only two kids in her family. Her brother had had some trouble with the law. Her parents were non-practicing. The cab of her truck was littered with newspapers and empty coffee cups.

She did things her own way. She’d started beauty school right out of high school, and wanted to talk about all the stupid girls in her classes, and possibly owning her own salon in

Denver or Salt Lake one day. I listened and laughed, and promised her I'd visit the salon for an eye-brow wax if she ever got it started.

"You want a cigarette?" she asked, stopping the truck at a park on the edge of town.

"No," I said, "I never--"

"Just thought I'd ask," she said, opening the car door and lighting up. I looked over at her, breaking whatever doctrines or covenants she pleased, and wished I were a smoker.

"You ever feel like you don't belong in this town anymore?" I asked.

"Sometimes," she said.

There was a long silence, unusual for us, a certain ache. Megan stepped out onto the gravel and then pulled herself up onto the hood of the car. I got out and did the same. It was freezing.

"Pretty sky, huh?" she said. "I've always loved looking at the sky here at night, especially when things are crazy with my family, and what with the holidays and everything, it just chills me out."

"Yeah," I said looking up at the snow covered trees and the mountains, and the darkness visible, contrasted with the whiteness that was falling all around.

I adjusted my scarf, as a star streaked across the sky. "Did you see that?" I asked.

"See what?" Megan said looking behind her.

"A shooting star," I said, as summers spent reading scripture, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price, spun webs in my skull. "How you have fallen from the Heavens, Oh morning star, Oh son of dawn," I remembered. I'd always had a mind for books.

Everything seemed peaceful sitting on the hood of the truck so I shook the thought of Lucifer falling from heaven out of my head, and changed the subject.

"Who's to say who is falling and who is ascending?" I would ask Connor the next morning, knowing he wouldn't understand, but for the moment I just let it drop.

"I'm not sure I believe all the Mormon stuff anymore," I confessed.

"Yeah," Megan said, "That's a tough one, Amber, especially with your family. Maybe give it some time." Her voice ended on a high note. It comforted me.

We sat there on the hood of her truck, exiles, and I nodded my hat covered head in agreement. "Give it some time. Good advice," I thought, silently wondering what it would be like not to attend my little brother's weddings in the temple someday.

"It'll only be a couple of hours, I just need to go to the store and run some errands," Alyssa said to me over the phone the next afternoon. "Can you watch Caitlyn for me?"

"Sure," I said, sublimating my reluctance.

I came over an hour later at three; promptly occupied Caitlyn with a bottle and some toys, shut the door to her room, and then snooped around the kitchen of my sister's new house in search of a Diet Coke or some such contraband.

Smart Start cereal over the refrigerator, prayer cards on the fridge, tennis shoes in a corner, nothing too exciting. Then a pseudo-Zen calendar of daily sayings caught my eye. "Be yourself." it commanded. "Life is precious as it is. All the elements for your happiness are already here. There is no need to search or struggle. Just be."

I surveyed the kitchen. What a thoroughly un-Mormon quote. I couldn't decide if it was silly or profound but I liked it immediately. It sounded so easy. "All the elements for your happiness are already here." It was like nothing I'd ever read.

No promise of salvation? No next life? No god?

Excited at my sister's slightest theological departure, I walked around the house reading the calendar aloud, mantra-like.

"Just be," I said to Caitlyn when she bumped her head on the sofa and started to cry.

"There is no need to search or struggle," I told myself when I got bored with babysitting. "This is as good as it gets."

By four I had memorized the memo. By five I had rejected most of it, except, "be yourself." Who else could I be?

Mormons have it better, I halfheartedly acknowledged in my head. Who needs things as they are when you have them as you hope them to be?

I put Caitlyn down for a nap and then lay down on the floor beside her crib listening to her breathing, and trying hard to pretend there was an all-loving God lying down beside us, keeping us safe.

OFF THE GRID: Ruth's Monologue

Renée E. D'Aoust

Act II, scene 4

SETTING: Jail cell in North Idaho.
Late September.

CHARACTERS: DEPUTY ARNOLD SCHURR, in his fifties, wears his police uniform with a large ring of keys on his belt, and RUTH, in her thirties, wears an orange jumpsuit. RUTH has been charged with murder.

RUTH

(Ruth is speaking to Deputy Arnold Schurr.)

No, the kids were gone by that time. Surely, you know, Arnold. There are so many kinds of loss. When I changed my name, that was one kind. A very insignificant kind, really, in the scheme of a life. A name isn't an identity; it just leads into an identity. The person is the identity. A symbol isn't the thing itself. Or the name. I'm sure of that now. Ruth now. Lillian before. Who cares? Do you? We called our place "Paradise," but it wasn't. Didn't come close

to what the name should mean. Following Marshall, trying to follow the exact word of the Bible, that's who I was. Then I changed. Not because Marshall changed my name, though maybe that was part of it. Perhaps I met him too young. Perhaps the move should have been done on my own. He saw the land first but never stayed around long enough to really know it the way I know it. He drove the long hauler. Left his family behind. I suppose now I'll not feel the land again. Not for a long time. I think of the land more than Sara or Daniel. To think of the land is less painful for me. No, more painful. To lose Marshall, the property, the children. All in one fatal arm swing. I suppose it wasn't an arm swing at all. I suppose it was a finger pull. And I suppose I did it. Perhaps I haven't loved Marshall in a long time. But that doesn't make sense of the thing I've done. If that finger pull was meant for me that would make sense of it. Someone who believes in God doesn't end her own life, though. Isn't that right?

What was there to love in Marshall at the end? His body. Always his body. And now? Nothing. Thankfully my parents have taken Sara and Daniel. The state is good that way. Don't you think?

I'll remember chopping wood and carrying water. That is why people move back to the land. Not for God or country or separation from the world, though all those things were part of us. For the same action over and over until your mind is calmed and your body strong, and you can return to the world in one piece. Except I haven't, Marshall won't ever, and the children have but won't see me for a long, long time. That's not returning to normal. That's not finding anything at all. Just loss. So many different kinds of loss all joined together. Before inside of me. Now outside for all to see. I wonder if they'd let Lucky come visit me. Her fur. So soft. So soft to touch.

(Pause.)

You know, Marshall and I got married when I was sixteen. We both had God, so we got married.

(Pause.)

When I held Marshall, as he was dying, he was so heavy, and so light. His soul hovered in the air between his body and my body. Right in front of my eyes. I could see it: An opaque whiteness. So different from the thick, deeply hued blood on the floor. "It isn't a problem, Marshall," I said quickly, "I'll clean it up." He hated it when I made a mess. But he said, "We have a big problem, Ruth." I stroked his cheek then—you know he always stroked mine at night, when he was home, and it used to make me so uncomfortable, waking up with him stroking my cheek. I was so used to him being gone, on the road. Well now he was going to sleep with me stroking his cheek. "We have sinned in the eyes of God," he said to me, so faintly. I could barely hear him. But I could see him, and he was leaving me. Not in the truck this time, but forever. When the Lord has tried you so dearly—and you've failed so completely—there's no return to the living. Will you keep Lucky, Arnold? Will you walk her on the land and pretend that a part of me walks with you?

(Blackout.)

(End of play.)

The Last Days of Summer

Nick Martin

The fence guarding Kaitlyn's backyard was set well back from the street. I liked to hide behind the tall hedges planted about two feet in front of this fence. There was just enough space to fit but you would never know it by looking from the street - that's how far back this fence was. I had edged my way through a familiar hollow spot in the bushes and crouched against the wall out of sight. Children darted around the cul-de-sac, circling in on the chalk outline at angles just outside of Chase's field of vision. I waited for him to gather more victims, smiling as I envisioned myself bursting from my secret haven like Superman - ready to save the day with one hard kick.

A loud voice from Kaitlyn's window stiffened my spine. My ears focused in on the sound as my head swiveled upwards. Kaitlyn's mother yelled at her husband. Then he yelled back. The cloth on my shoulder ground upwards against the stucco until they came into view. They were in the kitchen. He was standing close to me with his back towards the window. She was facing him from an uncomfortable distance, standing in a void between the kitchen table and living room sofa. Her eyes had that recognizable fire in them. I found myself hunched over slightly with both hands covering my ears. I slid my fingers apart, but I left my hands on my head.

Inside, the noise subsided but the air drew together tightly as invisible corsets pulled everything into the space between the husband and wife. I focused intently on her folded arms

and his bouncing leg. She was not crying as she stood there staring blankly into his chest, but her reddened cheeks quivered in tension.

And then he moved, breaking away from the wall and inching towards her. He slowly reached out his hand and his fingers floated up to comfort her shoulder. At the last second she spun around, knocking his arm towards the kitchen counter as she yelled again into his face.

Her husband did not move. Again he solidified into iron, meeting her strained eyes. Uprooted, her flailing arms found the vase on the counter and smashed it against the tile floor. I shut my eyes and drew my head back like a turtle into its shell. When I opened them I saw shards of glass strewn across the floor in a glossy film of water beside the chrysanthemums Kaitlyn had picked from the garden. Kaitlyn's father jumped aside towards the kitchen table.

His wife bent over at the waist, holding her face in her hands. He strode towards the counter, snatching up a small teddy bear on his way to sink. It disappeared into the sink as the garbage disposal roared into life. His hand found an eggbeater and brought it down upon on the valentine red cotton in sharp, focused jabs. The garbage disposal whined slightly as it sliced through the soft bear. He stared down at the drain with the corners of his lips taut and his eyebrows furrowed as if he were reading one of the papers in the briefcase on the table.

Without turning he started speaking in a loud, stern voice. She did not appear to take in the words, which drifted away like steam getting sucked into the vents above the stove. The rhythm of his voice slowed and shrank in a decrescendo. Eventually, his voice became so soft that I wasn't even sure if he was speaking at all. He turned off the garbage disposal. There was a long silence.

No one moved.

I stared.

She remained hunched over.

His head hung over the sink, and the full weight of his shoulders pressed his wrists hard into the tile countertop in a familiar fashion. He exhaled.

Then Kaitlyn's father turned and stood with his gaze drifting through the top of her head. She lifted herself up to face him. The skin on his face was relaxed now. He moved towards her again, but this time she remained motionless. When he was about a foot away from her he leaned over and kissed her reassuringly on the lips. This made her melt right into him, and her tears poured out freely onto his shoulder. My clutch on the windowsill loosened. I exhaled and my breath fogged a small space of window under my nose. As they stood intertwined they swayed slightly like the tall palm trees at T-Street Beach.

After an appropriate period of time, he pulled away from the embrace while rubbing her back with his left hand. She sank down into a chair at the table, and after a few seconds he headed towards the refrigerator. He pulled out a bottle of beer and went out into the backyard. She sat with her elbows anchored to the wood tabletop and her face buried in her hands. I could not see her face, but from the occasional jerk of her shoulders I could tell that she had started crying again.

"Gotcha," Chase hollered.

I turned absent-mindedly and met Chase's childish grin with a quizzical expression for several moments before scrunching up my cheeks and furrowing my eyebrows. He just laughed and ran off. I sped through the bushes after him towards the center of the cul-de-sac where several other kids sat in waiting. I dropped my head forward as I took the last few steps towards the unharmed can, to no hero's welcome. My sulk slowed down the dragging of my steps into

cinematic slow motion. The curtain closed around me amidst the silent audience and Chase was off again. I felt their eyes on me and struggled to keep the expression on my face taut. I brushed off a piece of asphalt and carefully lowered myself onto the street.

I hadn't noticed the street lights come on. A twinge of cold poked at the inside of my forearms and flowed down through my hands. A chill shot through my nerves and drew my arms tightly to my chest. Travis was sitting beside me with his arms wrapped around his drawn up knees. One foot bounced like a wind-up toy as his shoulders listed from side to side with impatience. Kaitlyn had been captured, too. She sat still near the edge of the circle with her legs crossed. Her elbows were anchored onto her knees and her chin was buried in the palms of her hands. The pink scrunchie no longer held up her ponytail and her long dirty-blond hair poured out over her shoulders.

I noticed Katilyn's mom sitting on the brick steps by their front door. She was neither smiling nor frowning. Her cheeks looked tired. Her thumb was rolling around the cigarette held between her fingers while her eyes drifted between her shoes and the children in the street. Occasionally they darted off to the side, pulling her head towards something in the distance that I could not see.

The lights grew brighter and the night grew colder, and soon mothers and fathers from all over the neighborhood appeared to collect their own for dinner and homework. One by one the circle decayed until only Kaitlyn and I remained. Her mom was still sitting, finishing the last drags on her cigarette. She too called for her daughter, and the voice moved Kaitlyn away. Her face floated over her shoulders as her body rolled into motion. I studied their movements, the corners of their lips, the motion of their eyes, and then tilted my head upward to search the sky.

Then I stood up.

"Kaitlyn," I said. She turned. I drew in the distance between us and hesitated. As I leaned over and pressed my lips to her face, I could feel the rim of her glasses sliding up the bridge of my nose. I pulled away and opened my eyes, waiting to see her relief. She was looking at me - just looking. Her glasses were still slanted and hanging slightly off of the bridge of her nose. My thin reflection hung in their lenses like a ghost under the dull yellow lights. Her blinking eyelids fell like tiny pebbles disturbing the surface of her still face. After a few moments, she turned and scampered to her house.

I kicked the can as hard as I could towards the gutter and started walking.

Light from the lampposts fell onto the street like a cobweb struggling to hold its prey. In the dark, every house looked the same. Silhouettes moved like marionettes in their front windows. Even the dark outline of my mom on the sofa seemed to whirl about our living room from the pulsating of the television.

Several shadows followed me as I walked, even though the sun had abandoned me. I didn't want to go to my tree on the hill across the street. I wasn't hungry either, and I didn't want to go home. I kept walking to keep the stillness from catching up with me. I didn't want to think.

It was one of those things that sticks with you, and seeing her now makes my cheeks flush with the memory. I'm at IKEA with Spence looking for furniture to fill our apartment, and I run into her in the aisle. We cut through the formalities easy enough, but we get stuck there. I

feel like I can't leave yet, but I don't know what to say. I hadn't seen Kaitlyn much since we were kids, but I'd heard some things every now and again.

"So, what are you looking for?" I ask.

"Not looking really, just registering some things." She says this ambiguously like she doesn't want to tell me any more, but I already know.

"Oh, you're getting married?" I ask innocently.

"Yeah," she continues naturally enough, "Jason Goetz – he went to San Clemente, you might know him."

"Oh, yeah – I think so," I say. Kaitlyn had moved into the next school district by the time we reached high school, but I knew him. I'd met him through some friends' friends at a bonfire one night. I didn't like him. Even while we were sober he wouldn't meet my eyes when he'd talk to me, and even when he was looking at my face it was like he was focusing on something more important just behind my head. He was the first one to leave as the wood burned low, but his absence didn't leave a void in our circle.

Not thinking I glance down at her hands held over her stomach, covering it. I feel like she notices so I play it off like I'm looking at her breasts.

"Well, he's a lucky man," I offer. I figure she'd like hearing that.

"Thank you," she said, "You look nice, too." I smile.

"I'll get you a blender or a set of those knives that can cut through cans," I say and we both chuckle. I see that she's holding a list of names. It's short. There's a pause as the laughter dies.

"How's your father?" she asks and I decide that it isn't worth getting into.

"He's good. I still see him every so often." There's a lag in the conversation so I ask, genuinely, "Are you going to be living on Pendleton?"

"No, Jason got assigned to South Carolina. We leave in September." She paused like she was thinking. "Sorry, but I can't remember the name of the base." I'm left hanging as she looks up to try and remember.

"That's too bad," I say. "The sun will miss seeing you." We look at each other and smile, and it's nice. I feel like it's a good place to end the conversation. "Well, I'm living up in Huntington Beach now. Look me up whenever you come home." I'm tempted to give her my number, get hers, and call every now and then to check up on her - but I know it's a stupid idea.

"I will," she says and we both slide away in different directions.

Spence and I are hauling our futon up the stairs, and I am a little detached. We get to the door and I let him figure out how we're going to fit it through. He enters first, pulling me with the aluminum frame behind him. The futon is squeezing through the doorway at odd angles, coming obliquely into the apartment like a thief sliding his way through one of our pathetic little windows. I get angry when a leg gets caught in the doorjamb and I punch the wooden slab.

I examine the situation for a minute and don't see any way to Rubik's cube this thing through, so I let it rest on my thigh and get a good grip on the leg with both of my hands. I don't feel it bend as I pull, but I keep at it anyway. I choose not to acknowledge the square aluminum tube as it cuts into my palm. The edge of the leg is gouging into the wooden doorframe, scraping off paint as it bends ever so slightly. I run out of breath and let my end fall. Spence swears at me and I kick the wall, shaking bits of stucco loose onto the ground. I stand back and sigh; nothing is ever simple. Spence wants to know what I mean by that, but I don't feel like explaining. I just want to give up and let the futon sit there straddling our living room and the

hallway. It makes me think back to sophomore year when I was sitting in detention with this bastardly smile on my face, over some crime I can't even remember, and Ms. Price pointed at me and said, "You will never amount to anything."

Untitled [2]

Nora Halmer

Sitting. A complex set of muscle contractions to put the body into a contorted, unnatural position.

He does not sit. He sulks his torso into the vinyl seats, allowing the legs to be raised above the line of his naval. His fingers are stained with paper cuts; his gums are receding.

I observe him thinking, He's changed. Not only has his voice dropped an octave but he is more changed than I last remember. He has grown up.

We were both musicians once; we lost our fingerprints to ebony and metal strings. Our calluses were a testament of betrayed talent, swelling and pussing until they popped. His were always larger than mine. Perhaps I was a little jealous.

We are not one person but two. Often, I think that every person I meet is a mere manifestation of myself, but still, I know that he is not. Even when we were the most similar, we were different. Now that separation is an undeniable fact, I must admit that indeed, we have changed. In this way, I am unreliable and only human.

(In his notebooks, da Vinci explained that depth is defined by shadow. Without the proper shading and coloration of the shadow of an object, it loses its true shape.)

Years ago, we bartered our instruments to gain voice. I became a writer; he became the reader. For all practical purposes, he became you, not the universal you, but you, the reader, desiring a metamorphosis to occur every time he picked up a new story. Slowly, you and he would become interchangeable, both understanding no more than the text offers, making life a voyage of voyeurism.

This story, however, is not journey into him, John, into you. He [John] would be almost too disappointed to go on, but by now, he is already engrossed in John [the character]. I now forget if there lies any truth behind the story, but this is not about my memory. It is about yours and his. I remain only a tool to translate his mind into words and a weapon to destroy the illusion of fiction.

Feline. Characteristics that exemplify that of being John. The universal John and the John that exists before me.

Bantering, we speak of literature as though we knew the writers intimately. I know that we are young, but some naïveté has been divested, revealing a more visceral form. There is something comforting about his veins and arteries exposed, naked before me. Unpatterned, jigsaw pulsations swing like cool ragtime.

His nose is slightly crooked. It casts an imperfect shadow onto his face. Often, when he feels most vulnerable, he awkwardly shoves his hand over his nose to hide the memory of pain while propelling himself into it.

(In the nineteenth century, Antonin Dvorak wrote his ninth symphony in his [John's] city. He said it was from the New World, but to this day, scholars dispute whether New York influenced him [Dvorak, John] or if he [Dvorak] influenced the city [John, New York].)

We are bored, not of each other but with each other. There is only a minute difference between the two. He finds me overly simplistic. It should not be thought of ironic that I feel the same way about him. We are too similar to be kind.

Boldly, he states, I am discontent.

His voice sings in perfect pitches. He has forgotten the Romantics and speaks Mozart. Harmonies mold without promise of dissonance.

Whispering, I reply, I am content. Ignorant perhaps. It is so satisfying but not at all satiating.

We are old friends reuniting under pained circumstances. Awkward conversation loomed for half an hour after our initial meeting. We see each other's faults and peck like chickens until blood surfaces. He licks his wounds; I grit crooked teeth and let the wind scab over flesh.

