Dear Reader,

My first exposure to Atlanta's literary scene began during my first year of college, with the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival. This event quickly became something I eagerly looked forward to each year. Now, as a senior, I am excited to be involved in the planning and promotion of such an event. Each festival brings life-changing writers and books that I now cannot imagine not knowing; I have no doubt that this year's lineup, featuring Richard Blanco, Dani Shapiro, and Charleen McClure '10, will be no different.

The Writers' Festival, now in its 45th year, is a time where fellow lovers of literature come together to celebrate the work of both emerging and well-established writers, to gain insight and ask questions about other writers' interests and creative processes, and to receive the push to breathe life into our own projects waiting to be acknowledged. Invented in the 1440s, Johannes Gutenberg's printing press helped progress the spread of books and knowledge to the greater public during the European Renaissance. It for this reason that the printing press is a central theme for this year's celebration.

The writers featured in the magazine this year each function as an unique piece of type in our festival's printing press. Whether writers of poetry, fiction, drama, or nonfiction, each has something to say, their imprint to make on the world. Read these, and after you are done, take a moment to reflect on them as a whole. What do each come together to say about the experiences, values, and concerns of 2016?

I hope you will enjoy the following works and, of course, the festival events as much as we do.

Happy Reading,
Sydney Love '16

April 2016

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AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

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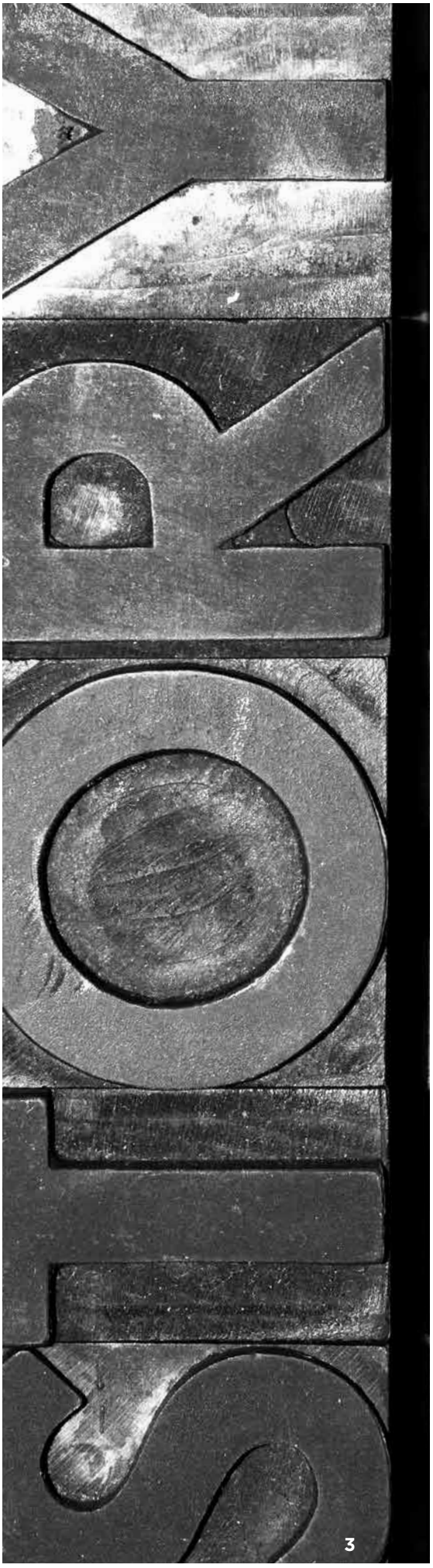
The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's festival are Richard Blanco, Dani Shapiro, and Charleen McClure '10.

The Writers' Festival Contest is open to anyone enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected by outside judges as finalist entries in the competition. The visiting writers make final decisions during the festival, and a prize of $500 is given to the first-place finalist in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the Emma May Laney Endowment Fund for Writing, the Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund; and the Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Vice President of Academic Affairs Kerry Pannell, Eleanor Hutchens '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. We are indebted to St. Amand Press for the use of their printing press and wood type, and to James Stamant for the photography that runs throughout this magazine. Special thanks goes to Willie Tolliver and the English Department for their unfailing support and guidance, as well as to Amanda Lee Williams in the Office of Faculty Services. Thanks also to the Office of Marketing and Public Relations for their help with design, social media, and marketing; Demetrice Williams and the Office of Special Events and Community Relations for their event planning and management. Finally, we are grateful to Crystal Boson, William Boyle, Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger, and Anya Groner for their time and careful reading as our outside selection committee.



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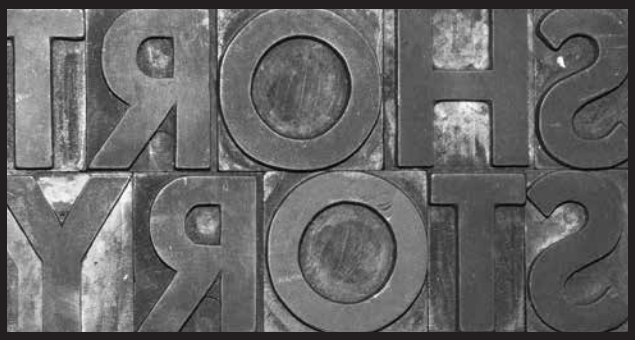

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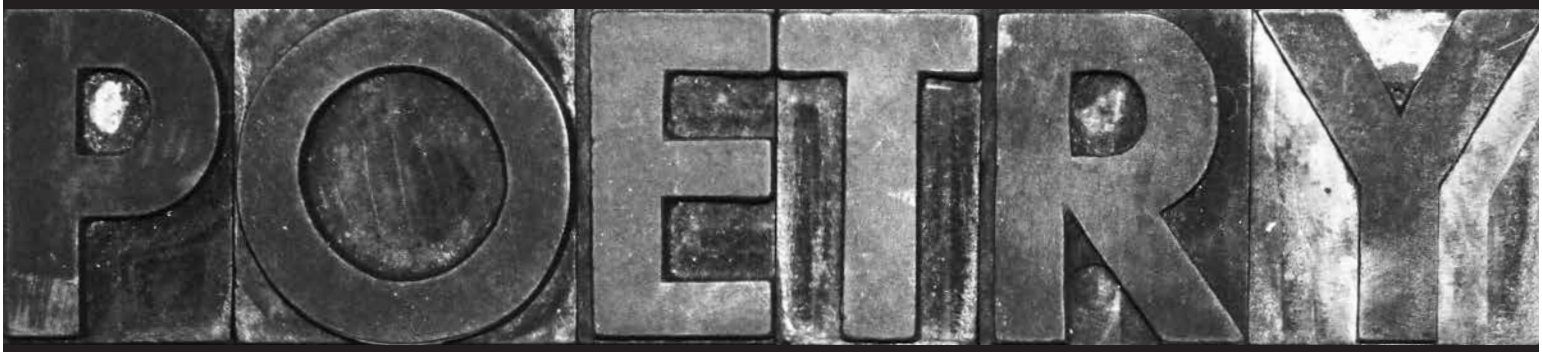

POETRY

Deadbeat Dad

Jenée Hardy
Agnes Scott College

My cousin says
God is the answer
To everything.

But I question:
Who is this faceless God
That lets niggas
get murdered?

Who is this faceless God
That I can't ask, "Why,"
But I can ask for guidance?

Who is this faceless God
Doling out death sentences
For my sisters
and brothers?

Who is this faceless God?
That I thank for waking me up
Only to be gunned down later.

Who is this faceless God?
Got me out of bed
Started me on my way
But I never made it back home.

Who is this faceless God?
Our Father, which art in Heaven,
Leaving his children
In the ghettos?

Who is this faceless God?
That has not heard the cries
Of recently sonless mothers.

Who is this God?
Where is He?
And why do we pray?

For Trayvon

Jenée Hardy
Agnes Scott College

Today,
I slapped a baby so hard in the face
that his nose burst and bled
down his unclothed skin
in thick, unsymmetrical globs

And then I shook him to death.

⋆

He stood there
watching me
for what felt like hours.
His uninterrupted gaze
causing ripples in my peace…
This little fucker was staring.

I'd always hated kids.
The way they look, intrigued, upon everything—
how their stubbly little legs
fought the air for grounding.

It disgusted me
how they could leave their mouths
open so long,
that they actually began to drool on themselves.

That was this baby. This kid,
standing less than 10 feet away from me:
mouth ajar,
legs bent slightly into a squat,
like he had something to say

but couldn't.

⋆

Some woman sitting next to me
told me to just ignore it.
That was just kids, that was just how *they* were.
But I hated his little face of curiosity.

I hated the way it looked at me.
Almost as if we were… equal.
As if we had some unspoken understanding,
though we'd never met.

For Trayvon (continued)

The hinge of his open jaw
made my lips twitch.
I was disgusted with his stance,
his boldness in squarely looking me on.

I shouted that: *if you are going to stare like that,*
You ought to say something!
You ought to be ready!
You ought to know,
that I am just looking for a reason…

He ought to know that's how these things work.

⋆

I told him.
I told him he'd better cut it out
or I would have to say something…
I would have to *do* something.

I told him.
I told him he ought to just let me be.
To just walk away
and leave me to my peace.

This little half a shit was
NOT about to make ME
feel uncomfortable.

Yet, he stared.

Head cocked to the side,
questioning,
shooting the veins in his face to attention.
I will show you who's who!

⋆

He took off running in his direction.
A frenzy of man vs. baby ensued
as I chased him around the room,
grabbing for his little legs in a desperate rage.

I finally caught him,
spun him around,
and open palmed his face so hard
that his nose burst,

sending blood and snot
down his naked little torso
and spilling onto the floor.
I watched as his limp body fell back onto his diaper,

tears of confusion flooded his reddening face.

⋆

He sat and began to cry
repugnantly loud.
The clotted cries coming out
in barely distinguishable sobs.

This ugly, gross, bold piece of –thing
thought turning his back and running
would save him…
It wouldn't.

And now
the fact that he cried for an undeliverable help
made his presence even more bothersome.
Made me ashamed to have been there

watching him fall,
and not thought to kick him on his way down.
Made my slap seem petty
and unjustified.

Made it seem, almost, as if he'd yet to learn his lesson.

⋆

So I picked him up,
and shook him.
Shook him until he learned
to stop fighting.
Until he realized
that the fight was not
about equality,
but about power.

I have the power,
the louder voice,
the longer reach,
the wider back swing.

The woman sitting next to me gasped,
I didn't care.
Because it's all
about the power

And who has it.

And I do,
Every damned bit of it.

family ties
with appreciation to halina duraj

Molly McDaniel
Agnes Scott College

i
my father learned tenderness from his father: the hollow bottle, the chickencloth for sheets. in the summer the neighbor boys made a game of riding bicycles with their hands to the sky. in this way they learned to scar.

ii
my father still sleeps with his teeth bared, wherever he is. my mother still wringing the cherry-soaked tea towels out in the sink, the scent of blood burnt into the stove. she does not cook recipes from her childhood but what she has been taught tastes good on the tongues in this home.

iii
he would drink scotch if he was a man who drank. earlier i said the bottle but i meant to say the throat. i won't lie to you: there are times when i have contemplated it, cutting him open. how there is just one word for so many different wars.

iv
loving my father was realizing that someone can build you a house and at night you can only dream of it burning.

v
he would dream if he was a man who cried; i do not know if he can't or if he knows where dreams hatch their soft and feral lives. dreams do not sleep. dreams do not blink, do not move their spines, their caterpillar eyes. under this kind of light a body is all too easy to find.

vi
you will go crazy if you listen to your own pulse. this, like other sounds, our body blocks out. our breath, our fingers rubbing against each other, each strand of hair brushing our neck. try to think about it clinically: who are we, who are we to assume that memory is not the same.

vii
because his are the only wounds i did not give myself, because—

viii
my father did not mean to hurt me. i know that. i can say that. i know the world is a black shadow with terrible teeth; i know that it raised my father to be a fox, that he had no other choice but to bite the leg until it sprung free from its trap. that such foxes, much like children, cannot run.

ix
sorry: that wasn't a good metaphor. i only said that because i once wrote a story about a fox afraid for its life, its claws clicking on each bead of the rosary. are humans the god of the fox? like my professor said, the concept is trite and overdone. it always has to be rewritten. the story ends, of course, like every story, with the men capturing the fox in the night.

x
they take him to a quiet room. not even his heartbeat escapes.

the breakfast taco war of austin and san antonio (1968-2010)

Robby Nadler
University of Georgia

when working with people
who are about to die
it's recommended you let them tell their life story

born in small town outside denver
learns to sing jesus songs while skiing
dad smiles after only daughter's birth because he says he has too many sons

mediocre student through high school
fascination with greg louganis compelled by promising amateur diving career
realization in tenth grade locker room leads to quitting diving team against father's wishes

highly active in church placates father's anger
commitment to celibacy before marriage ends summer before twelfth grade
girl misses her period for three months or so she said

decision not to attend college
follows best friend out west to pursue acting career
becomes competent extra in afternoon children's live action television broadcast

introduction to woman from montana with ridiculous first name
woman with ridiculous first name marries into new last name
sex is awkward for many reasons

comfort sought as youth pastor in church and attends college
angry drive to las vegas over thanksgiving when wife confesses infidelities
job taken selling closets to pay lawyers

begins cooking as hobby because there is no more wife to cook dinner
enrolls in trade school for twenty-five grand student loan
discovers bliss of velouté

good news is thirty-eight and climbs out of debt
bistro in santa monica turns a profit
had it been late-eighties death would've arrived sooner

nineties' cocktails extend life expectancy rates as opposed to life expectancy itself
three pills a day a new name for jesus
bad news is had it been mid-nineties there'd be an answer for how to avoid transmission

finds sick boy asleep in hospital pew
takes boy home to feed him
knows it's love first time bodies magnet the night

teaches boy to cook entire bistro menu
watches boy recover fat in his emaciated cheeks
knows boy makes excuses but still waits for him to call which he never does