(When I was fifteen and he was twelve, we played Dvorak 9. We were children struggling to perform mature music. In that way, our youth was taken from us. He said once, Music puts dimension to the flat surface of the page. It gives color and motion to something that is otherwise dead. John was not trying to be profound; he simply understood music. I smiled in response thinking that he was the most sensitive twelve-year-old boy I'd ever met.)

His eyes were a dirty brown the day I met him. He was peevish and goofy with thick glasses distorting vision. As I think back, this changed image crystallizes in my mind. Eight laborious years have transversed, and now, they are blue, like the lining of notebook paper, shining and iridescent; the glasses have been put away for a cleaner, less gawky look.

Stagnation. Product of this [any] provincial city that engages the person [I, he, you] in order to deny them escape. It brainwashes the individual into believing that there is nothing beyond the limits of their immediate line of vision. The periphery is denied by the splendor quaintness.

Like a tennis match, we volley John's descriptive catlike traits, bouncing words across the table, forcing the other to retort to derisive measures. His thesaurus is missing the pages between Canine and Devious. We did not know that I was keeping a silent score of the evening's events. I did not know that I could see us for what we were.

(Up until his death, Mozart could hear everything that he composed in his mind. He never edited a single note. His original scores were impeccable. After his death, many struggled to imitate his style in order to complete his Requiem, but there is a definitive point where the observant listener can hear where he [Mozart, John] ends and the imitator [me] begins.)

I have reached a point of stagnation, John. It's this place. The suffocating heat can cause blindness to ambition. It's like a television show that only has one episode. I know the ending but am compelled to continue watching, hoping for a changed resolution every time.

Slowly, he responds, Maybe it is the heat. I've stopped seeing shadows. Does that make any sense?

I squint, trying to imagine his face without shadow. His sunken eyes and full lips would lose their unique defiance against traditional standards of magnificence.

I am unable to sympathize to his condition; I am angered by the suddenness of his statement. Grappling with augmented emotions, I still cannot imagine the byproduct of his misshapen rods and cones. He continues to sulk in silence, hoping that I can promise the perfect light to expose a shadow onto him. Night can now offer nothing but cold, hard lines against the light.

My face is like a Klee painting to him, filled with color, absolved of shadow. If I had a better understanding of art, I would be able to see the possibility my beauty through his eyes.

John, I cautiously say, maybe I've misunderstood you. Tell me again.

Music. Flat notes written onto a flat page that when expressed by either instrument or voice, reveals something more profound. That is not to say that any sort of epiphany should or could be reached. It is necessary, however, that there be a translator or medium to retell the original vision or story of the composer for others to [in]adequately comprehend the secrets tucked behind crevices.

When I read in bed and my body is blocking the light, he says, I do not see a shadow on the page. My flustered eyes desperately attempt to make rough lines where darkness should surface, but it never works. It's like color-blindness only the shades of black and white have dissipated into Technicolor.

(When we [I, John, you] are melancholy, we listen to Mozart's Requiem. It exemplifies fear and anguish. Perhaps it would have been more fitting for me to compare him [John] to Mozart rather than Dvorak; however, the outline of an analogy has already been formulated, making it impossible to erase the seeded notion for your [John's] mind. The composers themselves are stylistically radically different. One is Romantic, the other Baroque. Somehow, the elimination of the boundaries of time produces a most passionate combination to me [John].)

He cannot stop staring into me. I can smell his desire to steal brief seconds behind my eyes, allowing shades of gray to momentarily envelope him. He would swallow it in deep gulps attempting to shelter its potentiality inside himself. Then, he would breed the capability to release those shadows from his too sensitive throat to fly and engulf an entire room with darkness.

Rather, he sulks without the capability to remove the bright, unstained colors from dilated pupils, discontent and shackled by disposition of the whites of his eyes.

Two months ago, he coldly informed me that he had given up the cello [life] to conquer literature. Reading words, he justified, was less painful than interpreting music. It did not feel like acid purposefully sprinkled onto your stomach; there was not a hovering, looming sickness involved in reading. Literature was a sojourn to him. He could briefly frolic into the world of another without the side effect of any physical hurt or harm.

My response was quick and cliché, Give it time, little John. As has been said two million times, that too shall pass.

Curiously, I ask, When did all this start?

Without a glimpse of hesitation he says, With Homer of course. The day I locked away my cello.

It was hardly noticeable at first. Things simply started to look a little different. I thought I was healing from the tumor music had planted into me. You know Jacqueline du Pre once wanted to give up the cello? Long before the physical ailment [MS] took over, she wanted to abandon her art for a normal life. That's all I want too. Reading offers artistic relief without the restraint of hurt.

Have you thought of playing again?

It doesn't work. That just intensifies changes.

Have you seen anyone?

It's unexplainable.

Perhaps you're finally becoming a cat.

(Laughter)

(In The Odyssey, the prophet Tiresias is given the gift of foresight into the future because he was stripped of vision in the present. Tiresias [he, you, John] told Odysseus the road that led to home [Ithaka, New York, me].)

That night, I slept tumultuous dreams filled with dancing shadows with gleaming blue eyes. I suppose this was not about him [you] at all but about me [John].

Starry Night

Meghan Wons

I know the cadence of his walk now. The sound of his polished shoes on the linoleum interrupts the horrid cowboy on the radio yodeling vengeful notes, something about how his neighbor ran over his cat with a Ford pickup truck. That's all he does, polish his shoes. Sometimes I listen to him while he furiously attempts to erase imaginary scuffs with his polishing cloth and I wonder what kind of problems he is trying to rub away. He either has serious marital issues or suffers from some sort of obsessive-compulsive disorder. I used to paint like that sometimes. Especially after Luke left for Ireland, I would sit in front of a canvas late at night and simply move my brush in small circles over and over again. Maybe that's how it is for him; maybe he finds solace in his polishing cloth. His shoes are getting closer. I always laugh quietly at the sound of those footsteps because my favorite nurse, Mary, has described every staff member to me and I know the feet that make that steel-toed clamor are unattractively turned inwards. I have come to equate the sound of those feet with runny chocolate pudding, and the thought of it now makes me shudder.

I know the shoe-polishing caretaker's name, it's Mack, and I always address him by it when we're talking face to face. In my mind, however, he's simply "the zookeeper." Zookeeper -- the shoe-polisher and pudding deliverer. To him, we're just a bunch of monkeys that he has to feed and clean up after. I would love to follow the zookeeper home for a day and discover how he organizes his closet. Mary has told me that he has a gap between his two front teeth. This makes me hate my own gap even more. He jingles his keys with an air of pretension that's almost as suffocating as the stale urine smell of this place. I can hear him dishing out the dessert -- "Let's see here, Miss Emily," slop, plop. "Merry Christmas to you -- I don't think I'll be seeing

ya before the holidays. I'm taking my wife and little boy down to Myrtle Beach; boss gave me off from feeding duty for the week." The soggy sardine smell of his shoe polish is overwhelming and I know there's no way I can stomach the pudding now. The mention of Christmas sometimes causes the same reaction as the runny pudding.

* * *

It was Christmas Eve, and I was still hoping Luke would come home for Christmas. The blinking lights on our crooked angel Christmas tree reminded me of the flicker in his eyes and I couldn't bear to be at home. I walked with Grace to Uncle Jim's General Store as snow blanketed the sleepy streets. Jim Delaney was the most industrious man in all of Fallstone, and he was proud that his was the only business open on Main Street on Christmas Eve. It didn't matter to him that my daughter and I were his only customers, nor did it matter to me that I hated shopping; it got me away from those blinking tree lights.

The zipper of Grace's coat was stuck like an elephant wading in quicksand, I remember. The coat was orange, her favorite color. Orange used to be my favorite color, especially the orange in a sunset or right before a sunset, when the oranges and pinks and blues and yellows all seep into the sky and drip into the horizon. I would love to paint that again. Grace's blue raspberry tongue peeked out of the gap between her front teeth as she battled that zipper. She looked like a little blue-tongued marine. Had I put her in boots and camo right then and there, right in the middle of Uncle Jim's General Store, only her blonde ringlets and gapped little girl's teeth would have given her away.

* * *

I have always felt like I was on display. That's why I used to steal the pink flamingos from Mrs. Eustace's front yard at night when I thought she was asleep; I empathized with them. When I was younger, old ladies in the checkout lines of the Main Street Market always touched my hair, and Mr. Keogh used to joke that I was the cause of all the accidents that occurred on Montana Avenue. That was the way I walked to and from work - the "Sudz and Sushi" Laundromat- a novelty that was owned by an old, senile Japanese couple who thought they deserved the Nobel Prize for combining two of life's greatest pleasures: sushi and washing dirty clothes. When the Health Department closed down "Sudz and Sushi" after finding traces of bleach in a California roll, the Japanese couple promised me employment at their newest business: "Beauty and the Beef." The Japanese woman's eyes lit up as she told me her vision of a full service beauty salon where patrons could munch on grade A steaks and filets while getting foot massages and pedicures. I politely declined the offer, as enticing as it sounded.

I was just twenty-one years old when my tenure as a waitress / washing machine repairwoman ended. As I walked down Montana Avenue after my final day of work, a sign I believe was sent by the heavenly Father Himself caught my eye. In the window of Bothne's, the town of Fallstone's most popular café, I saw an employment posting for a clerical position at a new art gallery ten minutes from the center of town. I had always loved to paint, even as a small girl.

* * *

My father came home from work, the smell of cheap cigars lingering on his tweed jacket, and always found me in what I had declared as my painting corner – just between the kitchen pantry and the stove. He lowered his tortoise shell glasses to the tip of his upturned Irish nose and gazed admiringly at my latest creation. Nodding his head thoughtfully, he turned to an imaginary fellow art critic who stood somewhere between the stove and the kitchen sink. He then pulled a spatula or wire whisk from the ceramic bowl that sat on the countertop beside the stove, tapped it to his lips, and pretended to write notes with it on a dishrag.

“Yes, quite an amazing composition, if I may say so, Stanley,” (my father thought Stanley sounded like an appropriate name for an art critic); “Just look at how she has captured the way the light falls on his face. And those colors! I should like to see Van Gogh paint something so inspiring!” I always giggled at my father’s critiques. Although I knew that his praise was of the highly biased sort, it was one of my biggest motivations as a child for painting with such diligence. My father died when I was twelve. The day he didn’t come home to discuss my artwork with Stanley was the last day I picked up a paintbrush until I met Luke almost ten years later.

That September evening, I sat on the edge of my wooden chair between the kitchen pantry and stove, paintbrush in hand, and pretended I was Van Gogh giving *Starry Night* one final examination. I puckered my lips and furrowed my brow, as I imagined the artistically frustrated Van Gogh might have done. I brought the paintbrush to my lips and pretended it was a cigar as I reached up to touch my ear. Good, it’s still there, I thought. My art hadn’t driven me completely over the edge yet. I remember the cherries that dotted the pink and green striped wallpaper looked especially cheery that day, as I thought about Van Gogh and how desperate he must have been to cut off his own ear. Thinking about Van Gogh’s ear made me remember I was supposed to set the table. As I gathered the nine sets of silverware necessary to feed the Murphy platoon, I wondered if someone could cut off their ear with a butter knife. A steak knife, most definitely, but I wasn’t sure if a butter knife would do the job. We only needed eight sets of silverware that night, as it turned out. I was supposed to watch the dinner rolls in the oven while my mother gave Peter a bath upstairs. He had gotten in a mud fight with Tucker and looked like he had been slingshot into a pool of tar. Peter had all of the characteristics of the baby of the family and never needed to look further than our backyard if he wanted to browse in the predicament department. The day prior to the monumental mud fight, he had managed to get his hand stuck in the shell of a poor, unsuspecting turtle that passed through our backyard sandbox. My mother, our resident heroine, set his hand (and the turtle) free after much careful prying.

I noticed the smell of the burning bread as our neighbor, Mr. McCourt rushed through the front door, breathing heavily and clutching his chest. “Where – is – your – mother- Emi-Emily?”

I continued to set the table methodically, ignoring all the rules of cutlery placement. I never could remember if it was the fork or the knife that went on the left. Mr. McCourt made frequent, unannounced appearances in our house.

“She’s upstairs giving Peter a bath, Mr. McCourt. She should be downstairs in a few minutes; she has some gravy on the stove. Can I get you something to drink?” I smiled politely. I decided the cold butter knife I held in my hand could detach an ear, if someone was really determined.

“No – Emily- it’s- your – it’s your father, there’s been an accident on Forward Street and – and – I – I saw his car – crushed – on – the – on the – side of the road.”

The cherries on the wall suddenly made me want to puke and the burnt toast smell reminded me that I had forgotten the dinner rolls in the oven.

* * *

I wobbled down Main Street the day after I saw the employment notice in Bothne’s window, wearing my newly purchased heels and carrying my seven-line resume. I passed the used bookstore, Cromwell’s, and waved to Mrs. Robinson as she looked up from George Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* from behind the register. She had read the play twice daily for about two years, ever since her husband “went off to war”. She sat behind the mahogany counter, oblivious to the customers two feet in front of her until they rung the little silver bell that sat beside the register. High society, and most society in general, avoided Mrs. Robinson, but I rather liked her because she let me come and flip through art books without once asking the questions one would expect a businesswoman to ask. No, Mrs. Robinson was content with her Shaw.

I passed the courthouse, St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, and The Firefly Ice Cream Parlor. I wondered about the sense and sensibility, or lack thereof, of whoever had invented the wretched high heel. Next to Thane and A.C.’s Hardware Store, in mid stomp-stutter-stomp, I saw a disheartening sign hung above a dirty, white, windowless door. It read: “Art and Darts.” Visions of soap suds and sushi rolls danced in my head, but something prevented me from pivoting on that wobbling piece of plastic that was supposed to support my foot and walking home.

I opened the door into a cloud of smoke, a mixture of Camels and Cubans, and waved a path up to the bar with my resume. I sat down at a stool between an old man in a fishing hat and a young man who was tapping his fingers wildly to the beat of Fred Astaire’s “They Can’t Take That Away From Me,” and carelessly tilting back a drink with ice. I saw Van Gogh, Renoir, Picasso, and Manet prints lining the wall behind the bar. I wondered what Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* looked like to a man drinking his fifth gin and tonic. That painting made me feel lonely when I was sober.

“Excuse me, sir, but I came because I saw an employment notice in town for a clerical position at an art gallery located at this address. Do you know anything about it or where I might find it?” The finger-tapper winked at me.

“Well, young lady, you are in the right location! I’m Eddie Amato, bartender, day and night manager, and cofounder of this here Arts and Darts. Darts are down here, arts are upstairs. Luke should be up there painting, ask him about the job. As far as I’m concerned, you’re hired.” Eddie shooed me in the direction of a small set of wooden stairs.

I tripped on the last step up. Let them hire me first God, I prayed, and then they can see what a klutz I am. I knocked.

“Just a minute, please. Let me put on a shirt,” said a warm, strong voice.

“I’m sorry; I thought this was the art portion of Arts and Darts. The man downstairs must have pointed me in the wrong direction.”

“No, you’ve got the right place.” A man with disheveled hair appeared in the doorway, his paint stained fingers still buttoning his shirt. He smiled, (crookedly, I noticed) and I just stood there clutching my resume. I hadn’t seen eyes so warm since my father died. “Come in,

come in. I'm sorry if you were waiting long out here. I get so wrapped up in my painting sometimes that I forget to listen for the door. And about the shirt- you must think I'm kind of strange – walking around shirtless in our art gallery here - It's just that, well, I've always found that I paint better with my shirt off. And Wednesday afternoons are usually pretty slow for us here at Arts and Darts, so I usually get out one of my paintings and work on it. So, what can I help you with?"

My eyes scanned the painting covered walls of the one windowed room. There were impressionistic and cubist paintings, modern art and living room portraits, but one painting in particular caught my attention.

"Let's All Polka Tonight," I said, accidentally out loud.

"Excuse me?" The warm eyed man tilted his head like Teddy, my childhood dog used to do when I told him to "sit."

"Oh," I hesitated, knowing that I had to explain my strange first words. "That painting, in the corner there – it's absolutely beautiful. It reminds me of the view of FitzGerald's Reservoir. FitzGerald's is such an ordinary name for such an extraordinary place; I like to call it Let's All Polka Tonight. Whenever I go there, I feel the waters just want me to dance with them. It's crazy, I know."

"No, no, not crazy at all," he said with a sincere and contemplative nod. This is what Stanley the art critic might have looked like, I thought. "In fact, I call those waters "Murphy's Law Disproved." And that's actually the name of that painting. I just finished it last shirtless Wednesday." He smiled at me and I knew that Arts and Darts it would be. I'll be enslaved to working at strange dual duty businesses for eternity, I thought.

Luke and I spent the next two hours together in that one windowed room. Ten of those 120 minutes he interviewed me. His dream was to open a real art gallery. I wanted to be a professional artist. I had never told anyone that before.

"Eddie was my first real art teacher. I took classes at Amherst for a couple of years until I figured out I had to choose between paying for paintbrushes and paying some PhD to lecture me about philosophy while I filled my class notebooks with sketches and drawings of places I would like to paint. I chose the paintbrushes, but I was fortunate enough to meet Eddie my first semester."

"Eddie, the bartender?" I asked.

"Eddie teaches there, still. He retired officially two years ago, but he goes back on the weekends to teach free art classes to anyone in the community who is willing to listen to his theories on foreign policy, Picasso, or the best ways to mash a potato. He has attracted quite a loyal fan base. He's a brilliant man when it comes to art; not so brilliant when it comes to business. His theory wasn't all bad, I guess. You see, he thought if he could get people a little tipsy in the bar downstairs, they would be more likely to buy art here, upstairs. The week I signed on as his business partner, he was perpetually mumbling about how if Americans weren't smart enough in their sober state to appreciate some good artwork, perhaps they would appreciate it if they were slightly drunk."

"And your theory on the matter?"

"Sure, I get plenty of customers who want a nice ornament to hang on their living room wall. But, people who actually *feel* the artwork and wonder about the artist's intentions and what he was eating for breakfast the day he decided to paint his masterpiece? I rarely encounter that. And I know plenty of people who are technically great painters, but very few who are actually *artists*."

The haunting sound of a saxophone solo playing on a familiar jazz record traveled from the bar downstairs and filled the room. I looked out the window and saw the school parking lot where I used to play hopscotch and jump rope while I waited for my older sister Kate to come from the junior high school to walk me home.

“I actually haven’t painted for a number of years.”

“Well then, Miss Emily, we’ll just have to remedy that situation. See that closet over there? Go pick a canvas, on the house, and I’ll set up an easel for you right here.”

I let go of my death-grip on my resume. I finally felt ready to pick up a paintbrush again.

“You can paint here on one condition; you have to leave those shoes at the door. We’ll just call it shoeless Wednesday for today.”

I looked forward to every day at Arts and Darts, but I looked forward to Wednesdays the most. Luke and I made it a ritual to arrive an hour before our opening time. We went to breakfast and talked over omelets and coffee at Meg’s Eggs, at the intersection of Forward and Main. After breakfast, we climbed the wooden stairway to our artistic haven and left our shoes at the door. Shoeless Wednesdays eventually became shirtless Wednesdays. One shirtless Wednesday was the day Grace was conceived.

We were married at St. John the Evangelist on Wednesday, April 3rd. We both wore shoes at the requests of our mothers, who were Daughters of the American Revolution and part of the Arts and Darts clientele we could count on to buy decorative pieces for their living rooms. Peter and his ruffled, grass-stained suit took the place of my father as he accompanied me down the aisle, winking at every girl in every pew on our way to the altar. Eddie got wonderfully drunk at our reception, and gave a toast that included a greater part of the *Gettysburg Address*. He sent us a telegram at 3 am, just an hour after Luke and I had left our reception, to let us know he was declaring April 4th a national holiday and therefore Arts and Darts would be closed. He was too proud to admit he was too hung over to find his way into work.