⋆

the breakfast taco war of austin and
san antonio (1986-2014)

after the person has told their life story
you tell it back
the experience is supposed to be cathartic for both parties

never visited any city in colorado
wasn't even born for almost two decades after you
but would like to have known you when you were my age

your father calls me after the funeral
you leave me several possessions i don't deserve
i tell him you were my youth pastor and he's proud

falls in love with matthew mitchum summer i desert you
pretends that's what you looked like at his age
thinks you'd forgive me if the chinese don't sweep the podium

remembers you being a psychology major at cal state northridge
cast in an opera during college and you attend my performance
we sex beneath a staircase after the show and you spit in a can of diet coke

zena and i don't bump into each other in montana
you once claim your greatest fear is me running into her
it's safe to assume as far as fears go you were somewhat lying

selfishness and stupidity are still the only answers i come up with
at night your ghost hovers in the form of a distant mountain that vanishes come morning
then sits by my bed as the pile of french cuisine books you wrote notes in to guide me

refuses to cook any dish you taught me to prepare
i've taken enough from you to leave your recipes intact
your body taste of cayenne wakes me from the chased sleep in my self-exiled north pacific cell

late mid-twenties and accruing debt
misses all ethnic food in los angeles not prepared here
i haven't become a better person despite the miles i've put between me-now and me-then

doctors say i have five years now my body rejects the meds
you were so kind you'd stand by me these five years through all my psychoses
every day i'm determined to fulfill the pledge of a good man you mistakenly saw in me

i still make everything about me even the telling of your life story
but it's like separating where blue and yellow meet in a green bath of possibilities
your life ends in the spine of my dreams

and in death my lover in a white chef suit
waits in regal destiny of timber designs we carved in farewell addresses to each other
embrace me then and i'll turn my face into a hand that has learned to thud open close open

Eating like a Bird

Jami Padgett
Young Harris College

The service was two and a half hours ago,
but you'd been dying for a month. For you,
it's only fitting our family would plan a feast—
your family, who ripped and tore at your aging flesh
until it hung from the bone, to set free a mound
of money and heirloomed recipes from the muscle
underneath. We circle around Papaw,
our center his bible, the word of God
thick as gravy on his tongue.

He calls the feast a wake.

"It's a celebration," Papaw says.
"Eat like you're alive and happy about it. She
would want that."

The tiled countertops are lined—edge to edge—
with casserole dishes that leave fogged,
sweaty place prints, identical to the ones
laddering scattered mason jars of sweet tea.
Your mason jars—which now belong
to my first cousin, the one who is downing
a bottle of beer the color of soiled lake water. I wish
you could smell it; your stomach always soured
like mine does around alcohol. I sit far away
from the stench of grease-thickened food
and cheap perfume, across from the empty
corduroy recliner you said you kept
only because it had already been broken in.

"You aren't eating enough to keep a bird alive,"
Papaw says, neck stretched down, his fingers
skimming over his bald head.

I pinch a piece from my unbuttered roll and shift
in my seat at the back of the living room.

Birds eat more than their weight, I want to say.
They peck and swallow and revisit their meals
until there is nothing left.

You taught me that.

Appetite

Caroline Schmidt
Emory University

When all of us had gone to bed, the kitchen light
still flushed— my mother, alone, eating.

She must have been so hungry
to take what little food we had, cornmeal, rice,
Miracle

Whip, a columned sleeve of Saltines. I could hear her
teeth going, each bite, desire for fullness or weight,
an occupied

tongue, the tender meat of a fruit, something to chew
and slick-swallow, pretending, for a moment, we had

money. Years later: my marriage, and a baby—
I learned what it was to be well-fed. A trash basket

choked with mangoes. Food scraped from plates,
apple peels
and green beans, a tomato still rosy

and blushing. My stomach never wanting, my
daughter's hands never
vacant. Still, if things were different, who is to say

I wouldn't spend my nights at the kitchen table,
fingers
driven deep into a near-naked pantry, wanting to
satisfy first

my own hunger?

Divine Judgment

Caroline Schmidt
Emory University

The mortality of a broken body,
I learned last Monday. I abused
the wasp for hours. Orbiting my kitchen light,
phototaxis, seeking heat or navigation. A passage
home. I used nearly my entire
bottle of hairspray to drown it. A survivor.
On its back, *bye-*
bye, needle-legs beating
a farewell. Get well
soon. Mouth belting
open-shut as it thrashed: perhaps a prayer.
Or else a whimper. A year before, I found my father
dead. Cancer of the liver: A deliverance. Or else
a penalty.

Water Hammer

Cheryl Stiles
Georgia State University

Sloss Furnaces, Birmingham, AL
April 27, 1951

In the blowing engine room
the high-pitched whine—sounds
of the Ingersoll-Rand turbine

could deafen a man in no time.
140 degrees, heat
a constant. Ten days on, one day off—

like working at the gates of hell.
Everyplace dangerous.
W. B. McDanal, a boilermaker,

said one time he heard how a man
with no safety line
fell from the downcomer,

turned to ash in the brick-lined
blast furnace
the men nicknamed Alice.

That day, Homer Hunt, an engineer
newly hired, pointing out
where to place a trap.

Then…that sound
of a water hammer, like
someone banging a pipe,

the sound of metal striking
metal. McDanal
yelling *you better get outta there…*

A twelve-inch valve, cast iron, bursting
at the seam, steam everywhere,
a hydrostatic catastrophe in the making.

Two men, Hunt and carpenter Moncrief,
Hunt's arm around Moncrief's shoulder,
scalding alive,

one still talking—come on old man,
stumbling up the grated stairs.
Tell my wife and daughter…

Sixty years later a spectral image—
Moncrief's face, holographic,
annealed in the photographic ether.

To Mary of Magdala, the Patron Saint of Habitation

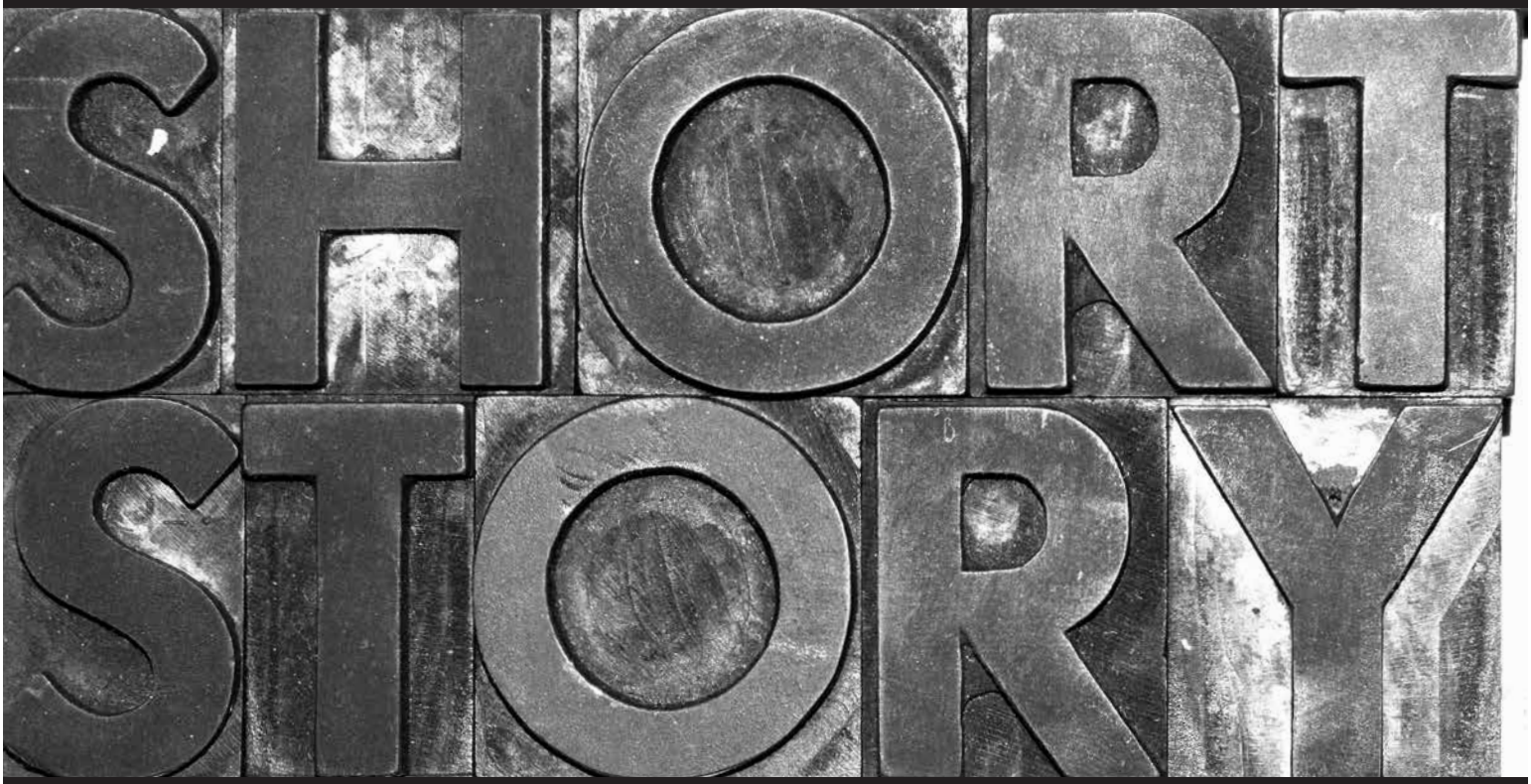
Simona Chitescu Weik
Georgia State University

There isn't a patron saint of women's bodies – I've searched. There is no name to invoke when walking the streets and men call Hey baby, the things I'd like to do to you. My friend says I wish men looked at me like that, but I am just searching for that stone in my pocket, the one I've rubbed smooth between my thumb and index. I touch the stone as one might touch a rosary. Which prayer would I circle in and to whom? And how can I cover this body without erasing its geographies, these breasts and thighs that map the mysterious ways it unfurled against my will? Mary of Magdala, is there a stone heavier than a body, a tomb larger than a self, a garden more verdant than flesh? And when you wrapped your arms around his knees, what did you feel? They say his resurrected form was like water, or like a gold-skeined swarm of bees. Did he slip from your hands, and spill onto your legs, your feet? Was that a kind of resurrection? Mary, I dreamt of getting to a nunnery, those generous folds of cloth in black and white safer than any shape. I wore my father's t-shirts, extra larges, to hide what inhabited me. But even in those days of saggy clothes, my face, my hair gave me away. Little woman, the men called, I know what you're hiding. Mary, the sacred texts say your own body was a dwelling for demons, that Christ but looked into your eyes and they left you. Were they the ghosts of old lovers? Or soldiers who took what you refused to give? Were they the names you murmured in the dark, those names of sorrow we give ourselves when the body becomes a burden too heavy to lug?

A Guide to Surviving Dislocation

Simona Chitescu Weik
Georgia State University

Turn every bitter memory into a funny story. *Begin with, when I used to be an FOB … (fill in the blank differently each time) I didn't own a blow drier. I didn't shave my legs. I thought Oprah was opera, and in an effort to connect talked nervously about Rigoletto for ten minutes.* Laugh along. Never mind the teasing, the glances sharp as lemon slices on the tongue, a prick that makes the eyes water. Blink it away. Never mind the waking nausea in the mornings of each first. Day of school, doctor's visit, mock congress debates, camp. Forget those very public slips into the registers of your mother language, where you become tongue-tangled, pitch-knotted, fuschia-faced. Because to you *live* will always come out as *leave*, the long vowel sounds that lilt from your tongue inserting themselves into English's plain speech. Don't let on that you think and rethink a simple sentence. You'll want your prepositions to stay and not fall out of your mouth, inserting themselves in the wrong grooves, denting your speech. When in doubt, add an *ly* to show you know the difference between adverb and adjective, because to add a syllable would be to learn that your life isn't just a series of subtractions, abstractions, disambiguations, that with each verb correctly described, your throat widens, your chest fills, the bones of your face rearrange themselves in an architecture you stop recognizing. How after you tame your hair, become fluent in *Oprah*, something more mysterious shifts, your grip on the intuitive knowledge of your birth language, the thin calligraphy of meaning that has crenelated your reality. It's a new self that balloons up from this stop bath of words, pure verb, or verve. Now, you've got to let this language into your dreams.


SHORT
STORY

The Film Critic

Morgan Bilicki
Young Harris College

If there was anything the film critic hated more than "The Most Iconic Films of All Time" lists and the films on the lists such as *The Godfather* – which he perpetually believed no one actually enjoyed, let alone watched all the way through – it was when the uncultivated, superficial masses would describe him to their friends as a "movie reviewer." To think that he, a distinguished critic of *film* – which he ran a vlog (video blog: the most sophisticated medium for sharing thoughts and opinions with the world) about with a total of one-hundred-and-twelve subscribers – could be so grossly degraded as to be labeled a mere watcher and reviewer of movies was inexcusable, intolerable, and outright blasphemous. These inaccurate labelers (i.e. the entire student body on campus; his friends; the occasional subscriber; his parents) gave him severe indigestion, which could in turn keep him up all night in discomfort (and his nights were already uncomfortable, as the university wouldn't let him bring his Tempur-Pedic queen-sized bed on campus and trade it out with the tiny twin mattress – which reeked of sweat and something in between mold and beer – that plagued his aching back and provided very little room for, in his mother's words, his "husky" body to lay comfortably), and more often than not, he would be resigned to sitting in the common room on the narrow orange sofa that looked like a soiled block of cheese and watch whatever film he deemed worthy of his time.

And while the film critic did not appreciate being repeatedly forced into a fate of insomnia-by-indigestion, he did enjoy being alone in the dark of the common room with the electric-white light of his laptop screen bouncing off of his skin. It was there that his film-watching ritual took place – a ritual that no other was allowed to participate in, as the mere presence of someone would throw off the entire process, thus causing the film critic to get an entirely warped view of whatever he was watching. There was the unfortunate incident his first week on campus when his roommate, Simon, tried to shove his way into the routine – it was a terrible mistake on Simon's part (though he never admitted it, the jerk), and since then he (Simon) had left the film critic alone while he (the film critic) was working, though there was always the feeling that Simon was just around the corner, listening. This eventually prompted the film critic to invest in a pair of state-of-the-art headphones, which were better than any movie theater's sound system.

The charcoal headphones with red padding and a silver logo were the film critic's direct lifeline to his films – a sort of umbilical cord, one could say, connecting him to the nourishing system of the finest form of art and expression – and without them, the ritual would be incomplete and his time wasted on an unfulfilling experience. Indeed, without the headphones, the film critic would be forced to succumb to having the film's sound floating around the entire common room, subject to every kind of problem one could imagine: bouncing off the stained beige walls; becoming absorbed in every surface except for the film critic's ears; being whisked down the hall and out… out… out of his laptop's speakers forever. After such an experience – unless the film was truly worth watching again – the film critic would make a note in his Word file, "Detestable Horrible Pieces of Trash and Why I Hate Them," as to the title of the film, what caused a negative viewing experience, and why it was worth never watching again. This list was of the utmost importance to the film critic, and he never showed a soul, even if they deserved being knocked down a few pegs by the list, as their film opinion was not even remotely compatible with the film critic's. Such was the case with his pop culture professor, Dr. Bins.