We boarded a train in Boston the morning after we were married and traveled up the East Coast for two weeks. We didn’t have any definite plans, but Luke found the best bed and breakfasts, ones with wrap around front porches and tail-wagging golden retrievers who made you feel like you were coming home when you arrived for the first time. When we were in Vermont, Luke woke me up early on a Wednesday morning to climb Mt. Kensington. He packed oils and brushes in his backpack, and when we arrived at the top, we spent the entire afternoon and the early part of the evening painting. We watched the sunset with our bare feet dangling off the edge of the mountaintop. That was the day I discovered that sunsets are much more beautiful when you are in love. My sunsets were made even more beautiful when I had my daughter Grace on November 16th, 1937. These days Grace is a lawyer in Boston, and sometimes rides that same train that Luke and I rode on our wedding night when she comes to visit me.

* * *

Grace had an imaginary friend, Ralph, until she was four years old. Ralph was an elephant who liked roller-skating and strawberry ice cream - but only without sprinkles, she told Luke and me. On her fourth birthday, Luke gave her a painting of Ralph. When Grace unwrapped the newspaper covered canvas her jaw dropped open and she cried for two hours straight. Grace had never told us that Ralph was actually a girl, and my husband had given what

he had assumed to be a “him” rather masculine qualities, including a shirt and tie. Grace lost interest in Ralph that day.

Everyone in our house cried on Grace’s fourth birthday. Grace napped on the rug, sprawled out amidst wrapping paper and boxes victimized by her over-eagerness. Her full tummy rose and fell beneath her yellow party dress and Luke and I sat in silence on the couch holding hands, content just to watch her sleep. Luke flipped on the radio and turned the volume down. His hand tightened around mine as he heard the voice on the radio say he was about to announce the outcome of the national draft lottery. Luke’s melon colored draft card was stamped with S-7861. The voice on the radio told him that day that his S-7861 was unlucky.

Luke turned off the radio and let go of my hand. He stared at his draft card in his hand for a moment and then put it in his shirt pocket. I sat motionless on the couch and watched as Luke rose and slowly bent down to kiss his sleeping daughter on her forehead. My husband wasn’t a warrior, he was a painter. Didn’t that matter to the hand in Washington that pulled the God-forsaken draft numbers? I still don’t like to listen to the radio.

* * *

The mailman was our hero during those years. Luke wrote to us whenever he had a spare moment, and I lingered over every word and stray pen mark his hand had made and Grace laughed as I read poems her daddy wrote her about the candy stores in Europe or the funny way the Germans marched. We usually received at least three or four letters a week, even if some of them were simply the words “I love you” scrawled on a torn edge from a map. One week in February the mailman delivered only our phone bill and the daily paper. On the ninth day after last receiving a letter from Luke, I sat at my kitchen counter and pretended to be interested in a Sears-Roebuck catalogue advertisement for percolators. I glanced at the clock that hung above our stove. 2:07. The mailman, whose status as hero was rapidly declining, usually delivered the mail by 1:30 at the latest, but I couldn’t bring myself to trudge down the driveway and check our box.

Grace brought me a letter from the box on her way home from school. Usually Luke’s letters were addressed to both Grace and I, but this blue envelope sent par avion was labeled with my name alone. I opened it carefully, as if the paper would crumble in my fingers, and my hands shook as I read the words that lay flat on the page.

My dearest Emily,

I don’t know if you’ll be able to forgive me. I killed an artist yesterday. He had a postcard of Starry Night in his left pocket. We lost Patrick Naughton and Connor O’Hagan two days ago. I hope you and Grace are well. I love you as much as always. Give Grace a kiss for me.

L

* * *

He came home the night of Grace’s school Christmas pageant. Her angelic looks made her a perfect candidate for class angel, but Grace was a free spirit and didn’t think it was fair that her blonde curls should force her to play the most boring part every year. She convinced her friend Sam, who lived in the brown gingerbread looking house down the street, that playing the part of the angel was the most glamorous and surely he was the only one talented enough to pull

it off. Grace's power of persuasion (she was a lawyer from the start) freed her to play the part she had always coveted, the little drummer boy. Although she had no musical experience or ability, she drummed that little drum so convincingly on stage it brought tears to my eyes. It was my third Christmas Eve without Luke, and I had received no word as to when he might be coming home. You know those little glass figurines that children scrape together their allowance to buy, only so they can sit on a shelf and collect dust? That's how I felt that night in the school auditorium, like a little glass figurine, sitting all alone and thinking about how much Luke was missing, and how much I was missing him.

My little brother Peter, Grace's favorite uncle, came for the final song and dance number of her pageant and offered to drive us home. He told Grace she was the most beautiful little drummer boy he had ever seen, even though he had missed her drum solo. Grace fell asleep in the car, clutching her drumsticks. As Peter pulled the car into the driveway, I could see the tree lights blinking off and on through the front window. I gathered Grace in my arms and tiptoed quietly in the front door. He was home.

He straightened the precariously perched angel that sat terrified atop our Christmas tree. He read extra bedtime stories to Grace that night and we spent the next few hours laughing about our old times at Arts and Darts. I showed him the paintings I had been working on and he didn't let go of my hand until we fell asleep on the couch in front of our tree with the blinking lights. I loved that it was his tree too that year.

Luke killed himself that night. I found him the next morning on the floor of our bathroom, wearing his boots and boxers. There were pills issued by a military doctor all around him and his hand gripped something tightly. Luke never really believed in medicine. He looked like a little boy, with his bony shoulders, his buzz cut hair, and his eyes closed so softly. How I had the courage to touch my nightmare, I can't tell you. That Christmas morning, as Grace lay dreaming of Santa Clause in a bed thirty feet away from her dead father, I was surprisingly calm.

I touched Luke's hand and loosened his fingers around the piece of paper he gripped. It was faded and worn, and still damp from Luke's once sweaty palm. It was a small postcard of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. I closed the bathroom door and went to the family room. I yanked the plug to those damn blinking lights from the wall.

* * *

Mack comes back to collect my bowl of pudding. I haven't touched it.

"Miss Emily, if I didn't know any better, I would say that you aren't so fond of my homemade pudding here." There's the key jingle jangle again.

"Homemade pudding, Mack? I may be blind, but even I can see that this here is no homemade pudding."

"Well, Miss Emily, as I said before, Merry Christmas to you."

"Merry Christmas, Mack. And thank you for the pudding."

Van Gogh said, "The more I think, the more I feel that there is nothing more truly artistic than to love people." I've been without my eyesight for ten years now. My mind's a blank canvas of sorts, you could say. I must use my memories- of all different gradations and forms- to paint my canvases now. Some are painful, but in recalling I remember that I loved. And in loving - in loving I was truly an artist.

This is a Mecca

Nick Mainieri

I thought about writing this in the third person, mostly because I hate first person narrative, but I decided against it. Not for any special reason really, mostly just because I want you to hear my voice. I like to say things like ‘there was a buttload of em’ or ‘that dude was a square’ and I think those things are funny. If you don’t... what the hell? Write me a letter of complaint. I promise I’ll take it into consideration.

I guess I should tell you who I am before I move on. My name is Charlie. My last name doesn’t really matter. This story is really just about a splinter I got the other day, which I will get more into shortly. I’m seventeen years old and I like to write, no big whoop. After I finish this story up I’m locking it away. You might not understand, but I feel like if people knew I wrote stuff, they wouldn’t take it/me seriously. I’m telling you right now, though, this story means something. I’m not pulling any punches. *This means something*. That being said, whenever this ends up in your hands (for I have no idea when or how it will) there’s no doubt you will recognize it for what it is— purefuckingenius.

And we’re off.

The other day I’m sitting in class. My last one of the day, British Literature with Mr. Burgerheim. I never enjoyed Brit Lit all that much in the first place (America is where it’s at), but old Burgerheim made it even worse. How do you expect someone with a name like *Burgerheim* to know anything about British Literature anyways? Burgerheim was droning on as usual, his flat voice in one of my ears, the ticking clock in the other. About this time of the day I

felt like a big gambler, one that bets on the horse races. My pony was Three O'clock. *Come oooooon, Three O'clock. Come oooooon, Three O'clock.*

When the bell rang I placed my hands on either side of the desk and pushed myself out. *Yow!* As my right hand slid along the edge I felt a sharp stab in my pinkie finger. The splinter had to be an inch. At least. I tried pulling it out. Chalk that up as my first mistake in this little story. The part still outside of my skin broke, leaving a smaller shard imbedded.

The hallway was a madhouse as always. You ever seen like footage or photos of a crowded street in India or Bangladesh or someplace where people are just packed in and it's loud and it looks hot and stuffy and you wonder how that guy on the bike doesn't get knocked over? That's what the hallway was like.

I got rough on the way to my locker. If you don't get out of my way you get an elbow in the ribs. That's just the way it is. I grimaced when the latch on my locker dug into the splinter. I opened it with my other hand and my books tumbled to the floor. I set my jaw in an effort to keep from screaming, my teeth the last line of defense against a garbled shout of frustration begging to be let out. I was reminded of one of my favorite tunes. It's by this band Rancid and it's called 'Journey to the End' and it's about this kid that goes somewhere that's supposed to be the best (like everyone said high school would be) but it's not. Anyways it's got this great line. *This is a Mecca? This ain't no Mecca man, this place is fucked.*

After getting the books straightened out I nearly fell right on my ass walking away. One of my backpack straps had caught in the locker. I've come to think of the shitty parts of life as the times when everything seems to *catch* on something. Your bag in the locker, you stub your toe, you close the car door on your jacket and by the time you get home the part dangling out the door is sopping wet, etc. Things just trip you up, tangle your feet. I know you have times like those. Times when everything *catches*.

I lowered the shoulder going back down the hallway, anxious as hell to leave. I'd count it a success if I escaped with only a migraine in addition to my splinter. But before I made it out I was forced to stop. It was a girl. They always seem to ruin stories somehow, and I apologize that there needs to be one in this story.

Charlotte Paisley was her name. *Charlotte Paisley*. Are you kidding me? Gorgeous, right? She strolled in front of me and said hello. I was practically in love with her. I think she knew it. I thought she liked me too, but it's not a big deal at this point. This is a story about my splinter, remember.

"Hi, Charlie. How was your day?" She flipped a hand through her hair and the golden locks caught the fluorescent glow emanating from the ceiling. Suddenly the slamming lockers sounded as sweet as wind chimes.

"Oh you know. Same old stuff." I probably don't need to tell you I was trying to sound cool. I can always tell I'm doing it, just can't ever make myself not do it.

"Yea. Well I was wondering what you were up to this afternoon."

"Um, probably not much." I never knew what to do with my hands when I talked to her either. I put em in my pockets all the way, then pulled em out halfway. I hooked my fingers around the straps of my bag. I crossed my arms. I reached up to scratch an itch that didn't exist on my chin and flinched when the splinter struck my face.

"Oh, what's wrong?" she said. She extended her hands, knowing I would supply mine for examination.

"Little splinter," I said as she turned my finger over in hers. My first impression was that she had really soft hands. Then she tried to get the splinter out.

I almost squealed, I'm not kidding. She pinched it and twisted it and jerked it. I rose to my toes, barely holding back the tears that were building behind my eyes. "Uh, Charlotte," I said, laughing uncomfortably and taking my hand back, "That's ok. I think I'll be fine."

"Oh are you sure? I promise I can get it." She went for my hand again.

"Uh no, I'm sure. It'll be fine."

"Ok, suit yourself. What I was saying is that I need to go shopping this afternoon because my mom's birthday is coming up. I was just gonna ask if you would like to go with me," she kind of looked at the ground when she said this, "you know, in case you gotta get anything or somethin."

Under normal circumstances I would have been floored by the offer, and I still think that on a more subconscious level I was floored, but I was distracted by my aching finger, which I cradled like a wounded puppy. "Uh, yea sure, Charlotte. I'd love to go."

She looked up, smiling. "Ok then. I'll pick you up in like an hour."

As I walked out of school, I slowly became aware of what just went down. Charlotte Paisley had asked me to go some place with her. *And* she was going to pick me up. She was some girl. Just not very gentle.

Home was a half hour, straight shot walk down one street of bleached, broken sidewalk which represented the less than pleasant half of suburbia. You know when it's so hot out the air feels heavy and it presses on you, making it impossible to focus? It's never very cool in my little corner of the world, but this day was an exceptional scorcher. The air, an unfathomable vat of sizzling jell-o, pushed at my temples with warm, gooey fingers. I could actually *hear* my finger throbbing. It boomed and echoed inside my skull like the ticking of a colossal grandfather clock. I was being less than manly, I know, but it hurt so goddamn bad.

The kids that had cars peeled out of the school lot and sped down the street so fast I swear they were trying to kill someone. And as they disappeared into the shimmering wall of heat rising from the pavement, I realized I was sweating. I needed a shower before Charlotte came by. I looked at my watch and did some calculating in my head. Half hour walk home, Charlotte's coming in one hour. I should have enough time for that.

I was about halfway to the Promised Land when all thoughts of Charlotte were hip-checked right the hell outta my head by the splinter. Sweat leaked into the puncture and it stung like mad. I crossed a street without looking both ways and was almost flattened by a greyhound, and not the dog either. I was focused on the finger. I can't walk and chew gum simultaneously either.

On the next block there was a drug store, a Walgreens. They'd have tweezers. Here was the plan: stop for a second and get some tweezers. Yank it out and feel better. Still get home and have time to shower. Not be distracted by finger pain while with Charlotte at the mall.

I spied the red Walgreen's sign and made straight for it. It sat across from a Texaco/Body Shop. I thought the Texaco might have some tweezers, but Walgreen's was a safer bet.

"Hey pal, do us a favor?" someone said from within the Walgreens parking lot.

The guy had shaggy hair and a beard. You could tell on looks alone he wasn't an old man, but if you still weren't sure, you knew by the erratic, struggling condition of his beard. Just a guy that didn't like to shave. He wore glasses, but that wasn't the reason his eyelids looked droopy. A tattered t-shirt and a pair of moccasins gave away what he was. Guy should have been arrested for vagrancy. Another stood next to him. He was in a similar state minus the glasses and beard.

“Yea guy, whaddaya need? I’m kinda in a hurry,” I said.

Beard guy smacked the side of a battle-hardened white Honda behind him. Black smoke billowed from under the hood. “Baby won’t start.”

No shit, Sherlock, your fuckin car’s on fire. “What do you want me to do about it?”

Beardless guy spoke up. “Help us push her over to the Texaco?” His smile was hazy.

I’ve always had this problem. I feel bad saying no to people that ask for help. I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s the long lasting effects of Sunday school, maybe it’s my friendly, hey-walk-all-over-me face, or maybe it’s the fuckin angel on my shoulder, I don’t know, but I can never say no, never mind the situation. I know most people in my predicament would have told them to go fall off the face of the earth, but not me. I could sure as hell think it, but I couldn’t say it. How long could it take to push some little p.o.s. (*piece of shit* to the lay person) across the street anyways?

I sighed resolutely as I walked toward the vagrants. When Beard guy saw me coming he shouted. “Right on, brother!”

Dude was a square. No doubt about it.

I told them my name was Charlie and they told me theirs, although I can’t recall them now. That’s another problem of mine. So henceforth, they shall be referred to as Beard and No-Beard.

No-Beard placed himself so that he could reach through the window and steer. Beard and I lined up along the bumper. It looked as if the white paint had put up a helluva fight for many years, but the barbarian horde of rust was finally winning out. The smell of old cheese or perhaps dirty socks wafted from the trunk, but by the looks of those dudes it could have very well been both. Hundreds of bumper stickers peppered the car’s backside like a clinging virus. Most of them were either faded or disintegrating, but a few were distinguishable. One had a little stick figure with dreadlocks. In red, yellow, and green letters it said, **Relax for now. You’ll die soon enough.** Another one, a green one, had a face shot of George Washington and read, **Hemp is green Hemp is good George Washington grew it Everyone should!** That sticker alone was enough reason for me to hate anybody. But the largest sticker, which was placed in the corner of the rear windshield, was very simple. Just black with white writing. **The Beatles.** It confused me mightily.

I must have been shaking my head because Beard spoke up. “Whatchoo shakin your head at?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing. We pushin this piece or what?”

“Hell yea we are. Let’s roll, man!”

I think I did the most work, but that’s probably cause I was the only one not stoned out of my gourd. That might also explain why it took so long to push the car across one street. Once we reached the Texaco’s lot I was swimming laps in my own perspiration. I was going to need a serious shower.

“Thanks, man. You are the original good Samaritan.” Beard clapped me on the shoulder but I didn’t really notice because I was mesmerized by the bumper stickers. “You like the Beatles, man?”

“Hmm? Oh, yea, well not really at all,” I said. To tell you the truth, I’ve always been a Rolling Stones man. Guys like Mick Jagger and Keith Richards... They are the face of rock n’ roll. Literally. You need those guys that not only look like they’ve been around the block a few times, but were dragged face first on each go around. The Beatles just wanted to hold your hand.

Side note: at this point I realize what you must be thinking because it is precisely what I thought after the fact. Why is this guy hangin around when he's gotta get home and meet this chick? Am I right? My only explanation is that I was delirious from the heat, my finger (which after pushing the car felt like a bear trap had clamped on), and the confusing Beatles sticker. It was an instance where I kinda forgot what was going on and was roped into something I had no control over. Another one of those situations when everything *catches*.

"You don't like the Beatles?" Beard was smiling slightly, a puzzled look on his face. "Greatest band of all time?"

"Naw, man. I don't agree. You know, I didn't really figure either of you to be Beatles guys. I figured you'd be into the Grateful Dead or some shit like that."

"Yea well we dig the Dead, too. But the Beatles, man? Come on. Who doesn't?"

"I don't, for one. Can't hold a candle to the Stones."

"I can dig the Stones. But the Beatles, man. *The Beatles*."

I couldn't figure out why they liked em so much. I don't remember seeing too many granolas among the crowds of screaming girls you always see in the file footage of Beatles shows. I told them that word for word.

No-Beard slapped the top of the smoldering car. "John Lennon was a goddamn hero."

I laughed. It made sense to me. These guys weren't into the Beatles. They were into John Lennon and the Beatles' later, trippy, druggy stuff. I thought about saying I was glad John Lennon got shot just to piss them off, but decided that might have been a tad classless. So I only told them Lennon was a no good son of a bitch.

No-Beard flipped. He kicked the side of the car and glared at me. *A visionary!* he screamed. *Guy was a visionary!* I could have puked. Lennon, No-beard, and an altered state of consciousness made three, I suppose.

Beard turned to No-Beard and adopted a sage-like voice. "Chill, man. *Chilllll*. To each his own. *To each his own*."

No-Beard shook his head and turned, walking a short ways away. I chuckled, clapped my hands without thinking, and then recoiled from the pain.

Beard asked me what was wrong and I showed him the splinter. I blamed it on his car. He didn't know any better.

"You know what you should do, man? Go over to Walgreens, get some tweezers, and pull that sucker out."

"Yea, I was gonna before you and Smokey McSmoke over there stopped me."

A dreamy grin crawled onto his face and he extended his fingers into a peace sign. "Go and do it. Thanks for the help, brother."

I didn't give him a 'you're welcome' or anything. Like I said, I have trouble saying no to people when I should, but I have no trouble whatsoever resenting them afterwards. *Treehuggers*, I thought as the sliding glass doors welcomed me into the AC of Walgreens, *I don't get em*. I mean, if this were the 60's or something I might understand. At least the hippies of that era had some semblance of a purpose. Kind of. But what was the point today?

It's a mystery, I tell you.

One hell of a regrettable mystery.

Goosebumps raced along my arms when the cool air met my sweaty limbs. It felt good. This little pizza-faced stock boy with a mop pointed me in the direction of the tweezers. He also suggested some ointment since the finger looked pretty red. I didn't want it to get infected.

There was a whole buttload of tweezers down aisle number three. I was trying to decide whether the larger, more powerful tweezers or smaller, more versatile tweezers would do the trick when something struck me funny about the red digital clock planted above the pharmacy counter.

4:06.

I blinked. My mind went in to a free fall as I searched for a reason as to why the time mattered.

4:07.

Charlotte! Before I knew what I was doing I dropped the tweezers and turned, sprinting for the exit. I slipped at the end of the aisle (the stock boy with the mop had left a slug-like trail of wetness) and went sliding on my stomach into a pyramid of soda cans. The meticulously formed sculpture of beverages went tumbling. The stock boy yelled something at me but I just got up and ran out the door. Everything *catches*. Mmm hmm.