Dr. Bins had rubbed the film critic wrong from the first day of Intro to Popular Culture, with his Freddie Mercury mustache and pointy Italian shoes. Apparently, along with his horrid sense of fashion, the professor had a terrible taste in films, and claimed that *Forrest Gump* was "an American treasure, and one of the greatest movies ever to be made." The film critic hadn't been able to contain himself any longer (as the mustache and shoes were *begging* to be commented on), and lashed into an eloquent monologue as to why *Forrest Gump* was an incredibly terrible, boring, and unimportant film. The film critic still felt empowered when he remembered his speech and how he had likened the film to a tourist attraction, all glitz and apparent glamor but no real depth or anything to truly be excited about. The film critic had firmly asserted that *Forrest Gump* was simply a film made to trick the public into thinking that they were watching a masterpiece of pure American genius, and most other critics had supported it out of some twisted political correctness due to the film's high gross; the film critic had ended his poetic outburst suggesting that Dr. Bins should spend his time watching *good* films, like *Terminator Salvation*, which had emotional depth and action. The film critic still felt puzzled at Dr. Bins' reaction that day, when he merely chuckled and said, "There's

always one in every class." What did he (Dr. Bins) know about him (the film critic), as he (the film critic) was totally and one hundred-percent unique, with no one else even close to achieving the same film-guru status?

The film critic learned that day that people were interested in his negative opinions, and he began making vlog posts about the un-rewatchable films he sat through (most of these posts, he thought, turned out extremely well), with titles such as "*The Silence of the Lambs*? More like 'Why did I Cancel my Dinner Plans!'" and "*It's a Wonderful Life* if you avoid this snoozefest." In these vlog posts (as well as all of his other vlog posts), the film critic would give a performance worthy of an Oscar – he would wave his arms around while yelling about what a horrific waste of money these films were, and how too many times people fell into the alluring trap of a big budget, a deep message, or an all-star cast; he would throw whatever was nearest to him if he felt as if a film were truly disastrous (though he would take care to not throw anything too valuable of his, and tended to reserve throwing trash-worthy objects such as Simon's English anthologies, which were so large that they made for a particularly loud, dramatic crash and were always conveniently located everywhere except for Simon's side of the room); sometimes, the film critic would even sniffle, pinching his inner thigh until his eyes got misty.

The film critic's performances were truly a sight to behold, and he would often remark to his vlog followers that if Hollywood wasn't so bigoted with their typecasting, he could get any part in any film – ranging from action hero extraordinaire to rom-com lead with dreamy eyes and a winning heart – but, as things were, a guy like the film critic would be subjected to portraying the goofy, fat sidekick who was only there for lame one-liners, and the film critic was just clearly (no matter what his father said) not *that* guy. No, he was much more sophisticated and philosophical than that guy, as that guy (the fat sidekick) wouldn't be so emotionally complex, like the film critic was – the sidekick would never understand, for instance, the trials of coming from such a desolate childhood home.

Both the film critic's mother and father had worked for as long as he could remember. His mother spent all day typing in a cubicle full of smoke, and his father sold cheap cars in a cheap suit, and both had spent the film critic's entire childhood working and complaining about working (and then complaining that all they could complain about was work). Due to their schedules, they had hired a babysitter, Cameron, who would watch the film critic every day after school until he was old enough to stay home alone (which, his parents decided, was when he was fifteen). She (Cameron) was more concerned with dirty romance novels and filing her nails than she was watching the film critic. Cameron was recently divorced, and while she never played with the film critic, she would talk to him about her life – though she claimed she was fine and didn't miss that two-timing liar and was able to start saving up for that salon she always wanted but could never afford because of that drunkard. The film critic always enjoyed Cameron's stories, when she would tell him about all the things she wanted to do – would finally be able to do – and would describe to him in detail all of her dreams, despite being a small-town girl with a small-town life.

Even then, in his sensitive youth, the film critic could see how Cameron's life would play out just like the middle-aged mid-life crisis heroine's would – and thus found her and other women suffering from self-identity crises to be both repugnant and captivating; he could still remember the way she would corral him in front of the TV, her ruby-red nails clinking against each other, and he could remember how she would set a Tupperware glass of milk on a napkin on the ground, always next to a paper plate full of Oreos. To this day, the film critic could smell her cheap perfume and visualize her blue eyeshadow every time he ate Oreos – which was every time he sat down to watch a film, as it was a central part to his film-watching ritual just as it was when he was a kid. During the film, he would pry one cookie away from the soft pad of frosting, while little dark, sandy crumbs stuck to his fingers, and like the farmer who works the soil, the film critic's hands looked as if they had dirt on them, hard-earned and rewarding. Then, never taking his eyes off the screen (a move he had perfected while young so as to not miss a second of his cinematic viewing experience), the lone cookie would enter his salivating mouth, and chewing, he would become high on the semi-sweet aftertaste, which was only rivaled by what he did next: after eating the tops of two cookies, the film critic would be left with a frosting-covered cookie in each hand, and with surgeon-like precision (while still watching the film on his laptop screen), he would press the frosting patties into one, double double-stuffed monster of a cookie, then put the whole thing into his mouth, heart palpitating with delight, just like when he was a kid.

In a way, the film critic owed some of his success to Cameron, as if it hadn't been for her lazy, self-centered nature, then the film critic might not be the guru that he had become. Without Cameron, he may

never have watched *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* – a film which still sat very near his heart, and always would. The film critic had never truly been in love with any girl, if love was what he felt for this – this masterpiece of a film. Sometimes, he got a little teary just thinking about it and its emotional depth, and he still cried (though he would only admit it to his one-hundred-and-twelve vlog followers) when Darth Maul was sliced in half and thrown down into an abyss. He related to this scene on so many levels – especially as a child – because he too felt like he was being split in half by the forces of supposed good around him, such as his parents who had constantly berated him with phrases such as "do your homework" and "stop whining" and "what do you mean you don't like meatloaf?" and "you should play sports or you'll be fat your whole life." And, yes, while Darth Maul seemed to stay dead (though the film critic, like every *true* fan, firmly held on to the notion that Darth Maul, being the epic warrior-assassin that he was, could never really die), his apparent death only strengthened the film critic. As a little boy – though he was never actually little, as his father never ceased to point out – the film critic had resolved that he too would fight those who pretended to work for the greater good but, in all actuality, followed their own selfish goals and used excuse after excuse to really get their own way. There was nothing worse – nothing – than when people used justifications from good motives for their own self-centered goals, like when Qui-Gon Jinn wanted to train Anakin. This film inspired him to become one of the greatest film critics to ever review cinematic works of genius – even though his parents had told him to grow up and pursue an actual career where he could actually make money and actually do something with his life (though the film critic knew this was their selfishness showing through the cracks in their good image, as all they really wanted was for him to work so that they didn't have to) – and granted, the world didn't appreciate him yet, but they would, just as soon as he could get more vlog followers….