I ran home. There wouldn't be any time for a shower. I was going to be lucky if Charlotte was still there.

4:13, my watch read. I was heaving for air, willing away the urge to hurl all over the white cement of my driveway. I saw the tail end of Charlotte's car disappear around the corner. Just missed her. She didn't wait even fifteen minutes.

Inside, my mother explained that she told Charlotte I hadn't been home yet and didn't know where I was. Charlotte said she was sorry and left. Fair enough, I guess. I planned on explaining things to Charlotte as soon as possible. And if she didn't understand... I'd remind myself how ungentle she was.

So that's my story. Now that you've read it, you can probably see why I'm locking it away. It's embarrassing, right? Plus I couldn't have Charlotte reading this. Can you imagine what the consequences of that would be? But before I let you off the hook, I think I should let you know what happened with the splinter. After all, this story was only about that little sliver of wood. Believe it or not, it just sort of fell out yesterday. Go figure. Anyways, I realized something once things had sort of worked themselves out. Had kind of an epiphany. Sometimes I don't really see things for what they are. And this goes for Rancid songs or high school or anything in between. The splinter, along with the granolas and their car, the heat, and perhaps even Charlotte, are all sort of these little hiccups along the way. Pot holes, if you will. They are simply more things that *catch*. Just reincarnations of everything else that *catches* in my life, fated to be replayed again and again, maybe like that Beatles song you get sick of on the radio. So what do you do? You try. You battle. You overcome somehow. And in the end you just might reach that Mecca, wherever or whatever it may be. In a nutshell, this is what I figured out. One way or another, I don't think I'll ever be rid of that splinter.

*To the end
To the end
I'll Journey to the End
-Rancid*

Twenty-Two

Meghan Harney

Three.

Sean could sense the shiny gold crown barely teetering on his head. "It looks like you have a growing boy on your hands," joked Grandma as she tenderly placed it on his head. Sean felt the light graze of his mother's peck on his cheek as she conceded. "It's true. I wonder when he'll stop." "Well, if he's anything like Jimmy, he won't," Grandma exclaimed. "Now, why don't we go get that cake, Hon. It looks like somebody's hungry."

Sean's eyes bulged and gleamed as he watched his mother leave the room. Cake? Nobody had told him about cake. He saw Tessa glaring back at him from across the table. She had been wearing a funny yellow cone on her head all day, and Sean had to giggle. "Oh, shut up, stupid," yelled Tessa. That immediately silenced Sean. He knew what Tessa could do to him. She was six, after all.

Sean yelped as the light above disappeared. "Mommy! Da-," he began to shout when that familiar tune interrupted him. "Happy Birthday to You, Happy Birthday to You," his family began to sing. Jerking his head around, Sean only saw his mom's face, illuminated by three giant candles. She looked like an angel. As the song ended, he saw a flash from behind her. "Say 'cheese', Sean-o!" his father cheered.

Three.

The yellow envelope bulged furiously, as if the photos themselves were fighting, forcing their existence on Sean. When he picked them up, the clerk had given him a knowing smirk, as if it was their little secret. Originally, Sean had planned to throw them away immediately, but there

they beckoned. “Not now,” he sighed as he threw the packet on the floor of his car. He jammed his keys into ignition, shifted into gear, and sped away onto County M.

Sean had only been home twice – five days total – since he went off to school four years ago. This current visit had already lasted six, but those days had been full of job interviews and settling in back home. This was the first time Sean could really take in his city, his surroundings. The first time in years.

As he picked up speed, he flicked the radio on. 105.1. “The hits from the 80s, 90s, aaaaaand...” Sean began, only to discover that he was dreadfully out of sync. “The home for all your Christian praise and prayer,” a soft female voice now cooed. Christian rock? Sean couldn’t believe it. The last thing he had time for was Jesus and friends. “Sorry God,” he grimaced as he flipped to the only other station in town – 92.1: “R&B hits for those with soul”.

During his senior year in high school, Sean and his buddies raced through these county roads as a diversion. M, PD, AB – the letters changed, but the experience was always the same. Boomer at the wheel, Ben, Kyle, and Pat smashed in the back, Sean with the coveted ‘permanent shotgun’ he earned after a chugging contest junior year. The ’89 Jetta had been past repair for years, but they continued to “cheat death”.

Driving the same routes now struck him as boring and worn out. Even with the wind rushing at his face and the windows vibrating from the heavy bass, the thrill had vanished. The quaint farms that used to dot the countryside had vanished as well, making way for new stores and restaurants. Barry’s Fishing Expo-torium. Novelty Knick Knacks. The Shish Kabob. “Isn’t it great?” His mother had exclaimed over the phone during one of their happier conversations. “The mayor calls it ‘new urbanism’. It’s supposed to revitalize the area!” Sean only felt choked by the stench of commercialism.

Seventeen.

“Why don’t you invite the boys for cake?” his mother asked that night.

“Nah, mom, I think we’re just gonna go out.”

“But I made a whole cake!” His heart sank as he looked at his mom. Gleaming pools formed in her eyes.

“Mom – I’m sorry.”

“Who’s going to eat it?” Her hands began to twitch. They did that a lot lately. Ever since Dad left the house. And Tessa went to school. He bolted from his position in the front doorway, grabbed her, and gripped her just as he had held his teddy bear years before.

“I’ll eat it. I’ll eat it,” he insisted. “It’s just – I think – well – the guys all have plans this evening with their own families – I think.” He couldn’t bring himself to tell her that he was embarrassed for the boys to see them this way. Never mind that the house had been in shambles for weeks. They reminded him of a broken mirror – so many different reflections, no way to reconcile. At least not for seven years.

His mom was still sniffing as they parted minutes later, but she appeared to be getting through it. “C’mon mom, let’s put some candles on this baby,” Sean suggested, causing her to light up a little bit. “I’ll grab the camera,” she said.

Seventeen.

Longing for a hint of familiarity, he picked up his phone and carefully punched out a number. “So, did you pick them up?” Wendy’s familiar voice demanded. Sean searched desperately for her answer. If he told her the truth, he would have to show the evidence. But a lie could only last so long.

Sean first mentioned the photos to Wendy two years during one of his infamous drunk dials. Since then, they had come up on and off during conversation, and it wasn't until recently that they started discussing it in more depth. She was the only one, besides Mom, that knew about them. In fact, Wendy really was the only one Sean kept in touch with from home. But that didn't surprise Sean. She was his confidant. His best friend.

Wendy couldn't wait to see those photos, and Sean's nerves were the only thing standing in her way. "Yeah, sure," he resigned. "But I gotta stop at home. See mom for a sec."

"Great," she replied. "Come on over afterwards. We can relive the good old days. Tell Jules I say 'hi'. See ya in a few."

"Wait, Wendy..." Sean stammered, but he was met with the deafening click of the receiver. He flung the phone on to the floor, where it landed on top of the yellow envelope. He wished he had forgotten the phone at school.

Home. 15 Crabapple Lane. Sean stopped in front of the driveway to gaze at the scene. At least the house hadn't changed. Cracks still crowded the concrete walkway. The prize evergreen still overlooked the front yard, although it was a few inches taller. "It is just like our own neighborhood skyscraper," his father had told him years before. During Sean's "imaginary friend" phase, he took to naming every tree, flower, hell – even blades of grass in the yard. The evergreen was Evelyn. "Ah, Evs, it's good to be home," Sean sighed, approaching his old pal. Even though he towered at 6 foot, he still had to crane his neck as he stood at her base, gazing up into the canopy. If he had to return here for good, at least Evelyn could keep him company.

Then there was the house itself. The white paneling continued to shine as brightly as ever. Unfortunately, the flashy pink shutters also refused to fade. The spark in Sean's eyes faded as he thought back to that fight over the shutters. His father despised them, but his mother insisted that they gave the house "needed character". Her exact words. One night while drunk, his father had tried to repaint the shutters using Sean's finger paints. The result resembled magenta and black zebra stripes. Mom repainted them the next morning. "It's funny," thought Sean, "they never talked about it." He opened the front door, complete with its signature squeal and honk. "Did they ever talk about it?"

Through the foyer, Sean saw his mother sitting at the kitchen table, coffee and paper in hand. Her pills sat on the edge of the table, and her briefcase lay next to her chair. She'd be going to work at the firm any minute now. "Mom," he began, but he was quickly interrupted by her bounding hug.

"Sean -," his mother tried to begin. "I-I just can't...you actually came back." She collapsed into sobs against his chest. Guilt began to wrack Sean. There he stood, twenty-two years old, his mother's rock, and he had barely been there since he left for school four years earlier. His ears burned in embarrassment as he clutched his mother.

"Mom," he stammered, "I've been here for six days. I'm not going away again this time."

His mother pulled away. Her auburn hair had grayed slightly, and her tear-stained cheeks had a few more wrinkles, but her eyes still danced with youth. "I know, Hon, it's just –," she paused, her tone turning darker as she stared intently into Sean's eyes. "They're exactly like Jimmy's. A carbon copy."

The thought of resembling his father in any form repulsed Sean. "Well, everything else is yours," he clarified for her. "My nose. My ears. Everything." Her smile faded as she nodded in solemn agreement. "Listen, mom," he continued, "I've gotta go see Wendy. It's important."

She rejuvenated momentarily. "Oh Wendy," she sighed, "how IS she?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure," Sean lied. "That's why I have to see her."

“Oh of course,” her voice trailed off slightly as she paced back to the kitchen. “I’ll see you tonight though, right, Sean?”

“Definitely,” Sean shouted down the foyer as he walked out the door. He watched his mother carefully sit down and reopen her paper through the screen as it closed. His own hands trembled as he returned to the car.

Eight.

The kitchen had been transformed into a palace of blues and silvers. Tinsel hung from the track lighting, twinkling as the incandescent light hit. Streamers drooped from the white wooden cabinets, confetti blanketed the linoleum floors. The décor enchanted Sean. He spent the better part of the day relegated to the den, only allowed to watch as his mother and sister decorated. Now, as the party began, he could finally immerse himself in the wonderland they had created.

To Sean, it seemed like he had waited his entire life for this moment. His golden birthday – April 8th. In honor of the day, the entire class received invites. He didn’t even know half of the kids in his class. He really only wanted to hang out with Wendy. Wendy was the perfect friend – she watched Power Rangers, liked soccer, and hated Mrs. Linden, their third-grade teacher. “Thank God Mom forgot to invite HER,” Sean thought as the doorbell rang and the first guests arrived.

A half hour into the party, Sean realized that Wendy hadn’t arrived. Had she forgotten? Did her mom get lost? Did they get in a car accident? Sean approached his father in the den, where he sat nursing what seemed like his 20th beer and watching golf. “Daddy, where’s Wendy?” Sean asked.

“Sean-o, do I LOOK like I know?” his father slurred. “Now go play with those other kids – over there.”

“But Daddy -,” Sean insisted. His father’s glare stopped him short. But Wendy could be hurt. Sean persisted, “Dad. I’m scared.”

Sean’s father exploded. “I don’t know!” he boomed as he rose, eclipsing Sean with his height. Sean’s heart pounded as he began to blink in double time. His father could never see him cry.

Hours seemed to pass as Sean stood frozen. Finally, a calming voice from behind whispered, “Boys. Wendy’s here.” It was mom. “She came in through the back. I thought – you see – well – maybe now would be a good time for the picture.” Sean wanted to breathe in the newfound safety, but he couldn’t. As he turned, he realized that Wendy – standing right next to his mother – had seen everything.

Eight.

Sean had never been to Wendy’s apartment. Most of the students lived downtown, but when Sean was in high school he rarely visited. It was foreign territory. Sean had gone to her dorm room during his winter break freshman year, but he hadn’t seen her since. The building was a high rise, a far departure from the suburbia of the west side of town. Sean grabbed the envelope as ascended the stairs. What had appeared so large and looming before was now thin and lacking. “So this,” he thought, “was what twenty-two pictures really feel like.” He knew he was ready. Floor Four. His heart skipped a beat as he approached her door. Four A. It wasn’t love – no – they had dated briefly but with complete failure. “No,” thought Sean. “It’s nerves. It’s time. It’s space.”

The door flew open before he could even raise his hand to knock. Wendy hadn’t changed a bit. Still short, still a little pudgy, but still stunning.

“Take a picture, Sean,” Wendy teased. “It’ll laaaaast longer. Come ON. I mean, I know I’m hot, but you do your gaping in private, please.” She giggled almost manically as she enveloped Sean in a trademark hug. From behind her door, Sean could hear the beats of techno music.

“Wendy,” he paused, stepping away. “TECHNO?!?”

She laughed, “Hah. It’s not just ANY techno. Romanian techno. They’re called O-Zone, have you heard of them in Michigan?”

He had. Vaguely.

“I’m so glad you wanted to show them to me,” she said, ushering him through the door.”

“Well, who else do I have?” He replied. “You were at most of my parties anyway. I thought you’d get a kick out of it.”

She led him into the apartment, which was surprisingly tidy. “Those them?” she asked, pointing to the envelope. Sean nodded, laying it out on the coffee table as he sat. “How’d it start anyway?”

Sean sighed. He hadn’t wanted to get into it. He couldn’t just leave though. He was eight footsteps away, not eight hours. “I knew that they did it, obviously. I just figured it was all different rolls,” he began. He shrugged his coat off. This would take awhile. “Anyway, before Dad left us, mom was already falling apart – she couldn’t handle him any more. Tessa was in school, so I was the one put in charge of everything.”

Sixteen.

“We’ve gotta make this fast. I’ve got places to go,” Sean’s father demanded as he rushed in the house.

“Sober?” Sean mouthed to his mother from across the kitchen. Looking up from the oven, she nodded carefully. “Impressive,” thought Sean. “First birthday in awhile.” His father’s drinking never surprised him. It wasn’t until mom started to change that Sean started to get mad. Mom always shined, but not now. And while his dad couldn’t be blamed directly, he didn’t help one bit.

“I haven’t frosted the cake,” his mother whispered. “It’ll be a few minutes.”

“How many?” his father implored. “I need to leave.”

“I don’t know, can’t you just wait?” Mom’s voice wavered as she spoke. Her volume increased.

Sean’s father paused, still standing in the foyer. “I won’t wait,” he said. “I have better things to do.” Turning about face, he walked out the door, slamming it in his wake.

The force of his answer hit Sean like a full on tackle. Crushed, he stumbled backwards, grasping at the chair for support. His mother stayed bent over the cake, now at the counter, intently frosting. He studied her face, registering nothing. Finally looking up, she said blankly, “Go to our room. The camera is in my dresser.”

Following her orders, Sean quickly found the camera. He then searched for some film, but none was around. “Mom, there’s no film,” he called.

“Don’t worry,” she replied. “We’ve only taken fifteen pictures with that film.”

It hit Sean. They used the same roll every year. He didn’t think film lasted that long, but how was he to know? His entire life was present in this tiny box. He stood shocked minutes later as his mother, for the first time, snapped the photo.

Sixteen.

“So I took the camera with me when I went to school,” Sean continued, “and I continued to take the pictures and now they’re...there.” He gestured to the envelope, still bulging, still calling to him. “Are you ready?” he asked.

Wendy still stood exactly how she had when Sean began. Her eyes wide and mouth hanging open, she could now be accused of gaping. Shaking herself out of the stupor, she asked, “Well, does your mom know?”

“What?” The question didn’t immediately register. “Well, no, I never told her.”

“Go home,” Wendy demanded. Her voice echoed through the apartment. “You can’t do this here. Not with me.” She grabbed Sean’s shirt and began to lead him out the door.

Sean stopped her, “What’s going on? I’m ready. I’m finally ready.”

“I know,” she replied. “That’s why you need to look at these with her first. I can see them another time.”

Sean realized what she meant. Looking at the pictures – his life on display – closed a door that he couldn’t close alone. She had been there through it all. She needed this closure as much as he did. He was her rock.

Evelyn still remained as he sped into the driveway, screeching to a halt. He burst in, much like his father had years before. His mother was back from work, and again in the kitchen, this time eating her dinner. “Sean,” she said, stunned. “What happened?”

Sean strode into the kitchen, taking his seat across from her. “Mom, I have something we need to look at,” he began, opening the envelope, removing the first, most familiar photo, and setting in front of them. “Let’s start with twenty-two.”

Twenty-Two.

Parking

Mary Fay

We looked something like a suburban funeral. At the back of an enormous and inhospitable plain of frozen blacktop, sprinkled with SUV's and mini-vans, a khaki-clad honor guard with identical blue vests stood huddled together considering the remains.

"Some people really want to take their Wal-Mart relationship to the next level." I commented as I turned from the group and lazily switched on the automatic cart pusher that was quickly rendering me obsolete.

"Some people will seriously fuck wherever." Liz flicked her cigarette to the sidewalk and ground it in with the sole of her rubber snow boots.

"Prolly just some kids daring each other to buy 'em." Dan, now a worldly 18, casually shrugged his shoulders.

During my stint as a cart-boy at Wal-Mart, I found at least two or three condom wrappers a week in the parking lot. Each discovery provided a guaranteed source of amusement and often an ego boost of sorts for whatever combination of employees happened to be on cigarette break. Even me, a pimpled sixteen-year-old virgin, took satisfaction in knowing that outside of the music department, all is not censored at Wal-Mart.

A lot of the employees liked to come up with good excuses for the apparent indiscretion of the people who weren't copulating the good old fashioned way behind the locked bedroom door of a split-level ranch.

“It has to be an affair...” Marguerite, one of the older cashiers who had unfortunately caught wind of parking lot scuttlebutt, hung her head and pursed her lips as if a sign of mourning for the ongoing destruction of the American family.

“We just gotta thank Jesus that they use rubbers, no way to bring a kid into the world, that’s for sure,” the graying greeter Smith would always say.

But, whenever I happened upon the remains of another blissful parking lot rendezvous, I couldn’t help but wonder why everyone didn’t make Wal-Mart a truly one-stop shopping experience. For one, the alibi is foolproof; it’s never a lie to say you have to go to Wal-Mart. At any time of day and night your local Supercenter is ready to serve you. “Oh Shucks,” you say, “I forgot to buy dog food and I need five C batteries for my trusty Ninja Turtle Alarm Clock”—No Problem, Wal-Mart’s open. Pick up your leading lady, and while you’re there, swing to the far south east corner of the lot and you’ll find a peaceful and private make-out spot underneath the burned out light of Pole Q. In some way, during the long shifts of the short winter days of the holiday season, the condoms of the parking lot became a symbol of hope; they were beacon of light in the harbor rescuing me from a sea of insecurity and dateless homecomings, reminding me that in the frontiers of the Wal-Mart parking lot anyone can get lucky.

I liked them, anyway, when they were still anonymous. I wish they’d stayed that way.

We first met when I was attempting to extract a MIA motorized handicap cart from the base of a fifteen foot snow bank when Daniela tumbled down the slope; I couldn’t imagine where this beautiful girl came from because on the other side of the bank was Route 20, a busy 4 lane highway. But, I didn’t let details ruin the moment. I recognized her as one of the new hires, who had been introduced during Associate’s Stretches and Smiles Time Sunday morning.

I will admit it was not her smile that I had noticed first. It was her tight \$5.99 rollback-priced t-shirt that proclaimed: “Everybody loves a Pisces” in pink sparkles that really won me over. After that it was her smile, particularly when it landed on me and my faithful sidekick the automatic cart-pusher.

“Keith, you getting pretty strong, almost 20 carts at once!” Daniela teased as she was walking in one morning. I loved the sound of her Dominican accent when her voice rose to its highest taunting pitch.

“I know...pretty good...” I stammered searching for a witty reply. Unable to come up with anything fast enough, I raised my tooth-picked sized arm and flexed my muscles.

She burst into laughter, flashed a friendly “see you later” grin and dashed in through the automatic doors. The warm air of the store, which had the thick smell of old soda bottles ripe for deposit, mixed with the damp chill of the parking lot, and I stood for a moment in front it rubbing my gray wool gloves together, considering how our flirtation might move beyond its current phase of celebrating my faults and weaknesses. This constant self-deprecating tactic, though funny and seemingly limitless in material, was sure to keep me in the position of “passer-by” level friend; at this rate and in this weather Daniela would never stop to talk to me on her race to and from the time-clock. She should start smoking, I thought—that would be good for us.

Then on one fated day, Robert, the Customer Service Manager from the daytime shift, approached me in the cart corral. A ruddy faced man in his mid fifties, Robert possessed a commitment and old-fashioned sense of loyalty to his job and employees, which seemed acutely

out of place in the impersonal aisles of the Supercenter. Robert wore a suit underneath his red manager's vest everyday, he helped old ladies carry their newly purchased dog beds out to their Lincolns and he never walked by an abandoned cart in the lot without ensuring that it made its way to an approved storage space. His solid ethical backbone and good sense of humor mixed with a healthy dose of arrogance to form a guy who was fun to listen to but hard to talk to and especially frightening to disappoint, even in the world of cart storage.

"Keith," he started. I began to get nervous that my electronic counter-part was officially being promoted to sole cart collector. Instead Robert, with a cool twinge of irony, rattled off a spiel that he had obviously recently memorized at a Management Information and Strategy meeting, "I've got good news, I don't know if you know this but Dan's leaving to take advantage of an offer to get involved with the door to door knife-sales industry, so the management team has reviewed your original application, and seen your credentials, saw that you're working hard over at Piedmont High and decided to offer you the chance to move up to the level of Internal Customer Service Associate, perhaps maybe you could become a cashier, if you do good with bagging."

My heart jumped—Robert was handing me my non-carcinogenic ticket to Daniela.

Robert smiled, patted me on the back, and said, "Besides it sucks out here in the cold."

Daniela frantically stomped the snow of her sneakers in the middle of smiley-face welcome mat. When she walked in the store, I felt all of my senses sharpen, I could hear the buzz of florescent lights which stretched above me in a giant grid connecting my one corner of the store with every other department. The harsh whiteness of the light clung to everything from the unidentified stain stuck on my conveyor belt to the bright glossy celebrity faces of the tabloids surrounding me. Thousands of security cameras hidden inside seemingly innocent giant ceiling orbs in a vain attempt to catch the latest Oscar Meyer's Franks thief, all suddenly felt directed at me and Daniela.

I never knew how this first interaction of my early Saturday Morning shift at Register 2 was going to play out. Somedays she simply waved as she rushed by with a wave, not wanting to shirk on a minute of her duties at the Fish and Game counter, and sometimes she lingered long enough for us to have a real three to four sentence conversation. Daniela dominated every interaction; she was quick and spontaneous and I generally spent the rest of the day mulling over how I should have responded to her. So far, I'd learned a treasured collection of facts about her: she was had eight brothers and sisters, all of whom were still in the Dominican Republic, she had worked at a sporting goods store in New York City before she worked before she moved upstate (explaining her placement at the firearms and tackle counter of Wal-Mart), she was born with only one kidney and Frosted Flakes were her favorite breakfast cereal.

"My foot's dead," she declared to me.

I raised an eyebrow, a trick that always had always gained me moderate respect from the double-jointed tongue-rolling crowd on the school bus.

"The cold, you know." She brushed a strand of her long black hair out of her face, scrunching her face up in disgust as snow continued to shake out of off head.

"Oh yeah...my hands got real numb when I was trying to scrape off the car this morning." That was dumb, I thought, who talks about their hands getting numb, now she probably thinks I'm trying to correct her English. I continued to rationalize, at least she'll think I

drive myself to work, there's no need to tell her that mom had sent me out to warm up the mini-van before she dropped me off for my shift.

"Mmm..." She appraised me suspiciously, "You drive?"

"Ummm...well...I have my Learner's Permit now, but I'm getting my license soon."

This was not going well.

"Don't worry," she reassured me, "I don't drive either, and I'm twenty-two."

"Really?" She couldn't possibly be twenty-two, I had guessed eighteen.

"No I walk from my house, it's not far. At home, we don't got a car, it's the country, you know, everyone walks."

"You've been here a while though, right? Why don't you learn to drive?"

"I only been here a year. My husband he came early and sent for me."

Husband? I tried to swallow that word but I kept belching it back up. A middle-aged couple walked by, the woman's black stretch pants which were extended to their fullest capacity covered in fine white cat hair. Her husband was laughing hysterically at a brown styrofoam can cozy that said 'couch potato' in white letters. Husband? You have a husband? I kept repeating it to understand. Did she mean boyfriend? She must have meant brother. I tried desperately to convince myself of weaknesses in her English that I knew did not exist.

The intercom interrupted, "YO, DAN-YELL, IN FISH AND GAME, GIMME A CALL AT REGISTER 6," Liz shouted in a thick Brooklyn accent, which must have been the result of careful cultivation in our Albany suburb.

"I gotta go." She smiled and bounded away to her post in the back of the store where she spent the day surrounded by camo and duck decoys.

My shocked gaze followed her as she darted between the racks of holiday sweatshirts but I had to turn away when she went behind the giant sock partition. The smell of detergent wafted over me, Marguerite's bony hand squeezed my shoulder, laying claim to her bagger.

"Poor girl." She shook her head in pity. "Married a sickly old man, just to get into this country. Makes you think...Makes you think...about what we have. Freedom, that's what they come for, you know, freedom."

The "couch potato" was trying to show his wife a bright red shirt that said "HOT STUFF" in flames. She did not look up from the tomato she was carefully checking for bruises. Freedom, I thought.

I could hardly believe the figure trudging on the shoulder of Route 20 was the vivacious Daniela that I knew. Hunched over and clutching a Wal-Mart bag to her side, she seemed to be walking a tight rope, wedged between the massive snowbanks of parking lots on one side, and the heavy traffic of suburban rush hour whizzing past her on the other side; her eyes remained steadily downcast as she watched her feet take every plunge into the slush-covered shoulder. Sitting next to my mom in the mini-van I felt powerless.

"Look, Honey, do you know that girl, she came out of the store too. Her car must have broken down, let's offer her a ride."

I hated my mom's chivalry. I should have suggested it, but my stupid pride about the mini-van got in the way. My mother pulled off the road; I turned in time to see Daniela stiffen in fear at the sudden intrusion into her path.

"Get out and offer her a ride, Keith. No one should have to walk in weather like this."

I opened the door and jumped out. Executing a less than smooth dismount from my maternally-chauffeured ride, I sunk down into a deep pile of snow, trying to pull my leg out which was trapped from the knee-down, I started waving frantically asking her if she wanted a ride. Attempting to turn towards her, so I could hear her above the roar of the traffic, I fell backwards into the snow.

“You, OK?” She pulled me up from the snow. I couldn’t understand how she had become my savior, even though I was the one with the mini-van.

“Thanks, want a ride?” I stammered, furiously brushing the snow off my jacket and pants.

“If no trouble,” she said, smiling at my distress. “I only live up the road.”

“Sure, get in.” I slid open the door to the van, and climbed back into my seat, as my mother shook her head at the snow I was grinding into her upholstery.

“It’s too cold for walking today. Did your car break down? Do you need our cell phone?” my mother said as she pulled back into traffic.

“Oh No, Thank you.” Daniela replied simply. “It’s not a far walk.”

“Just let me know where I should turn.” My mother swatted an ice chunk off my seat, and I hung my head in embarrassment.

“Oh, Keith, you know that lady that always she bring that puppy in with her to the store. Like she hide it in her jacket, right?”

“Yeah, she’s real weird,” I said, trying to forget push my mom’s upraised eyebrows out of my mind, my cheeks got pretty frostbitten in the 35 seconds I was outside. I had to take advantage of this prime opportunity to exchange some gossip and listen to the Daniela’s hysterical descriptions of Wal-Mart regulars.

“Well, I was coming back from break, and I seen her over by the lawn and garden. You know, no one’s there this time of year, and I seen her dropping a cookie down her coat to feed the puppy.” Daniela wrinkled her face up in disgust and shivered if she were imagining the sick slimy crumbs against her skin.

I laughed and added, “I heard that she once put the dog inside a pot that she was trying to buy, and acted real surprised when the cashier found it.”

“Yeah, Liz, she told me she puts the dog in her bags with her groceries—oh, I sorry, turn here,” she exclaimed.

My mother stopped suddenly and turned into a parking lot dominated by a sign the same size as the building on which it sat. “MO EL,” it declared in bright red, the burned out “T” stood out starkly as the mere wire frame of the letter it once was.

“This is where you live?” My mother’s face and voice expressed concerned as she watched an older man in a torn orange flannel hunting jacket walk hesitantly over the ice from the mailbox.

“Yes, see it isn’t very far. There’s my husband, I bet he is hungry for dinner,” she held up a Wal-Mart bag full of groceries and began to slide out of the car. “Thank You for the ride. See you tomorrow, Keith.”

I watched her approach her husband and give him her arm to help him across the icy path. They retreated into the dark room that they made their permanent home and closed the door. I couldn’t believe that was how she spent everyday, subsisting entirely off Wal-Mart, and then returning to a man nearly 3 times her age, who, as Marguerite had said, only walked to the mailbox to check for the arrival of his government checks. She made the same walk everyday, the rest of the town sprawled far beyond her pedestrian reach. I hated thinking about her trapped

in that tiny little room with that gross old man. As soon as I get my license, I resolved, I'll free her.

With a wagon full of re-shops, I finally had an excuse to trek into the wilderness of Fish and Game. When I rounded a display of Kerosene camping lamps, I saw her holding a rifle out for a grizzled man covered in red plaid flannel to inspect. Robert was standing behind the gun counter with her intently reviewing a huge binder of papers; he was unconsciously stroking the back of his head while he worked, leaving his remaining strands of grey hair in a wild frenzy. His brown suit with thin orange pin-strip and his disheveled hairstyle gave him an overall appearance of well-meaning incompetence. I started rifling through my enormous cart of mis-fit items, abandoned by their potential adopters at the cash register. I slowly slid some flashlights back onto their hooks, adjusting and straightening the rows around it, giving Daniela plenty of time to approach me.

"Hey Keith, you like?" She smiled, and held up the "shadow grass" patterned camouflage jacket that she was hanging up for me to admire.

"You blend right in," I joked, "I almost didn't see you there." The camping part of the department was toned down for the winter months. Hunting was the big focus in the winter months, so in addition to the usual scrutiny of the harsh Wal-Mart lighting, I felt as though 30 gun barrels were pointed in my direction.

"Let me show you this machine that we got, it makes bird noises, all the Dads tell the little boys that they know one bird sound from another, but most of them, they don't cause I learned them by now."

"You've got enthusiasm for the product," Robert looked up from his books for a moment to offer sales advice. "But I doubt that Keith is a potential customer." He smiled agreeably and switched on the large grey box next to him. The Black-billed Magpie started hooting at our small assembly. "How's it going in front-end? We really seemed to have unleashed your potential now that you're inside, it must be the heat," Robert remarked consciously mocked himself, "I think we'll get you on your own register soon."

"Thanks," I said. Robert turned back to Daniela and asked, "What's this one?"

"I think, Ruffled Grouse." She giggled as Robert straightened his tie, shook himself out and began to whistle along with the bird.

"Just like being in the woods back here." Daniela shrugged apologetically to me as though she were an embarrassed hostess.

"Well I better get back to the reshops," I pointed to my cart of unwanted, hoping that she'd offer to do a demonstration of one of the collapsible kitchen tables that doubled as a butcher-block for hunters on the go.

Instead, she smiled and turned back to the digitized bird calls, "I like the Snowy Owl the best." She attempted a poor imitation of the low mysterious hoots of the plastic grey box.

Robert, with his hands on his ears, threatened to silence the calls of her favorite owl by playing with the programming settings. She lunged at him, but not before the bird inside the box morphed into a Canadian Mallard. She playfully shooed him away, and tossed her shining dark hair over her shoulder as an assertion of authority. There was a pink hula-hoop next on my re-shop list, as I was rounding the corner, I looked back to get to one last look at my Fish and Game

princess in her bright red “Cutie” shirt, but instead I turned just in time to see Robert casually brush her back with his hand.

When they promoted me to register I also had to start working the 2-11 shift, a beautiful expanse of time that manages to consume not only most of your day but also your whole night. Even worse, however, was that my shift only overlapped with 3 hours of Daniela’s, and I had not really seen her since the bird call demonstration. Now that my full potential had been realized, and I was stationed at register 18, far away from Marguerite’s constant stream of judgment and lecture, I felt very disconnected from the daytime shift information circuit. I spent a good part of my day reliving my last interaction with Daniela, re-playing the last moment over and over again, trying to justify or explain Robert’s apparent indiscretion. It had been such a small and flippant gesture, a brief unexplained moment, but every time I thought about his large pink hand pressed against her back I seethed with anger and bubbled over with questions. Did he do it accidentally? Was it platonic? We had all seen the sexual harassment video before we started at Wal-Mart—we saw the example episode between Wendy and Roger in which friendly co-worker interaction turns inappropriate. The buxom redheaded Wendy’s back did hurt after carrying the crates to the storeroom, but Roger’s wandering hands went beyond the bounds of a friendly massage. But maybe this was a more ambiguous incident, I wasn’t even so sure that it had been wrong; Robert, a man in his fifties, probably would never have considered that someone would see it as wrong, I was probably being jealous and immature. Besides, how could he ever take advantage of someone as vulnerable as Daniela? Luckily on my second day on the register, my friend Travis came through my line to purchase an apple at 9:15 pm rescuing me from a day’s worth of fabricated and irresolvable emotional turmoil.

“You’re this bored?” I placed the apple on the scale. “44 cents, do you need a bag?”

“Yeah, it sucks that you’re working for break this year, nothing to do. No thanks, man, I don’t need a bag. I don’t even really want the apple.” He sneered at it in disgust. He’d chosen a bruised one with weird brown spots surrounding the stem. “Do you get a break or something?”

“Yeah I can actually take it now if you want, I just gotta go clock out.” I pulled the drawer out of the register and headed to the back to find my shift leader.

Travis bought a soda and we wandered out of the store.

“How much time you got? Can you leave?”

“Nope, we better stay here, I only have 15 minutes.”

“Dude, did you know those things are magnetic?” Travis walks over to a short-bed Chevy Pick-Up with a yellow ribbon decal jauntily placed at an angle on the tailgate.

“No way, why would they do that? You could just steal ‘em then.” Having received the challenge, Travis triumphantly peeled the ribbon off.

“In this whole lot, we could get a ton.” He waved his hand dramatically over the whole expanse of possibility, like a pioneer who had just forged his way over the mountains and now gazed out at his future.

“I bet this is like illegal, like desecrating the flag or something.” I said as I gleefully removed my first.

“Of course it’s illegal, asshole, it’s called stealing.” Travis had a tremendous natural ability to knock you down to the lowest level of self-understanding, thereby stripping away any pretensions or possible political significance of any endeavor that we pursued. So embracing the

vast potential for our haul, I raced to the far end of the lot to begin our operations in a covert yet systematic way.

I loved the people who had backed into their spots because I could inconspicuously tear off their patriotic emblems by moving in between the rows. I got great satisfaction from discovering a hidden decal. With chameleon-like skill it had transformed into the same thick grey color as the car, the grey ribbon coated in a wintery blanket of snow and salt peeled away to reveal the shiny red car beneath. The cars were getting sparse the farther back I moved in the lot, and I knew that Travis' more reckless locale was probably reaping greater results, I thought about turning back when the sound of a motor made me stop guiltily.

A rusted wine-colored Pontiac was sitting by itself against the fence. The lights were off but the car was on, and the windows were completely opaque with condensation. I had unexpectedly happened upon the source of the parking lot condoms; I was sweating inside my coat and a gust of wind let me prickled with fear. What if this was some kind of sick pervert or pedophile, what if someone was being hurt, what if I was hurt for discovering them? My imagination had run amuck, when Travis came over and saw what I was staring at.

"OH YEAH, THEY'RE GETTING IT ON AT WAL-MART!" He shouted and I punched him in the shoulder.

"Shut the hell up, man, you want the guy to come kill us, let's get out of here."

We started walking back to the store, my fifteen minutes were almost up. Apparently so were the Pontiac's, because just after we were out of sight, its headlights switched on and it started to move. Travis was tossing our loot into the trunk of his car, when the car slowed down next to us. My body froze in fear, as the window rolled down.

"Hey Keith, don't you have a job to do." Robert, more pink-faced than ever, chuckled good naturedly, tooted his horn and gave me a wave, "Have a good night."

Daniela, sitting in the front seat next to him smiled and waved also.

"That fucking bastard," I couldn't keep my emotions contained. "How could he do that?"

"What's wrong dude? I'm glad the old guy didn't see us. That would have been weird."

"She's....She's....married." That was the best I could do to express my indignation.

"Well then ain't it her fault too? Do you know her husband or something? Why do you care so much?"

"He's old and disgusting, Robert, I mean, and well the husband too actually and—" At that moment I couldn't believe that the whole world wasn't aflame with rage, Travis' ignorance was intolerable.

"And what? And she's hot and you want her?" Travis guessed.

"Not just cause she's hot, she's had a rough life, you know. I just thought we could have fun. But that fucking asshole went and took advantage of her, he's gotta be 30 years older than her. Bastard."

"Sorry, man, but listen, she's married, she's prolly pretty old anyway."

At the end of January, I got my license. Driving the wood-paneled mini-van over the rough terrain of suburbia was the first thing that made me smile in a long time. But whenever I drove to work, I couldn't help but think how the license came too late; if I had been able to offer Daniela a warm ride to and from work everyday I could have protected her from Robert. He

drove her home everyday now; their relationship had finally become an established part of the daily cigarette break buzz.

“Can’t blame the girl. She’s married to that louse, just sits around spending her hard earned money, and ours, he gets government help, you know. Can’t blame her if she would like a few extra benefits around here, sleeping with the boss will get you places, apparently that’s a universal language,” Marguerite remarked in her typical tone of assumed sympathy.

“Jesus, Marguerite, I don’t think she’s doing it so he’ll bring her a donut back from the business office. He’s lonely and horny and so’s she. Whatever.” Liz’s reductive assessment received several nods from the rest of the group.

“He’s a dirty old man,” I said in disgust. An image of his rusted Pontiac came to mind, Robert hadn’t even bothered take her someplace other than Wal-Mart. She didn’t move to the U.S., I thought, she immigrated to one half-mile stretch of Route 20.

Keys proudly clutched in my right-hand, I headed out to take my dinner break. I spotted a small figure climbing up the snow bank at the end of the parking lot, so after carefully checking all of my mirrors and still narrowly missing an unreturned cart, I drove over to her.

“Hiya Daniela,” I shouted. “You need a ride?”

She turned and looked down at me from the crest of the snow mound. “Yes, Keith, thank you,” and she skidded down into the van.

“It is good that you came. I not used to walking home no more.” She smiled at me.

“Um, yeah, how come no ride today?” I didn’t want to spend my precious moments with her talking about Robert, but she looked so eager to talk.

“Oh yeah, he left early for a dentist appointment, you know. He said he would come back to get me if he got out early enough. It’s weird to back walking though, seems very different in a car everyday.”

I wasn’t sure what “seemed” different but I didn’t ask her to supply the lost subject.

She kept going, “You know, everything goes by so fast, and even though I took the same path everyday, I knew it, right? It looks totally different, and so fast, in the car, it all goes fast. Fun though...” She looked out the window of the van, staring out into the right lane as though she were waiting to see a familiar face. She glanced up at me as though she just realized who I was, “You drive now?”

“Yeah I got my license in January.” I was trying to think of how I would propose that we take a drive to the Adirondacks and test her bird calls in nature, when suddenly she pressed her lips against the window of the van and exclaimed:

“Look, Robert!” She laughed appreciatively as he pointed to a hole in his mouth where he’d apparently had a tooth pulled.