The film critic had officially started his vlogging career his second semester at college, though before he had tried a blog. But the typing strained his wrists which had cost him a huge battle in *World of Warcraft* and turned him into an internet laughing stock – and on top of all that, he had received numerous hateful comments and Facebook messages berating his grammar and style. What did his grandmother possibly know about grammar? Just because she used to teach didn't give her the right to tell him he was "doing it wrong." How does one "do" grammar wrong anyway? It's open to artistic liberty. No, none of them had understood him; he was an artist before his time, which made his transition from blogging to vlogging all the more important, for vlogging represented the future, and the film critic planned to be a celebrity because of this by the time he was thirty.

The film critic had harbored a dream of being famous ever since he was young, as how could anyone watch films and *not* be overcome with their sheer awesomeness? He often thought of what being famous was like when he was a child, and would sneak into his parents' bedroom and practice giving acceptance speeches into the long dressing mirror that had been his great-grandparents'. He held a statue of Mary in one hand, and used the other to wave, clasp his chest, gesture in a sweeping way, blow a kiss – all of which he was very good at, and would use to drive his future audience wild. And after he had perfected his performance, he tried to show his father, who told the film critic that he was busy doing taxes (even though he was reading the newspaper and said last week he was doing the taxes), so the film critic had tried to show his mother, but she was pressing her chest against the kitchen table, reaching over stacks of paper and magazines to grab a pencil that had rolled away. Ever since she had seen pictures of the Eames' furniture she had spent her nights brooding over blank paper, saying she could do much better, and that anyone could draw a lousy chair and that the film critic should be doing his homework and why was he holding Mary he should know better than that because Mary was delicate and what if he broke her he would not be a happy little boy did he want to break Mary she didn't think Jesus would like that now would He?

As such, the film critic had kept his golden dreams a secret since then, so when he would go back home for Thanksgiving or breaks, he would tell his parents that everything was fine, and he was pursuing his business degree, and "hangin'" with friends. The film critic could easily fool his parents – after all, he had spent a great deal of his childhood practicing various methods of acting (he had even been in a play once – he had been Panicked Village Man #2 – and had easily stolen the spotlight) – but the film critic had a harder time convincing relatives. They always asked so many questions – especially Aunt Millie. Over the years, the film critic had (unfortunately) discovered that if he acted like he enjoyed his dork-of-a-cousin's company, then Aunt Millie would leave him alone. The problem was his dork-of-a-cousin only talked about TV shows. Like *he*, the film critic, would want to talk about nothing but *TV shows*. Ugh, that dork-of-a-cousin needed to get a life. The film critic was often forced to escape his dork-of-a-

cousin's clutches and meander with his aunts and uncles, putting his acting skills and patience to the test. Typically, they always asked the same questions (how was school – was he making good grades – did he party a lot – what were the classes like – what was he going to do with his degree), but sometimes, sometimes they'd throw in the dreaded question about the dreaded subject: GIRLS.

It's not like he hadn't *tried*. The opposite sex had always captivated the film critic, they must just be… intimidated. And who could blame them, really? The film critic was unlike any other guy on campus: the film critic was more of an intellectual of art, which was really the best of both worlds, as he had the brains and the creativity, which made for a perfect package.

And even then, with all girls being intimidated by him, the film critic wouldn't possibly lower his standards so as to injure both a girl and himself – it would be disastrous, as the girl's heart would be broken when it didn't work out (not to mention that other girls would see the film critic with a girl that's not his type, and all fawn after him, thus having him partly responsible for more heartbreak); and as for the film critic, he would lose considerable time and energy by dating the wrong person (like Cameron had said once about her ex-husband), like in *The Princess Bride*, when Prince Humperdinck (a character that the film critic believed he could relate most well to, being a chivalrous type of knight himself) spends all his time with that horrid Buttercup, even though she's *clearly* not good enough for him. The film critic would break out in a cold sweat every time he thought of this, and would wipe his hands on his Nickleback shirt, or his comforter, or the orange sofa, wherever he happened to be. To distill this feeling, the film critic would watch a romantic movie – something good, calming, with a touch of humor and an ending that would leave him happy and full of hope. The film critic would make sure no one else was around, then would lower himself onto the floor. There, he would gaze into his laptop screen, watching, smiling, laughing along with Meg Ryan or Julia Roberts, rooting for Billy Crystal or Tom Hanks, imagining what true love must feel like. The film critic would reach for an Oreo during a moment of triumph, when the hero got the girl, then eat the top after twisting it off. He would reach for his glass of milk, then snap back into reality when he would hear the sound of his nails clinking against the glass.

Nothing Dies in our Quiet Town

Sydney Bollinger
University of West Georgia

I clearly remember the night we met Martha because the air was cold and crisp and smelled like harvested corn. My mom had driven me over to my best friend Lainey's house in her summer car. Towards the end of October, her Honda Accord without four-wheel drive would be completely useless in the ice and snow; instead, she would have to drive the old Jeep we bought so she could trek down icy roads to the hospital where she worked. Lainey's house, on Hatchet Man Road between a haunted cemetery and an Amish home, was one of my favorite places. The four-story house was built to resemble a log cabin. As soon as my mom hit the brakes, I jumped out of the car, bag in hand, and without saying goodbye, ran up to my friend's house. Unlike other parents in the area, mine never stayed around to chat. I grew up in Lima, a typical small northern city. My family was used to minding our own business, only resorting to conversation when absolutely necessary. So, my mom promptly turned around and drove out of the driveway, waving to me in the process. Lainey's mom, Rebecca, opened the door before I had the chance to knock and welcomed me inside, yelling at Lainey to come upstairs. As soon as I stepped foot into the house, my glasses became foggy. Rebecca teased me about the incident and then went back to her house chores.

"Hey Lucy, how ya doin?" her dad asked me as he dumped corn into the corn burner that heated their house. I took in a deep breath. The smell of burning corn was sweet, but not overpowering.

"I'm fine… beat my dad at HORSE this morning," I said.

"Tell him that next time I see him I'll whoop his butt in three point knockout," he answered. Our dads coached our fifth grade basketball team and often liked to challenge each other to silly games at the end of practice. During my conversation with her dad, Lainey had come up from the basement and stood by my side, looking at me with determination. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and blue eyeliner lined her bottom lid. She wore the black sweatshirt and sweatpants we got at practice earlier that week.

"You ready for tonight?" she asked.

"Ghost hunting?" I answered. Her dad chuckled,

clearly amused at our obsession with the ghosts in the area. Lainey nodded excitedly and dragged me down to her basement room so we could plan our evening. I pulled the "Ghost Hunting and Occult Stimulation Transcripts," our binder of ghost-hunting documentation affectionately referred to as GHOST, out of my bag and flipped it to the latest entry.

"It's going to be tonight, I can feel it," she said. For months, we had been tracking the Hatchet Man and looking for his glowing grave in the neighboring cemetery. Occasionally we would be graced with a glimmer of a person or a certain sparkle on one of the gravestones. When I was younger, I liked believing these wild things because it gave life to the boring place I lived. Nothing exciting ever happened, and if something out of the ordinary did occur, word traveled fast. Lainey and I had grown up with our classmates, played on the same sports teams and gone to the same social events for years. Ghost hunting gave me a good story to tell my parents or my peers at school or my cousins whom I only saw at family gatherings. Since childhood I understood that the only way to win in Logan County, Ohio, is through stories and experiences that are better than the stories and experiences of those surrounding you. In desperate attempts to become the best, I made my stories, knowing that it didn't matter if they were true or not.