I followed Robert into the MOTEL lot. She quickly thanked me, and then happily bounded over to the Pontiac. I watched as he slipped his arm around her shoulder and then drove out of the lot before the sickly old husband made his regularly scheduled trek to the mailbox. I followed the Pontiac on my way back to Wal-Mart, but while I sat in the left-hand lane with my turn signal waiting to turn into McDonald’s before returning to my scheduled five-hours of enslavement, I watched as they sailed freely past the Supercenter.

On my way back into the store, I spotted a condom wrapper lying in a pile of snow. It crinkled slightly in the light wind. I kicked a clump of snow on top of it—the unmarked grave of love.

Jim's Clothes

Barbie Sloan

Walter tipped his head back. He felt the softness of the chair underneath his palms, felt the floorboards supporting his shoes, closed his eyes and let the dark sooth the remnants of burning red. He wanted to feel anything but the smoldering emptiness between his shoulder blades. Susan was dead. The silence in the house left room for echoes of restlessness. Father was upstairs, lying down of a headache, Mother in the kitchen, making the plates clatter busily as she filled the cupboards, Lulie probably reading somewhere underneath a windowsill.

He reluctantly let his thoughts drift to Susan--the graceful smile glowing from the top of her crisp white nurse's uniform on the day she left, the lovely cursive letters she wrote home while serving, the day Mother opened the last white envelope, one from the government, and read that her eldest daughter would not be writing anymore. They'd wired Jim immediately so the family could be together for the funeral, and two weeks later Walter sat and watched raindrops gray the windowpane as he waited for Jim's arrival. Jim's letter was in his left hand, and he clutched it numbly. It was hastily scrawled. 'Granted leave. I'm coming home.' Not even signed.

Walter let his brow furrow, and he fiddled with a button on his new shirt. He had picked it out especially for today, overlooking the worn ones that crowded his closet. Those were Jim's old clothes. Today of all days, he didn't want to be wearing one of those. Even though the shirtsleeves were always a little loose and Mother had to hem his pants, he felt trapped inside Jim's hand-me-downs.

It hadn't always been so bad, but he remembered when it had started. Back when he wore feet on his pajamas--his own pajamas--and political analysts were still trying to define 'the Depression', Walter had been playing on the carpet after dinner. He knew something was wrong because this was never allowed; Mother usually got him ready for bed straight away from the table. But that night she and Father had stayed in the kitchen, heads bent in over their plates, talking in low, mournful voices. Walter was waiting, tracing circles on the coarse Persian rug in the parlor. Susan was pounding out Alla Turca on the Baldwin. When he looked up, his parents were standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the stove light. Father was yelling, standing over his mother, who leaned against the doorframe with her arms folded delicately across her apron. She spoke low and gentle. Father raised his fist above his head--Susan shrieked, Walter paused in mid-trace, his mouth hanging open perplexingly--Mother did not move. Father shook his hand, stopped it with a jerk. Then his arm fell to his side and his shoulders surrendered their stubbornness, and he began to weep.

Walter had never seen his father cry before, and as he clambered upstairs to bed, alone, little questions started to form. He voiced them to the dark space in between the beds in his and Jim's room. Jim was motionless in his bed, but he was only pretending.

"Jim."

"Aw, shutup, Walter. Mom doesn't always hafta kiss you goodnight."

"Jiiiiim," Walter squirmed beneath his comforter. "That's not what I was going to say. I was going to say, I was going to say why did Father cry."

"Shoot, I don't know. Go to sleep, little brother." Jim turned and put his face in his pillow dramatically.

When Walter awoke the next morning, the same question troubled him. He clomped downstairs, shuddering through the cold, grey house until he reached the kitchen. Mother was standing near the sink cleaning the breakfast dishes from Susan and Jim, who had already gone to school. "Morning, Walter," she smiled. Her hair was pinned neatly as usual, and he smelled her lavender perfume when he hugged her apron, but her eyes were a little red. Walter climbed awkwardly into the tall kitchen chair and rested his chin on the spotless table. He gazed at her back and listened to the soap bubble and froth in the sink.

"Mother?"

"Mm?"

"Why'd Father cry?"

She shut off the faucet and turned to face him, smiling sadly. She had been waiting for him to ask. He was glad. "Something bad happened yesterday with Father's business."

"Did somebody die?"

Another sad smile. "No, Walter. Your father is part of something called the stock market."

"Like cows and sheep and--"

"Like money. A few years ago the stock market stopped making money. Your father worked hard to make sure we didn't lose money too, for awhile, but yesterday something happened and he lost a lot of money. So he was very sad."

"Are we poor now?"

"I don't know, honey. I don't think so. But we might have to be more careful about spending money. You know, maybe not having so many new things."

Walter straightened up, eyes widening. "Do we have to give the baby back?"

Mother laughed. "No, the baby can stay. But we might not be able to get you new school clothes this year. You could probably wear Jim's old shirts."

"That'd be okay, Mom. Just as long as we keep the baby."

She smiled a real smile, then, the kind where her eyes danced and her teeth stood at attention, white between her lips. He kicked his pajama feet happily. They were a little loose; he would have to grow quickly if he wanted to fit into Jim's clothes.

And from that day on, anything Jim grew out of ended up on Walter's side of the small bedroom. Flannel cowboy shirts and argyle sweaters, slacks and Easter Sunday suits, even socks sometimes, if there weren't holes or Mother could patch them. They came in waves--the day Jim entered Our Lady of the Snows secondary school, when he sprouted six inches and a beard the following year, after he was hired at MacPherson's Hardware and had to look sharp for the customers, and the day he left to enlist.

Jim and Father had been talking about his enlistment for months behind the closed doors of Father's study, leaving Walter to read his tenth grade history textbook in the parlor and wonder what the consensus of the pow-wow of maturity would be. Susan, several years older than Jim, was already working in the American Red Cross, and Walter could sense the same wanderlust in his older brother.

The morning Jim left was burned in his memory. Walter awoke to Mother's gentle shake. "Come say goodbye to your brother," she whispered. He brushed sleep from his eyes and clambered down the stairs to see Jim, standing proudly in his newly starched Navy uniform. Father, robed and slippers, stood stoically at his side. Lulie, littler then, was clinging unreservedly to Jim's pant leg. Walter suddenly felt small and gawky standing opposite his brother. He reached up to smooth the clump of hair that had clashed against his pillow during the night. Jim peered at him.

"Take care, Walter."

"Yep." Walter chuckled. "Go save the world or something, will ya?"

Jim allowed the left side of his lip to curl up in a dry smile. "Yep."

A flutter of bags, a wish of the door, a kiss for Mother, and then only four of them remained. Father was the first to speak. "I'm starving! Anne, breakfast? Walter, help you mother. You're the man of the house now." He chuckled and pounded his open palm on Walter's back.

Walter blinked. "Sure." He didn't let the discontent creep into his face. Jim could be masculine, expressionless, why couldn't he? He snorted inwardly. Maybe it was because instead of going after the Japs today he'd be cutting Lulie's pancakes into bite-sized pieces. Not quite old enough, not quite strong enough, not quite Jim...he decided to do some situps after breakfast.

"Walter, could you flip on the radio?" Mother asked. "I'm lonely for the piano."

He shifted in the big chair and let his eyes refocus on reality. Lulie was standing over him, one hand on her thin hip and the other holding a copy of Nancy Drew. She was, now, to him, his earliest memories of Susan--smile like a rose, gentle demeanor, with a sense of humor that pricked any semblance of pride.

"You awake?"

He shrugged. "Sure. Nancy Drew?"

"It's a good one."

"You've read it before..."

"Still good." Her eyes clouded. "Susan gave it to me a coupla years ago for St. Nicholas' day."

Walter turned his head for a minute and blinked furiously. "Aw, Lulie. C'mere." He made a spot for her in the chair and she squeezed in, sniffing just a little.

"Thanks." She let her chestnut head rest in the crook of his shoulder.

Six years younger than him, and they had been closer than he and the brother he shared a room with. Every fall, even when he should've been too old for it, Walter would come home from school, abandon his books next to her paper dolls and do his best to lift her up and help her toddle outside. They would climb onto the white porch swing at the side of the veranda facing the tallest, most beautiful oak on their property. They let their feet dangle over the swing seat, rocking gently and waiting for the next great gust of wind. When it came, roaring, they would laugh and stretch their hands up to catch the gold flecked leaves as they cascaded through the porch columns and scraped across the floorboards. Later that night, they would inspect them like true botanists, and then press them in Father's bible between Philemon and Hebrews.

They found the leaves years later, when Father started putting Jim's letters between the pages too. Father read the correspondences at dinner while Mother looked down and pretended to trim the fat from her pork roast. Lulie always listened, forgetting to eat her baked potato, rapt by Jim's heroic recounts of long days at sea, or sections that read "I can't tell you any more than..." followed by a spot that had been cut out by censors. Walter stared at Father's proud face through those holes and wondered if an A- in History would merit that look.

Lulie noticed Walter's whitening knuckles around Jim's recent telegram. "Any minute now?"

"Think so."

"You excited?"

"Think so."

The freckles on her nose knit together in concern. "Just 'think'? Don't you miss him, Walter?"

Walter grimaced and let the silence hang between them. Perhaps once a Sonata from the radio would've lightened the moment, but all he could hear was the muffled clamor of Mother's dishwashing. "Lulie, I guess...I don't know...sometimes I wonder if Father and Mother--and you--would miss me as much as Jim, if I were the one that was gone."

She looked up from his shoulder. "But...you're here." She smiled. Walter closed his eyes. "Besides," she giggled, "That one blue shirt of his looks much better on you."

In the next instant the doorbell rang. Lulie shrieked and jumped up from the chair. Walter felt nauseous. No one rang doorbells anymore. People knocked. If the buzzer rang, there would be a man on the other side with a telegram that said "The department of Such and Such regrets to inform you..." His eyes darted to Lulie's and they both remembered the awful day Mother was called to the door by a buzz. Mother, who had wiped her hands on her apron and straightened her chin and waited till the postman had rounded the corner before sliding her finger along the envelope flap. She had read the note aloud--all the way through--to Walter and Lulie, who had been peering curiously from behind the doorframe. Then she had let her hands fall, and she wailed, Rachel mourning for her children, a wail that echoed through the house and brought Father out of the study, pipe still smoldering in his mouth. And Walter retrieved the paper from the floor tiles and took it to the study. He opened Father's bible to Psalms and slid

the telegram in. "Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth; break into song; sing praise. The American Red Cross regrets to inform you..."

The buzzer rang again. No footsteps ventured to answer it. Lulie gasped raggedly and nudged him with her book. Walter gathered himself and walked into the hall, turned the knob.

"Hey, Walter." It was the same uniform, but the shoulders had hardened and the eyes under the hat still held the sea in them. Walter stuttered, stared, let his mouth hang open, until Lulie brushed past him, out the door and onto the rainy porch and nearly knocked him over. Jim chuckled. "Hi Lulie. Where's Mom?"

Dinner that evening was awkward. Jim finished in five minutes and sat listening to the clatter of the other fours' silverware. He answered the general questions: how was the trip home, was he tired, did he miss the food--that at least merited a laugh.. And then the table was cleared--Walter was asked to help with dishes, the weary sailor was shooed to bed. Walter finished wiping plates, made his way upstairs, and climbed between his sheets. Jim wasn't even pretending to sleep, now, he lay with his eyes open across the room. Walter wondered if it would be easier to talk that way, staring at nothing but darkness.

"Good to be home, Jim?"

"Yeah, it feels pretty good."

"You see any girls out there?"

Jim chuckled. "Whaddaya know about girls? I saw a lot of the ocean, that's what I saw."

Walter ventured a little farther into the deep. "I was thinking maybe as soon as I turned 17...well, you know, I was looking at maybe the Army or the Nav-"

The mattress springs jumped as Jim sat up, rigid, the moonlight chiseling a stony expression on his face. He was terrifying, and when he spoke again, it was in an earnest whisper. "Walter." His breath was raspy. "Walter, it's not...what it seems like...not on the ground or on the ocean. What they show you at the movies...that's not it."

And that was all. Walter forced his eyes shut and listened to Jim shift to a sleeping position. He lay there, motionless, but could not relax, and so he stared into the darkness until the mottled shadows of wind-blown trees lulled him to sleep.

Susan was buried next to the plots where Mother and Father would eventually lie. So many had died that her burial became indistinctive, a whisper among the fresh, frozen mounds of dirt that lay scattered across the cemetery. A small gathering of people offered their condolences by bringing food to the house after the service, but the early dusk of the aging year drove people home early, and sent Mother and Father to sleep. Walter wiped the crumbs off the table, kissed Lulie goodnight, and was about to start upstairs when he noticed Jim's silhouette on the porch swing.

In spite of himself, Walter grabbed his coat and walked into the rainy night to sit beside Jim. Jim looked up in unspoken greeting, but his attention soon returned to the piano score he'd swiped from the parlor. He thumbed through the music, running his index finger over the clefs and trying to decipher the scramble of notes. Jim took off his hat and looked at his younger brother. Walter hadn't realized that they were almost the same height, now. He opened his mouth to make small talk, but Jim beat him to it.

"She loved that piano. And this damn song, what was it?" He looked down and hummed a few lines of Alla Turca under his breath, watching the cold air make puffs of the notes. "Damn song."

Jim started to choke in sobs; his eyes crunched up and he doubled over on the swing, making it rock empty. Walter did not know what to do, and so for several minutes he sat staring, listening to Jim's cries intermingling with the creaking swing. Walter looked over. His brother was shivering.

"S'alright, Jim," he said. Walter took off his coat and eased it around Jim's shoulders. He let his arm rest there, holding his brother's shaking frame. They sat for a long time, letting the swing mourn its hinges, sleet battering their cheeks and noses. Jim was not shivering anymore. And although Walter had no coat in the winter rain, he didn't feel a chill. This shirt was warm. It was one of his.

Monster Picture

Jayne Marek

For a long time Lainie kept the laundry basket that had been her brother's cradle. Sometimes, when Lainie looked down into the basket, the pattern of its circling slats brought to mind the lattice tops of her mother's pies. Other times, the basket's pattern gave her the impression that she was staring into a whirlpool. She didn't use the basket much for laundry because it had a narrow bottom and tended to tip if it held a full load of clothes, but she liked its long oval shape. She kept the basket in the back corner of a closet. Over the years, it filled up with spare socks and shirts that needed mending. Every now and then Lainie would pull these items out, sort and fix them, and give them to the Salvation Army. That was what Mama used to do.

Once, organizing her closet to fit in some new shoes, Lainie knocked the basket over and saw a scrap of manila paper peeking from between two slats. The paper was marked by a streak of crayon, half an inch long, and suddenly Lainie sat down on the floor and began to pick at the rest of the scrap with her fingernail. It came free. The crayon mark was part of a clumsy outline of a figure that Lainie recognized. She had drawn that figure over sixty years ago.

She held the scrap gently, as if it were a lock of hair. The paper was the color of sunlight on sidewalks.

After Lainie had turned ten, her mother said that Lainie was allowed to walk the seven blocks to the downtown library by herself. That March morning, a breeze was skimming

through the oaks and maples in the back yard. Mama was wearing her red-and-white checked apron that had red flowers printed in the white squares.

“Lainie girl, how is it looking out the window?”

Lainie glanced at her mother who stood at the sink peeling carrots, then turned back to the kitchen window that gave a view over the back lots. The family’s apartment was on the second floor of an old house that had been remodeled into two apartments—one upstairs, one down—in the middle of the block. The vantage point of the back kitchen window, with its sweep across several back yards and a glimpse of the block’s central alley, always seemed important to Lainie. The sun and clouds were close to her, and her glance tangled in and then let go of the tree branches.

“It’s windy.”

“Ain’t going to rain?”

“No, Mama,” said Lainie. She watched a shadow split across a garage roof. “The clouds are blowing off and there’s blue.”

“That’s fine,” said Mama. “You could go over to the library in a little bit. I don’t have time to go, but you can.”

Going to the library was an honored event, and being able to go alone had been the privilege of the older kids—her brother Holley Ford, who was twelve, and her sister Lucy, who was sixteen and didn’t spend much time with the other kids because she worked at the drugstore when she wasn’t at school, even on Saturdays. Lainie loved the library, with its smell of dust and its shelves and shelves of dark-bound books. Lainie imagined reading one after another, sitting at the long wooden tables under the globe lamps. She glanced up through the kitchen window just as a swirl of sparrows burst from an evergreen bough.

“I will then,” Lainie said. “I’m old enough.” That sounded good.

She glanced over at her little brother, who sat near the kitchen door, frowning over a comic book. He didn’t seem to have heard.

Mama said, “I need to go downstairs to help Mrs. Carmody. You take Abey along.”

Mama usually took Abey with her when she did charitable things, like take care of the sick or put up fruits and vegetables for the poor people when the city set up temporary canning facilities in the park in August. On this day, Mama didn’t want Abey exposed to whatever Mrs. Carmody had, Lainie figured. Also, Mrs. Carmody probably knew a fresh piece of gossip about one of the neighbors. Mama and Mrs. Carmody liked to keep each other informed about what was happening on their block. Lainie watched her mother tie on a fresh purple-figured apron and pack some cookies and knitting in a clean pail.

“You look after your little brother,” Mama said, and went out with her pail through the back door and down the flight of wooden steps. The sound of the screen door spring stretched out, then a slam. A murmur of voices started below.

Lainie got up and put her breakfast dishes in the sink, ran water, and did the dishes. She especially liked washing Papa’s thick white coffee mug. He had gotten it when the railroad dining service switched to a new style, so all the railroad workers were able to buy the outdated crockery for a few cents per piece. This mug had a round handle that looked like one ear sticking out. On the front, the logo read, “Main Line of Mid-America,” with white initials “I. C.” slanted inside a green diamond. The I.C. stood for Illinois Central. Lainie rinsed the mug and put it in the dish rack. Abey’s head was at her elbow.

“You want to pull the plug?”

He nodded and reached into the dishwasher to pull the chain. Both of them laughed as the water whirled and gurgled. Lainie wiped their hands on a dishtowel.

“I want to go to the library, so you have to come with me.”

Lainie’s favorite part of the walk to the library was the string of old elm trees lining Ponder Street. Here she and Abey could linger, pulling the heads off the daisies that grew all year round, tangled in a picket fence. On that particular day, the daisies were riddled with ants, and Abey and Lainie took turns hitting the tallest flowers with a stick. In the distance, two figures turned at the street corner and headed toward them. Lainie waved and they waved back. She recognized the tall figure of Bennie Rasmussen, who was a year ahead of Lainie in school. The other one she wasn’t sure about. When the two boys reached Lainie and Abey, Bennie stopped and hooked his armpit around a picket so he could lean while he watched. The second boy, whose name was Wallace, was someone Lainie didn’t know too well, but she had seen his blond head bobbing around during games at recess, playing dodgeball. The boys were dragging long willow switches and Bennie carried a small paper bag.

“Hi,” said Bennie. He set down his bag and watched Lainie swat daisies. The flower heads jerked and ants spilled down the stalks.

Lainie nodded. “What are you doing?”

“Going to fish at the river.”

Wallace said, “Nothing else to do.”

“You don’t live on this street, do you?” said Bennie. “Where are you going?”

“To the library. They have story times for the kids.” Lainie turned her head so she wouldn’t see Abey’s sharp glance. She knew she had no business reducing Abey to that status, but it felt like she had to, in front of the boys. Abey took the stick from Lainie and whacked the daisies a couple of times.

“Oh, yeah,” said Wallace. “Mom used to take us when we were little.”

“I don’t know your mom,” said Lainie. “Or your dad. What’s he do?”

“He’s in the shop with his dad,” Wallace said, jerking his head toward Bennie.

“Yeah,” Bennie said. “You know, downtown, Arcade.”

Arcade Metal Fabrication was one of the town’s success stories. Even during the current problems, with lots of businesses failing and people out of work, Arcade managed to remain open because it had expanded its line to include manufacture of toy cars, trucks, and wagons. Every kid in town had played with an Arcade car, but not all families could afford to buy an Arcade of their own. Lainie’s next-door neighbors, the Voysin kids, owned a green Arcade sedan about eight inches long that they brought out to the backyard sometimes.

“You got an Arcade?” Lainie asked Wallace.

“A pickup truck, this big.” Both Wallace and Bennie held out their hands with index fingers set about six inches apart. “A gray one. Dad got it cheap because one fender didn’t come out right.”

Everyone was silent for a minute, reverent at the thought of an Arcade.

“What’s wrong with him?” Wallace asked suddenly, pointing at Abey.

Lainie said, “Nothing’s wrong. He doesn’t talk much.”

“He looks funny,” said Wallace.

“He’s not funny.”

“Sorry,” said Wallace. He and Bennie exchanged a glance. Lainie got the feeling Wallace and Bennie thought something that they weren’t saying.

“Hey,” said Bennie, “when we’re down by the river we’re going to look for sabotage stuff along the railroad tracks.”

“Yeah,” said Wallace. “Last week the sabotegers blew up part of the tracks down south toward Peoria and an engine derailed. Dad read it in the paper.”

“Saboteurs,” Bennie said. “We’re going to look for dynamite.”

“I saw that in the paper too,” Lainie said. “That was miles and miles away. It wasn’t here.”

Wallace shook his willow switch. “It could be here,” he said. “You never know.”

“Remember last year it happened twice outside of Moline,” Bennie added.

Lainie said firmly, “Papa says everybody on his trains is really careful to watch and there aren’t any more problems with the I.C. anyway.” She sensed that Abey had set down the stick and was listening, so she turned to him. “Don’t worry about Papa.”

Bennie picked up his paper sack. “We’ll find out if there’s any dynamite along the tracks, all right? With two of us to look, we’d find anything that was there. Come on.”

Wallace waved. Bennie picked up the bag and the two boys headed east on Ponder Street, jumping now and then to hit their willow sticks against tree branches overhead.

Lainie took Abey’s hand and finished the last few blocks to the library. They climbed the wide front steps slowly and passed through the heavy double doors that stood open. Abey was panting, so Lainie led him over to the green fountain and let him drink from the stub of water that bubbled up in the middle of its bowl.

Behind the front desk stood two women, sorting and filing cards in wooden trays. Lainie knew that the older one was nice to kids, but she wasn’t sure about the brunette who wore black-edged glasses. That one was new to the library. Near the door, a circle of youngsters surrounded a young man who was reading aloud from a picture book. As Lainie watched, the young man turned the book and held it open to his audience. A yellow cat playing a silver fiddle leaped in a midnight sky. Abey passed Lainie’s elbow and joined the ring of listeners sitting on the rug that marked the children’s area.

Lainie headed across the room to the racks of daily newspapers. The *Chicago Daily American* hung on a dowel just out of her reach, near the top. She went to the big desk to ask for help. The woman with glasses followed Lainie over to the racks and took down the issue that was right in front.

“Is that from last week?” asked Lainie.

“No, it’s today’s. Which date did you want?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking for an article about the train sabotage.”

“Oh.” The woman studied Lainie. “Aren’t you a little young to be reading about such things?”

“It’s for a school class,” Lainie said.

The woman turned back and lifted several dowels before selecting one. “Here it is, from Thursday. Please let the front desk know so we can put this back when you’re done.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The article in the lower-right corner of the front page didn’t say much more about the incident than what Lainie had already read in the local *Journal-Standard*. A homemade explosive had shattered several ties and skewed the rails enough to throw off the front end of a coal train sixteen miles north of Peoria. Crews had gotten right to work repairing the line, and railroad management was sure that section would be up and operating the next day. There was no photo, but Lainie knew that a row of smudge-faced men would have been laboring with

pickaxes and crowbars to remove the broken ties and twisted rails. “Those commies can’t stop us,” an Illinois Central official had said to the reporter. “We carry hogs and coal and mail. Communities need these goods. It’s better for America if the trains keep running.”

The I.C. kept things running, Lainie reflected. She knew her father felt lucky to still have his job after the I.C. had laid off almost half its work force in order to stay in business. Papa had enough seniority and a good record as a brakeman, a job almost as important as the engineer’s. He had sharp eyes and knew every mile of that line all the way down through Arkansas. He’d even been as far as New Orleans. He knew all the engineers who lived between Moline and Chicago, and they trusted him. You had to trust your crew, Papa often said. Once, when Lainie asked why, Papa pinned her with a cold blue stare. “There’s plenty that will kill you on a train,” he had said. “You have to know when it’s going to move.” Lainie had thought about how a train gets started—how the engine starts first, with a roar, and then each following car jerks into slow motion, with the slam, slam, slam moving back down the line as couplings tighten one by one until the whole thing is rolling. She thought that was what Papa meant.

Lainie closed the newspaper and went to tell the women at the desk that she was finished. As she waited in line, she heard the voice of the storyteller rise a little, and she turned. The young man in the circle of children had stood up to display a large illustration of a purple creature surrounded by heaps of bags from which gold coins spilled. The creature had a broad, toothy smile. Its clawed hand rested on a sack decorated with stars and moon shapes. The young man smiled and closed the book.

“That will be all for today. We’ll keep the book so we can finish it during story time on Monday afternoon.”

Some of the children groaned, and one high voice piped, “Isn’t he going to tell us about the magic bag?” The young man shook his head and tucked the book under one arm, then started to help children to their feet with his free hand. For a moment general chatter washed across the room until the sound was cut off by a loud shush from the new librarian behind the desk. Abey got to his feet. His mouth sagged and Lainie thought he was about to cry, so she went over to him.

“Did you want to hear the end of the story?”

Abey nodded, his eyes pink.

Lainie went over to the young man, who was sliding the book onto a shelf marked “Reserve.” “Excuse me, sir, I wonder if I could read the end of the book for my brother? He just wants to hear the end, and I don’t know if we can come back on Monday.”

The young man turned. “I’m sorry, but my time is up, and I have to be sure the book is here for Monday. You can hear it later, all right?” His expression softened and he added, “You can even think up your own ending. Wouldn’t that work just as well?” Seeing Lainie’s face, he said quickly, “I’m sorry. You can get the book later.” He shifted his feet but stayed in front of the shelf, watching the two.

Lainie turned back to Abey and led him over to a corner of the children’s area. Abey’s eyes were angry, so Lainie held his arm. “I hate that guy,” she whispered. “He’s not nice. He won’t let us have the book.”

Abey yanked himself free and glared at Lainie. “Na oh oh, eh ban han ho,” he whispered in his soft, strangled voice.

Lainie glanced around and saw the woman with glasses staring at Abey. She felt her neck and face flush.

“Shh, now. Sit down a minute.”

Lainie sat on one of the kids' chairs. It was too small for her, so she slid to the carpet. Abey stood blinking, then sat on the carpet. Lainie leaned toward him.

"Look, in a minute, that man will leave. Then I'll get the book. Wait here and don't turn around, okay?"

Abey nodded. Lainie stood up and casually walked over to shelves where the Nancy Drew books were kept. She pretended to read the spines as she edged her way toward the end of the row. She knew all of the titles by heart, since she had read each at least twice. Near the Nancy Drew books were the other adventure series: the Hardy Boys, the Gray Seal, Tom Swift. For a moment, Lainie admired the wide tan-and-red spines of the Tom Swift books. Those covers were the best; they usually had an embossed drawing of Tom with one of his machines, like an airship or automobile. She pulled one title off the shelf to admire its cover, then remembered and glanced around. Abey still sat with his head bowed, staring at the carpet. The women behind the front desk were busy with their charge cards, and the reserve shelf was unguarded. Lainie put back the Tom Swift volume, then crossed to the reference shelf next to the reserves, turned, and passed in front of the reserve shelf, pulling out the monster book as she passed. She tucked the book under her arm on the side away from the circulation desk. She thought that everyone must be looking at her. She walked quickly and sat near Abey with her back to the desk.

The book was wide, and Lainie had to rest it on both their laps as she turned pages. She guessed the monster picture was about in the middle. Abey urged her with soft syllables. There it was: an illustration that lapped over two pages. The fat purple monster lay atop the pile of sacks spilling over with gold coins, and Lainie got a good look at its satisfied smile and the knobs on its claws. Abey put his finger on the magic bag covered with yellow and white shapes.

A hand closed on Lainie's shoulder and she twisted to see the new librarian's spectacles right next to her cheek. "What are you doing?" the woman asked. Her voice was firm. "I think that book is supposed to be on the reserve shelf. The children expect it to be there for reading time on Monday."

"We were just going to finish it now. We can't come back."

Abey took one look at the woman's face and pushed the book away. He started to whimper with a soft bawing sound. His face darkened, and Lainie remembered that people who didn't know Abey could be frightened by the sight.

"Now he's having a fit! See what you've done?"

"It's not what I've done! He wanted to hear the end of the book, that's all."

"Story hour is over. It's time to be quiet."

"He's just mad. You would be too!"

The whimpering came regularly, a sadness breathing. Lainie felt the grip tighten. "Where's your mother?" the librarian asked. "You should know better than to bring... to the library. He can't understand."

"He understands..." began Lainie, but the pinch caused her to gasp. She looked up and saw the tight angry frame of the librarian's eyes, like people had when they talked about Abey, if they didn't know him.

"It's not good to tease him with things beyond his reach. Can't you take him home now?" asked the new librarian.

"Margaret, what's the matter?"

Lainie felt her shoulder freed. She looked up into the gray-haired librarian's face.

"The child was upset about a book. He wouldn't behave."

The older woman said, "Margaret."

Without looking, Lainie could tell that the new librarian turned away. The gray-haired woman's face was sad, and for a minute she seemed about to pat Abey on the head, but she thought the better of it. His face was dark, his eyes puffy. Lainie rubbed her shoulder. The woman turned to her.

"Honey, don't you think you should go now? Why don't I put that book back for you?"

Lainie nodded. She handed the monster book to the librarian, then took Abey's hand. He snatched it away and headed toward the door, and Lainie followed. She felt her own face suddenly tingling. Somehow she found her way out the door, and this time Abey let Lainie hold his hand as they crossed the sun-baked street on their way home.

She would need a crayon. Mama had given away Abey's crayons a few years ago, after he had lost interest in coloring, so Lainie considered which neighbors might be a source for a crayon that wouldn't be missed. She decided to try the house a few doors down the alley. That family had six children, including a set of twins who would start kindergarten in the fall, and their backyard and stretch of sidewalk were generally littered with pieces of toys and clothing. Lainie casually got up from the step and strolled down around the end of the alley until she could see the yard.

The twins' names were Barbara and Debra, but because their aunt's name was Barbara too, the one twin was called Baby Barbara, shortened to Beebee, and of course her sister was called Debbie. The two girls had dragged out to the sidewalk an old vanity drawer full of crayons, doll's legs, dice, buttons, and marbles. Several torn sections of movie magazines lay strewn across the sidewalk, and Beebee sprawled out, coloring the black-and-white pages. Debbie sat next to her, digging her hands in the drawer. Lainie squatted and pretended to study a photo of Claudette Colbert, whose forehead had been scribbled over with orange and whose teeth were green. Jagged green lines radiated from her mouth.

"What's that?" asked Lainie.

Beebee said, "That means she's talking." Beebee scrubbed a brown crayon across a picture of a horse. Debbie sorted through crayons and pencil stubs, every now and then tossing one aside, whispering to herself. Lainie leaned over to point, said "Oh," closed her other hand around a big piece of purple crayon, then stood up.

"Well, I have to leave," she said. Her heart thumped. Debbie looked up and opened her mouth. "You're doing a good job," said Lainie. "I think that man there could use a hat." Debbie glanced down and put her palm on a page that was about to blow away, and Lainie walked off with one hand in her pocket.

That night, on the floor of her bedroom, Lainie pulled a piece of manila paper from her school folder, set out her pencils and the stolen purple crayon, and began to draw. First came the outline. Lainie took time to remember exactly the curves and shapes she'd seen in the library book. Then she added ears, eyes, and a smiling mouth with pointed teeth, just the kind Abey had liked to draw himself when he was smaller. Lainie added a few lines around the face to suggest laughter. Finally, she drew the magic bag, suspended to one side over the creature's head. A crescent moon, a star, and half a star decorated the bag. Lainie was proud that the half-star turned out so well. That had required some thought, since it wasn't as easy as just sketching five quick lines as for a regular star. Lainie colored gently within the lines of her drawing so the purple came out clean and smooth. She signed her name at the bottom of the page and then wrote, "To Abey. The monster picture."

Later, as Lainie lay in bed waiting for sleep, she imagined Abey's happiness, the way he would stare at the picture and tell himself the story of the magic bag, day after day. He would do that, for a few months at least, until the picture was forgotten under a bed or in the closet as other drawings had been before—until it became caught underneath comic books or a jacket, put into his old basket, pressed down by other things, until it began to tear.

Mother Never Created Monsters

Alicia Montero

It was in a little store next to the laundromat where she washed, rinsed and dried the delicates that the picture frame sat, unadorned by the surrounding chamomile flowers and diced nopales. He had paid more for it than it was really worth, throwing away half of his week's salary earned driving around drunks and whores with a borrowed taxi cab. But the emotional value was greater than the frame's peeling golden foil fringes. He placed in it a picture of them, holding each other in a lustful embrace, her hair flowing into the Ferris wheel in the background, covering my father's face. Each morning, I look at the picture fearfully, knowing her hair will become entangled with the wheel today, and I imagine the tiny strangers in the baskets climbing down the strands as if it were black rope, falling into my father's mouth.

I was born in a crack house. My mother, strapped to the bed with worn leather bracelets, coughing and grunting and dilating, gave birth to me an early morning in April at the St. Remini. I shook purple and black in the doctor's arms, the umbilical cord twisted around my ankle, unable to stop crying. A nurse asked my mother in the background if she wanted to breastfeed me, what my name was, if she was happy, if she wanted to see me. My mother had temporarily passed out from the pain, the exhaustion, from the sight of having birthed such a dark-skinned baby—although she did manage to utter a soft no.

My mother used to hate it when I told that to others. You weren't born in a crack house, she exclaimed. She takes out a birth certificate and points to the top: St. Remini, *family clinic*. But it did become a house for recovering drug addicts three years after you were born, she clarifies. But that had nothing to do with me. It had been a simple clinic, the best my father could afford with his meager salary. She claimed she never said no to seeing me, to holding and breastfeeding me but the nurse injected her with something that dried up her breast milk nevertheless. The certificate still has staple marks where the nurse had attached a paper with tiny footprints, feet that were pretty because they were little, unlike my feet now, the target of all insults from my short, vain aunts that don't know wearing high heels is the western form of practicing Chinese foot binding. Bunions are just a little bit more of me to love, I say.

It used to be that new born babies had no soul and it never mattered whether their mothers loved them while they swam the womb when inside you couldn't hear the neighbors fight or see your father drink, it didn't matter what you thought when you were just a fetus. My mother held her belly knowing I had heard her but after all, it was easier for her to change my mind when I was inside her womb than as a separate mind. Her lie became a sort of comforting sadness—I was born knowing things are different but bigger, livelier and somehow not always for you.

Sister, I was at my dad's house, getting my mom's stuff and he said Oh what beautiful flowers, my wife could have looked like a little dove, but instead she was yellow and folding like an old corn tortilla. I turn 43 years old today, the day of her death; although you say it's not 1996. You ask what I did with her suitcases. Remember throwing them away when she died, only to have your sister bring them back to the room, stinking of garbage and forgotten memories? This is what I'd like you to believe, son. How your mother would cry if she knew I gave her dresses to the woman I met on the bus, holding her waist as she swayed in her yellow dress, asking if she could also take her shoes? I showered her with recycled gifts and called her your name in drunken stupor, Virginia, but if you must know, your shoes never did quite fit her.

Nobody knows what I'm really thinking; I look up from my glass and cheer on for my 50th birthday. Nobody looks the same anymore either and I finish one last cigarette in the bathroom, caressing piercing stubbles and fading scars on my face. I am not angry anymore and I can't remember the last time I had a drink that didn't burn. Before she died, your mother caressed my hair more than often, but I secretly knew she did this to make me go to sleep so she could dig her fingers deep into my skull—I caught her once, son, holding a cup to the wound as my thoughts poured into it gently--what had I been so angry about?

I knew Virginia had been angry at the happy memories. Marriage never meant that I would stop loving women—they're too beautiful as they come in different shades and shapes. Caressing legs in the back of a taxi cabs, slipping tongues by folding leaves, smoothing out oiled collar bones in the backroom, licking a quick belly button fix. But I always came home after that, didn't I? *See sister, not even her death has changed him.*

I used to live next to a girl named Nanda who was terribly chubby and pale with a head full of lice. She lived with her grandfather and her mother was a baby mama, living on welfare, a cheese-puff-eating, underwear-lounging, child-neglecting whore. After Nanda became the neighborhood's bearer of lice, all the kids, including me, a dark and skinny bubbling 10-year-old, were gathered for a lice test. Our hair was washed and combed through but we had all been spared but Nanda and we danced around her, our hair wet and stinking of lice shampoo, taunting and poking her.

“Your dad is *HOMELY!*” Nanda screamed at me. I was used to being the one with the extensive English vocabulary. I won the 6th grade spelling bee in the 4th grade. I had been on the front cover of Helena Texas Times holding a polished trophy, hair combed back like Benito Juarez, pulling at my shirt. Nanda had learned a new word in order to insult me!

My dad isn't a *homie*, stupid! I said while I tried to beat her little fat head with my blunt fists. No, HoooOMELY! she said. My dad is handsome. I'll show you a picture. She walked into her one room apartment, walked out holding in one hand her belly and in the other a picture frame. He's a soccer star, she said. Nanda sat there proud and erect, like the day we had iced water at my cousin's house and said her family was the only one in the neighborhood that had a refrigerator that produced ice and water on the side of it. The frame held a newspaper picture of Diego Maradona. Her mother had lied to her, made her believe that was really her father. But that didn't make my dad any better looking, though.

I remember my mother throwing coffee mugs that missed my father only by centipedes and smashed against what I didn't know was sheet rock until I read it on the side of a van in Las Cruces a few years later and it no longer was “chirak.” That was when my mother used to defend herself, keep her ground, until my father fell by her feet, cried and begged for forgiveness. My parents had their biggest fight the day my nibby mother found my porn. As any other male teenager, I became quite interested in the workings of the body, where everything went and why, especially during sexual intercourse. Me and my friend Rudy, or as my mom would refer to him, my “lesser half,” developed an addiction to poker cards displaying naked, wet women (who were very hardworking women I must say, as most were either washing cars, grooming horses, milking cows sans clothes) which I would hide from her somewhere where I thought they could never be found—a place that, due to the desert conditions and predictably hot weather of Texas, I deduced would be a perfect hiding place—my winter coat. My mother, in turn, hid her spare change in *her* winter coat. One of those days, while placing her last quarters in her black wool coat, change that, I must mention, would someday be donated to *St. Niño de Atocha* in return for his miracle of helping my uncle to safely swim across the Rio Grande, she rummaged through my winter coat and found a video tape.

My mother laughed to herself when she found it and then became immediately curious. Indeed the day the tape made it to the VCR for the first time in front of my mother, she made me watch and translate it for her. How do you translate English-spoken pornography to a Spanish speaking woman, you may ask? Well, I couldn't tell you. What my mother and I watched was not pornography, to be honest. It was only a really bad movie about a lonely woman's life. She took off her clothes only once, by an indoor pool, and the scene lasted no longer than a couple of

seconds, as the water was too cold for her to submerge in but Rudy and I loved that scene. We never saw the next scene, where she was wearing a tuxedo, sitting on a half-moon, smoking. Overly dramatic, poorly filmed and scripted, the movie became my mother's concern as she became worried there was something I wasn't telling them, as if the missing sexual intercourse in the movie was a clear sign that my father had failed us, *rather*, had failed *his son*. After all, a father was supposed to teach his son how to be a man. Calm down, mom, I said, Just look at those beautiful, buttery tits!