"My dad built a bonfire out back and set up our tent and my mom gave us a cooler with pop and a plate of cookies," Lainey told me. "Pepsi," she added. I smiled wide and pumped my fists into the air.

"Something has to happen tonight," I said. "We've been searching forever." I flipped through a few more pages in the GHOST, trying to determine where we should hunt for ghosts. I began to study the x's which marked past supposed sightings on our map. My eyes widened after a faux triangulation of ghost activity.

"I think we need to stake out between the Amish family and the cemetery in your backyard," I said, surprised at how we had never searched there in the first place. Many of our nights were spent wandering on the dark road, only wide enough for one and a half cars, carrying kitchen knives in case a coyote pounced out of the corn field across from Lainey's house or in the event that we actually met the murderous Hatchet Man with his bloody axe.

"Okay… we'll have to be careful though, I don't want them to be mad if we cross into their yard," Lainey said. We had never spoken to the Amish family next door, but would watch them daily, mesmerized by their lives off the grid, a chosen rejection by society. We coexisted peacefully, but only if the Amish never did anything to bother us modernized citizens. The horse and buggy, the dismissal of a technologically advanced life, and the hatred of American values could be bothersome at times. The prejudice and annoyance would remain into adulthood, eventually to be passed down to our children.

"They go to sleep early anyway… we'll be fine," I said, picking up the GHOST and heading out to the tent.

Lainey's backyard was huge and bordered with a corn field like my own, but much more interesting. We terrorized the field behind her house in the summer, ripping up stalks to form pathways and hideouts, creating mazes in the middle of the night when the farmer and Lainey's parents could not see us. She had a pool to lounge by in the summer, a trampoline for front flips, and a playset that would serve as our lookout for Hatchet Man and the glowing grave when we were too frightened to face the danger of murder head on. The autumn nighttime was quiet, filled only with the sound of a gentle breeze rustling the dead leaves and corn husks that had invaded the yard. The Amish family next door lit candles in the window. They would be inside for the night. A couple of wooden tables and headboards, built by the father, sat out with a fresh coat of varnish.

I pulled on my second sweatshirt and a second pair of socks to fight the cold. Lainey was bundled in her snowboarding jacket, an activity my mom forbade in fear of broken limbs or frostbitten death. I pulled out the binder again while sitting around the bonfire, facing the cemetery, looking for signs of a glowing headstone. According to the legend, the only way to actually see the glowing headstone was while driving a car; however, we always chose to ignore this part of the legend and look for the gravestone on foot, or from afar.

"Ghost or headstone?" she asked. I thought for a moment. "Just asking 'cause the ghost usually doesn't walk back here," she said.

"I think… both," I answered. "Won't he walk out of the grave? My calculations say that he should walk right back here, through the Amish yard, and then head to the road." Lainey pursed her lips and then nodded yes. We set up our camp chairs back to back next to the fire, confident in our ability to pin down ghost activity. Lainey watched the cemetery and I watched the Amish house.

It seemed like hours of sitting to our childlike concepts of time, and then, I saw a glimmer of white movement across the backyard of the Amish house through my half shut eyes. My glasses had fallen onto the ground. At this point the fire had all but died, a few glowing embers remained in the ash, and Lainey's head was bobbing against my shoulder as

she drifted in and out of sleep. The figure was moving toward us, all white and willowy. I moved and shook Lainey back to full consciousness, pointing at the figure who grew closer. She flipped her chair around and sat next to me. We held tightly onto each other.

"Hello?" it called out, a girlish voice marred by an accent that I did not recognize. Our eyes grew wide. Months of ghost hunting had only produced glimpses- a flicker of movement, a faint glow of a gravestone, the crunch of leaves and twigs. Never before had we been witness to a voice, a fully formed human spirit. She came closer, gliding in a way that made her immortal to my eyes. I picked up my glasses and hurriedly shoved them back onto my face. They were crooked but I did not care. She was beautiful. Pale with smooth skin, light blue eyes and her brown hair pulled back tight from her face. Her dated nightdress fluttered in the wind. "Why are you sitting here, in the cold?"

Lainey looked frightened, cowering behind me as I stood up to talk to the ghost girl.

"Looking for you," I replied. "Are you his daughter? Hatchet Man?" She laughed at my naïve accusations and reached her hand out to me. I touched it and felt lively flesh.

"No. I am real. I am called Martha." She said. "I live there," she pointed to the Amish house, "and often watch you and your friend when you sit here." She smacked a mosquito that had landed on her hand. I contemplated her, confused by her existence, wishing that I had never met her, never ruined the anonymity Lainey and I had with the Amish family that lived next door.

"Why do you watch us?" Lainey's voice was a squeak.

"Don't you watch me?" she answered. Lainey and I reddened. We did watch her and her family, on a regular basis. Always from afar, always commenting on the way they did their laundry or grew their food or treated their horses. In our minds, the Amish were an oddity, a museum exhibit, a group to shift the blame on when something went wrong in our community.

"Yeah…" my voice trailed off. Martha studied us, a pair of girls stricken with embarrassment. She smiled warmly.

"I watch you for the same reason," she answered. The wind blew and her dress along with it, the white fabric rippling. She turned a fraction of a degree and the moonlight hit her from the back. She was ethereal. "I will wave to you the next time I see you, and I would hope that you would wave back." She turned on the heel of a practical black boot, lifted her nightdress, and walked back to her house. Lainey and I watched in silence until her figure disappeared into the all-consuming dark. There were no lights out here, only the moon and a sky filled with stars.

Too freaked out by our short conversation and the clashing of cultures to do anything else, we crawled into the tent and talked about the boys we wanted to date. We pretended we were psychic. We made up stories about Martha's life as the daughter of Hatchet Man. We wrote her down in the GHOST and she became our first official sighting. We went to sleep and dreamed of ghost girls and cemeteries and men who killed their families with bloody axes.

The following Monday, Lainey and I were the talk of our small elementary school. We had a conversation with a real life ghost girl. Our eyes would meet at the mention of Martha, daughter of Hatchet Man. We felt a slight rising of guilt for turning this real girl into a Logan County legend, but it dissipated quickly in favor of the recognition we earned. Our legacies as amateur ghost hunters lived on, and the story was told for years to come. Nothing dies in our quiet town.

Lies and rumors and truths stuck with us until we finally left the wretched place. People forgot about me for a while, but I came back. There is no real leaving, no real escape. And when I came back, because I was destined to return, the lies and rumors and truths were dug up from the grave and held over my head when I married and bought a house and had children. And now, I am in my forties sitting at a high school football game because my son plays like every other kid in town and my daughter is in the marching band. A person I attended high school with sits down and says to me, "Oh, hey Lucy, do you remember when you and Lainey talked to a ghost? Crazy to think about now… how is Lainey anyways? I know she made it to the city… Columbus… lucky to get out of here… but LoCo has its charm, don't you think?"

It Just Comes At Me Like It's Still There

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No explanation was offered when Grandpa started to leave. I knew the story already; the war was hard on him, and that was why he was so distant. His life was hard, and that was why he stomped out of the Thai restaurant on my fourteenth birthday. Because of the war—he stomped and huffed and grumbled at the restaurant's lack of liquor license and almost knocked over the pretty waitress as he shoved by her and out the smudged glass door, which banged against the outside wall. A string of colored wood beads that hung from the door clicked like loose teeth. That was why when we got out of the restaurant after a voiceless meal full of the sounds of spoons clinking on plates and ice shifting in glasses we didn't see him in the parking lot. That was why my dad said he was going to go look for him.