Y luego el dia, I mean and well the day that your father came to the clinic to see you, he smelled of alcohol and moth balls, a deadly combination that contaminated the room as if inhabited by old wool coat wearing *viejitos* that dabbled in the spirits more than the saints high above that took care of your grandfather through his stroke, *mira*. Look to see if you can find some meaning in this, *porque* I've finished asking why your father came to the clinic that night, asking for some sex that I didn't feel like sharing because, you know, he was my first one and my last and it wouldn't happen unless Christ wanted us to have more children or your father quit the clothing business and put the moth balls in boxes where they belonged and the alcohol on where it would cure, not inebriate. Plus, the nurse would have seen us!

But your *papi*, he's a drunk. He didn't think I could smell it, it did after all sweat out of his body onto the sheets I had to wash every three days because you know Tejas is hot and too much sun would burn on up from the inside, I was afraid my anger would provoke the sheets to combust as my heart did that day. The mothball smell I didn't mind because it preserved the relationship that kept burning my heart like alcohol pouring through my veins. Like that guy downstairs, Damoclito who said his life hung on the clothesline. He was not playing, *mira*, he hung himself one rainy night and his wife was so angry he had cut down the clothesline and left her panties get wet with muddy water and urine but had taken the shirt and pants she had washed for him and hung on the clothesline to wear them for his suicide!—that was his best outfit for his funeral. He had failed to acknowledge her hard work, like your dad always does to mine, and let the rest of the wash fall on the muddy water—the urine, well your father was so drunk that he pissed outside as if he didn't have a *madre*.

But he came to the hospital that night you were born and I had enough—enough of his reddened eyes and his sweet *piropos*, cause your father, see was romantic but only in words, he never gave me an ounce of perfume or a rose petal—I still remember the day I gave into your father, he was leaning against a wall, wearing a purple bell bottom suit (*Yeah, that was called fashion back then*), leaning against a wall, looking real *suave*. His black hair glistening against the sun. That's when we got on that frightful thing, the Ferris wheel! I cried. I was so scared that when we got off your father held me tight against his chest, the dark skin of his arms wrapping around my waist, your father comforting me with tiny kisses.

There was this little old man standing by, smelling of grass and cotton candy, holding an ancient camera in one hand, a creaky old wooden camera stand on the other. For two dollars, he prepared his camera and that's when the clouds parted, the sun shone defiantly, angrily, and the wind blew hard against your father and me. The old man counted three, two one, and clicked

right when my hair flew into your father's face! Haha. I should have known then your father and I weren't meant to be. He did, after all, say that I looked like a refreshing drink for such an old tree like him and I found this romantic because I never had felt like I had completed anybody else but your father. *A refreshing drink.* Ha. He says I'm like vodka now, I look transparent and pure but when he tastes me, his throat burns and quickly becomes drunk with my love and wants more and more. But he came see you that night and I screamed, at him, at the saints above, at the twinkle red of his eyes because he smelled like mothballs and reeked of alcohol and all I wanted was a tender kiss from his dark full lips of cinnamon and that was all, my love.

21 Stories about Gun Control: An Autobiography

TL Miller

1.

In 1967, my father, a freshman at Marquette University, joined the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps. He stood six feet three inches tall. His voice was low and slightly nasal. He would study comparative literature. On October 17, riots broke out 90 miles away at the University of Wisconsin, over whether the university should permit Dow Chemical, a manufacturer of napalm, to recruit on campus. The administration at Marquette feared sympathy demonstrations might break out and deployed the ROTC to secure the campus. Because my father and the rest of the freshmen cadets had not yet received weapons training, they were allowed to carry only walkie-talkies. My father was stationed at the entrance of the university library, which my mother says was fortunate—she doubts he would have defended any other building on campus.

Several weeks later, his squad went to the rifle range, where, after several rounds of target practice, they stacked their guns and took a short breather. When my father returned, he had a problem. As he said to his drill instructor:

“I can’t find my gun. Sir.”

“First off, son, we call it a weapon, not a gun. Second, *how the Hell did you loose your weapon!*”

2.

Because my mother disliked the idea of children playing with toy guns, I did not have one until I was six years old. I didn't mind. Andy Burgmeier and Pete Gingrass, who lived across the street, had Nerf guns and cap pistols and let me play with them. Besides, you could always pick up a tree branch, point it, and make machine gun noises. So, my mom eventually relented and for Christmas bought me a Star Wars gun, a chunky, squarish block of hard, black plastic, with a grip and barrel stuck on at comical angles—no one would have mistaken it for a real gun. It shrieked in three pitches, depending on how far back you pulled the trigger: eeeeeee-RAAAAGH-WAAAAAAH! Deafen the enemy must have been the theory. It took four D batteries, which made it weigh about two pounds and much better for whacking people than a lighter, more realistic looking toy gun.

3.

At the Mom and Me overnight campout, my mother and I shot BB guns. She and I were surprised to learn she was as good a shot as any of the Cub Scout mothers there. She said she wouldn't have minded every nine-year-old in the country owning a BB gun provided they had to follow the same rules we did: the mother loads when the son shoots and the son loads when the mother shoots.

4.

My fifth grade class went on a fall nature hike at the Audubon Center. We were learning to identify different trees and collecting leaves to press together between sheets of wax paper. My classmates and I wanted sugar maple leaves (glossy and scarlet) without too many insect holes in them. We were less interested in oak leaves, which turn only brown, but our park ranger guide was—he offered us this mnemonic: “The red oak has pointed ends on its leaves, just like the pointy ends of the arrows the red man used. The white oak has round ends, like the round ends of the bullets the white man used.”

5.

Each Friday, we had an hour of Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or D.A.R.E., which was taught by a bald police officer. He was on duty while teaching, so he wore his utility belt with all its equipment. Naturally, Jason Luell asked him if he'd ever killed anybody. He said no, but he'd fired his gun in the line of duty.

“Do you shoot someone in the leg if they're running away?” Jason asked.

“Never,” the officer said. “We use force appropriate to the situation. We shoot only as a last resort and we shoot for either the head or the chest. They're dead in two seconds.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that.”

6.

In May of that year the LAPD cops who had beaten Rodney King were acquitted and riots erupted in Los Angeles. King appeared on television and famously said, “Can't we all just

get along?” For weeks, we all aped Rodney. Playing dodgeball or capture the flag: “Can’t we all just get along? [Thwack!] Can’t we all just get along?”

7.

When the Boy Scouts came to recruit the Cub Scouts, they told us, “In the Boy Scouts, we don’t shoot BB guns. [Restive murmurs from the crowd.] *We shoot .22 rifles!*” [*Excited hooting.*]

8.

At summer camp, five kids at a time lay prone on thin plastic mattresses, the stocks of their rifles snuggled up against their cheeks, the butts braced against their shoulders. The range master called out, “Put on your eyes and ears,” which I thought meant, “Pay attention!” but which really meant, “Put on your goggles and ear protectors.”

We used bolt-action .22’s, which required us to manually eject the casing after each shot and re-load a fresh cartridge. Five shots at a target 50 feet distant. A “qualifying” target meant grouping all five shots closely enough that a quarter could cover them. Earning the merit badge required five qualifying targets. One target with ammunition cost twenty-five cents, so it was a relatively cheap merit badge or an expensive one depending on your aim.

I was nearsighted and had left my glasses at home. I’d sight in on the target, but all I could see was a big black blur. I took as long as half a minute to aim—by my second shot the guys were screaming at me to hurry *up*, everybody else was *done* already—but when I pulled the trigger I couldn’t even tell whether I’d hit the target or missed it entirely. I had no trouble with the rest of the requirements. Some safety stuff, a few questions we were supposed to answer. We covered it in a half-hour on the first day. My favorite question was, “Describe how you would react if a friend visiting your home asked to see your or your family’s firearm(s).” After my smart aleck answer, the instructor asked me again: “*If your family owned firearm(s)...*” He didn’t smile.

My dad came up halfway through the week for his three-day shift as an adult leader. He brought my glasses. Suddenly I could see the concentric black rings on the target, each with a white number printed inside. Not that I could hit them, but I could see them. I needed twenty-five or thirty targets to qualify. A .22 doesn’t kick much, but it does sort of tap your cheek each time you fire. I had a tender spot beneath my left eye by the end of the week.

My rifleman’s merit badge is sewn on my uniform sash between my patches for coin collecting and first aid.

9.

Leonard McDowell, 22, was a dropout from Wauwatosa West, the high school I later attended. On December 1, 1993, he returned to his alma mater and wandered the halls. One of his former teachers recognized him and immediately called the office; they dispatched Dale Breitlow, the associate principal in charge of discipline, who had dealt with Leonard as a student many times. Mr. Breitlow confronted Leonard, who pulled a pistol from the waistband of his pants, shot Mr. Breitlow in the chest and walked away. A student in a nearby classroom—a lifeguard—attempted CPR, but failed to resuscitate Mr. Breitlow.

One hundred yards west of the high school was Eisenhower Elementary, where my brother and sister were locked down. One block east of the high school was Whitman Middle School, where I was locked down along with my fourth period German class. All we knew was that, after a two-word announcement on the PA system, Frau Witzke had locked the classroom door and told us we were not allowed to leave the room. She didn't know why. We cracked jokes and threw paper. No one needed to go to the bathroom until I asked if we could and Frau Witzke said no. Then everyone needed to.

We did not learn what had happened until several hours later, when we were dismissed. All the local news stations gave the shooting round-the-clock coverage and Tom Brokaw lead with it on the NBC Nightly News (the only time in my childhood Wauwatosa was mentioned, aside from the *E. coli* outbreak at Sizzler's). The police found the gun lying in the street near the apartment complex where my friend Justin Drane lived. They found Leonard a few hours after that. The guy was clearly crazy, but none of us cried when he got life in prison instead of life in a mental institution.

We had school the next day, but no class. Instead, we had sharing sessions where we talked about how bad we felt or how bad we felt for Ty Breitlow, a fellow seventh grader. I played center behind him on the basketball team and had been assigned to him as a math tutor and mostly what *I* thought was that he'd use it as an excuse to act like an even bigger asshole than he usually did.

I went to the funeral with my parents. Ty hugged me in the receiving line. His mother burst into tears.

10.

When I started high school, I thought it leant me a tough guy legitimacy. Cross country meet, marching band competition: *Where's that guy from?* Nicolet. *Oh—rich suburban kid. Where's that guy from?* 'Tosa West. *Oh typical suburban—no... they were the ones that... yeah.*

11.

A dozen kids from my high school went to Fulda, Germany as exchange students after our junior year. In history class, I looked at my host-brother's textbook. I was interested to see how the Germans wrote about World War II. Though the text was too complicated for me to follow, I realized I hadn't seen most of the pictures before—none of the familiar shots, no D-Day or Yalta Conference or atom bomb. The only photograph I recognized was one in which six *Wehrmacht* are pointing their rifles at a grinning, blindfolded member of the French resistance, who is lined up against the corner of a stone barn. He's positioned at the corner to prevent ricochets from rebounding toward the soldiers executing him.

12.

I wanted to say something about it, say, "You have all different pictures in your books, except for this one, which I've seen before." But it was a difficult sentence to translate and by the time I had parsed it, the teacher had decided her class should have a question and answer session with their visitor about life in America. They were to ask questions in English and I was to answer in German.

Is America a dangerous place? *Well, parts are. But I feel safe nearly always.* Is it very violent? Your news is quite violent. *Yes, the news is sometimes quite bad. But mostly it is not like that.* Do you know people who have guns? *Yes. But one must be eighteen years old. Also, one must not be a criminal.* Would you be able to buy a gun? *No, I am not eighteen.* But if you wanted, could you get one? *No, I could not do that. But perhaps some of my classmates could.* Does anyone ever bring a gun to school?

Nein, nein, nein. Nie. Never. In *Milwaukee*, maybe. Then I realized I was lying. Not lying, really—it had been five years and I just never thought about it anymore. So I said, *Der Hauptman von unsere Schiüle war in 1993 geschossen. Aber nicht bei ein Student, bei ein verrückte Mann, der Leonard McDowell heisst. Aber das ist sehr untypisch—jederman in der USA hat über das gesprochen.*

“Shit,” said my friend Erik Schleiker, afterwards, “Nice job. Now they think people shoot each other at American schools all the time.” I felt bad about giving the Germans the wrong impression, but by the end of the next year, it had begun to feel like people really *did* shoot each other at American schools all the time.

13.

I took American Public Policy—civics, essentially—my senior year of high school. During the first week, our teacher drew a line on the chalkboard, marked one side “left” and one side “right” and told us to stand where on the political spectrum we thought we belonged on different issues. Due to a scheduling peculiarity, most students in my section were repeating the class, some for the second time, and were shaky on what constituted liberal versus conservative positions. The activity rapidly degenerated into a game of “Look at where Tom’s standing and figure out if you think you’re on the same side or on the other side.” When the issue of gun control came up, I held my position on the far left side and a dozen of my classmates bunched around me. The teacher asked me to explain what my position was. When they heard the words “handgun ban” all but two of the students moved to the other side.

14.

Public school kids who were members of St. Joseph’s parish didn’t get confirmed until they were seventeen. I spent the two-day preparatory retreat trying to find a way to spend a few minutes alone with my girlfriend and speaking as little as possible in the group discussions out of fear that I’d be found out and sent home. (“If I think the teachings of Jesus are a good ethical code, but don’t really believe more than that, should I get confirmed?” Or, “Say you’re engaging in an activity you know is sinful and that you feel guilty about, but don’t want to stop doing. Should you confess that?”)

As a bonding activity on the first night, we sat in a circle on wooden chairs and answered questions that one of the leaders read off index cards. I got “What’s the most useless invention ever?” I said paperclip. Second time around, I got, “What’s the cruelest thing someone has ever said or done to you?” The only thing I could think of was, “Dear Tom, I really don’t want to go out with you. Sorry. Kristin.” (In the form of a note delivered by a third party.) Only she was in the room. As was my infamously jealous girlfriend. So I said I didn’t know.

“Well, I know,” said Ty Breitlow, who was sitting next to me. “Leonard McDowell shot my father. That’s the cruelest thing anybody ever did to me.” He got up from the circle and left. We didn’t do any more questions after that.

15.

When the math team competed, I took both my calculators, a TI-34 and a TI-85, rectangular machines with heavy, black plastic cases. I liked to walk into the room where the test was being administered without my backpack. My calculators in my back pockets, pencils in my front pocket. Nothing to encumber me. Like a Wild West gunslinger, all my weapons in easy reach. Removing the cover from the calculator felt like pulling back the slide on a pistol, I thought. The clack of the calculator shoved home in its case at the end of a test sounded not unlike a fresh magazine being inserted.

16.

In the 44-hour First Responder course I took before becoming a lifeguard, we learned to treat gunshot wounds. (There had been shots fired at a county pool the year before, but no one had been hit.) As I remember it, there were seven steps for treating a conscious GSW: survey the scene to ensure your own safety; alert EMS; glove up; check for a spinal injury; cover the wound with a Vaseline dressing and secure the it with a roller bandage; sweep the back for an exit wound; treat for shock.

Things become more complicated when the victim is PNB—pulseless non-breathing. In a group of three responders, two perform CPR and one patches the GSW, so the victim doesn’t bleed out. The tricky part is keeping the neck immobilized while rolling the victim to sweep the back—you assume that your victim has a C-spine injury and if the neck moves, he dies. My group couldn’t for the life of us (or of our instructor) roll him correctly. We killed him three times in a row.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” he said. “A PNB GSW—you’re not gonna bring him back with CPR. Maybe one percent of the time. Learn something else.”

17.

During the emergency preparedness test that summer, our examiner drafted me to play the victim’s friend in the GSW scenario. My job was to inform the lifeguards that there was an emergency and lead them to the site of the shooting. When the examiner said go, I ran up to Tracey Stayton and yelled, “Lifeguard, lifeguard, somebody just shot my friend!”

Afterwards, everybody got the giggles about it. “Jesus, you sounded dumb,” Tracey said. “What was I supposed to say?” I asked.

18.

The tenth word of my first real short story was “gunshot.”

19.

I read Timothy Zahn's novel *Star Wars: Heir to the Empire* when I was eleven years old and started working on a sequel the day after I finished it. Over the next seven years, in the back of my school notebooks, I designed weapons systems for my stories—starfighters and spacecraft, mostly, because my story centered on a band of renegade pilots intent on ending a decades-long space war—but plenty of other gadgets, too, shield generators and body armor and ejection seats. Over 300 pages, in all.

I learned that the toy gun I had had as a child was a BlasTech DL-44 heavy blaster pistol, Han Solo's preferred weapon. During the first week of my freshman year of college I sat up one night, sketching the blaster in the back of my physics notebook. The problem set I was supposed to be working on required math I had never heard of and I had nearly thrown my textbook across the room in frustration twenty minutes before. In the early hours of the morning I diagrammed that blaster, working first in light pencil, then adding highlights with marker and ballpoint pen. I shielded my drawings with my body. I thought that if I caught a guy in my dorm drawing guns, I'd probably turn him in. Or I'd at least give him plenty of space if I were in line behind him for the shower.

20.

I joined an improvisational comedy team. Some of our members had favorite offensive jokes they told backstage, partly to break the tension but also in hopes they would exhaust their supply of nastiness so that it didn't come out on stage. Rob Dubbin did an impression of the Kennedy assassination, in which he played the president, the side of the president's head, and Jackie crawling across the back of the limo. He'd studied the Zapruder tape, he knew Jack's little, "That's odd—something seems to have bitten me in the shoulder" movement before the third shot. He understood ballistics, that the spray of blood and tissue particles moves in the *opposite* direction of a bullet, because the bullet creates a vacuum behind it. He knew that the conspiracy buffs who claim Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't have been the real assassin, because he would have been shooting from the wrong angle, have the physics backwards.

21.

After I graduated, I moved into an apartment with two guys I met online. One roommate, Benny, took medication for a facial tic. He thought our other roommate, Hayden, whom he had met only a couple of weeks before, was some sort of genius who inhabited a world of pure thought—you had to repeat something four or five times before Hayden realized you were speaking to him.

I came home one Saturday afternoon to discover that Benny had allowed the apartment to be burglarized. It had happened while he was in the shower—Benny's showers lasted a half hour, the same length of time as his Bon Jovi repertoire. He had walked out of the bathroom, surrounded by a whoosh of steam, towel wrapped around his waist and hadn't been able to find his glasses, which he had left on his dresser. They had been knocked to the floor. When he put them on, he discovered that the candy dish that he kept his change in was empty. He thought he heard a door slam.

I came home two hours later. Benny grabbed me by the shoulders and asked, “Where’s Hayden?”

“At work,” I said. “What...”

“On a Saturday? When did he leave?”

“He always works on Saturday. He left at like seven this morning. Why?”

“Because someone *knew* I was in the shower.” He explained about the burglary. He’d lost his change, his watch, and most of his DVD collection, including *Sorority Sex Kittens* (which the cops had been especially interested in—if they bagged a guy with that particular film they could trace him to our apartment.) Benny thought it was an inside job. “Hayden,” he said again.

“Then why didn’t he take your computer?” I asked.

“Okay, maybe not him, maybe one of the neighbors.” Benny said. “I swear to God, though, if they try it again and that guy’s here when I come out of the shower—*BAM!* I take him down, and I’m not responsible for what happens next.”

It kept coming back to me over the following weeks, a prickle of anticipation in the time it took me to wipe the steam from the bathroom mirror, and hang up my towel, and stretch out the shower curtain to dry. Walk out of the bathroom, skin still soft and damp, profoundly nearsighted, and there’s a guy in the living room with a knife. Benny had wrestled at the 185-pound weight class in college—it was one thing for him to talk about *BAM!*-ing someone while armed with a bath towel and soap-on-a-rope. But I thought I’d want something more than that.

When I sublet my room several months later, I called my dad for advice. “So let’s say your apartment hypothetically gets broken into. Do you have a legal obligation to tell a potential sub-lessee?”

“When did this hypothetically happen?”

“October.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want Mom to worry. The neighborhood’s safe, it was just sort of a freak thing. It happened while Benny was in the shower. They took my camera.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You know all those people who say they want a gun for protection? I mean, you’d have to shower with it for it to do you any good, but what if you get out and find somebody in the living room? You know? Is that stupid?” I straightened a book on my bookshelf.

“Yeah,” my dad said. “You have a legal obligation to tell them.” Then we talked about football instead.