My grandfather was a life-long military man and never went to college or worked in any professions that stimulated him on an intellectual level. I couldn't tell how he felt about his dearth of knowledge. Maybe he couldn't see it at all. Maybe I'm really pushing to find answers, and I may have no evidence, but maybe he didn't want to see what he was missing. He knew what he needed to know. Anything beyond his line of sight was unnecessary, superfluous, elitist nonsense.

When I talked about what college I wanted to go to, saying, "Grandpa they have a really innovative arts program," Grandpa said, "The school's basketball team was really something back in Fifty-five, and they had this power forward with some kind of an amazing left-handed jump-shot; but the kid only played his freshman season with the university team before being drafted by the Rochester Royals and blowing out his knee in preseason never to play again. Damn shame, what could have been."

All these statistics he could call up to the fore-front of his mind, as though he were reading it out of a crisp morning paper. Those details were important history. But when the touring Mondrian exhibit came to the Museum of Modern Art in the City for one weekend—and he was the only person in the family with the time to drive me the 160 miles to see it—that just wasn't happening. He didn't care. We weren't going. No explanation came. It wasn't necessary.

In the parking lot in front of the Thai restaurant, next to the gray Volvo station wagon, I remember staring at an oil stain that looked like one of the screaming faces from *Guernica*. I wanted to say, "Hey, look at this," but Dad was headed down the street.

Grandpa was at the end of the block at a bar. I know because after a few moments I followed Dad. Even when Grandma said, "Let your father handle it," I followed him regardless of the consequences—because I wanted to know. I wanted to know why a drink was more important than rice noodles and birthday cake.

Stealing down the cracked sidewalk in grass-stained sneakers, I stayed at a distance so Dad couldn't turn around, see me, raise his arm and point, not at me but through me, and say, "Back to the car."

I followed Dad into the bar, even though I was sure they'd never let in a twelve year old. I was always told that bars were, "no place for kids." But no one seemed to notice my presence. Maybe no one cared. The dark room was slightly aglow in the corners with the neon red and green of beer signs. I hurried past the two chubby, bearded biker guys playing pool, who smelled like corn chips and old cigarettes, to the bar stool where Grandpa was sitting. Dad was already talking to him. Grandpa was tipping back a dark dirty-water-brown drink from a short clear glass and staring straight ahead, vacant eyes pointing straight through the rows of liquor bottles that sat on the shelf. The puke-colored paint peeled like dead bark on a eucalyptus tree.

Dad wasn't getting through with his "Embarrass this" and "Disgrace that" or even a "Ruined birthday something-or-other." Grandpa wasn't going to turn. His world was somewhere else. I wanted Dad to say something more, though I didn't know what, something like, "Tough it out for your grandson, at least for today." Dad couldn't seem to find the words to say either. At one point he reached out as if to put a hand on his father's shoulder, maybe even to grab him, but he pulled back, still struggling to find any language.

Grandpa wasn't saying anything in return, just silence, but I knew if he were talking, he'd have said he was a "military man." He "deserved a drink" and, "You can't understand."

Dad certainly didn't understand and walked out, snapping at me, "Come on."

But I stayed. I wasn't content with Grandpa's non-answer. Dad was gone, soaking in his own frustration. He hadn't noticed that I stayed behind.

I sat down on a bar stool next to Grandpa, and just stared at him, at his perfectly cut and combed hair, set to perfection with seventy-six years of hair

tonic—I stared at his laser precision mustache—I just stared, and Grandpa snapped his fingers at the bartender, saying "Get this kid a soda," carrying the implication, 'cause I was a goddamn war hero.'

I sipped a cola that tasted like more than half water.

Moments scraped by. Grandpa still didn't turn, but he could feel me staring, demanding. He must have realized I wasn't walking out. His son didn't have the patience, but I was going to wait him out. He must have felt that I wasn't going to let him out-stubborn me today. Grandpa said, "I don't like this any more than you do, but you don't know what it's like. I've seen stuff I can't forget, and I ain't going to forget any time soon. It just comes at me like it's still there at the end of my gun crying tears down those slant eyes, babbling in some savage language I can't make heads or tails of, but that don't matter, cause I damn well know they're saying 'Don't blow my brains out the back of my head,' cause it's the same goddamn thing they cried the last million times they looked up at me with that rice paddy mud caked on their face. I know it. I hear. But that don't stop me from pulling the damn trigger, cause that is why I'm standing there in the mud in some godforsaken swamp."

Back when Grandpa was sent to that swamp he was only a few years older than I was as I sat in that bar sipping the water-cola. I'd been in a swamp once when Dad took me camping during the previous summer. I saw a frog the size of a small cat and a thousand tadpoles swimming in circles in a tiny pool of muck and twigs. I was too old to catch fireflies in jam jars, which made the swamp interesting for about ten seconds, and I was aching to leave by the end of the first day, two days before the camping trip was over.

Then, at night, lying in the tent, frogs croaked all around us in a hurricane-like roar. Then, suddenly, they'd stop, all six million of them. The swamp would turn to utter silence in an instant. Then one would start croaking, just one for a few beats, then all of them would join in. Maybe an owl had flown by. Maybe there's a specific croak one frog gives when it sees an owl, and the croak is instantly echoed, and they all know to stop, and then the owl leaves, and one frog sees the danger is gone and gives a croak that says "All clear," which is echoed until all six million are croaking again.

In the bar, under the neon buzz, staring at Grandpa's craggy face, I tried to think of the bravest thing I'd ever done. Stealing my lunch money back from Tim Pope in third grade? Going off a four foot jump on my mountain bike when I was ten?

Above the bottles of liquor that sat on the bar shelves hung a static-speckled TV. The screen glowed with pictures of soldiers and tanks and sand. The bartender stared up at the tube. Film played in green and black as rockets launched into the desert night. Grandpa just looked down into his dirty-water drink watching the ice sweat.

I think maybe he knew something was wrong, that maybe he wasn't supposed to be there in that swamp, that maybe he sees their tears when he closes his eyes, and he knows he was wrong and can't do a thing to change it. Maybe he saw the same things happening all over again on the evening news on TVs across the country, and on the television hanging above the liquor bottles in that bar, and he knew some kid wasn't going to come home, and some other kid was going to come home with blood on his hands and wouldn't be able to shut his eyes without seeing what he did, and that kid would grow old at the end of a bottle and ruin his grandkid's birthday because the pretty waitress looks like someone he killed.

Female-to-Male Passing Tips

Charlee Keating
Agnes Scott College

- **Cut your hair short, but not too short.** Buzz cuts make you look like a lesbian.
- **Walk with your shoulders, not with your hips.** Step heavy like there's five-pound weights in your boots. It's no wonder they think you're a girl when you dart down the street on your toes.
- **Keep your back straight.** It makes you look taller.
- **Puff your chest out, but not too far**, or they'll see the breasts under that sports bra you wore instead of your binder. You should have worn your binder, but the stabbing pain in your sternum has become so common that you wouldn't notice a heart attack if you had one. It hurts even when you're not wearing it. It hurts even when you're in the tub, buoyant and blind, claw marks crisscrossing your chest like power lines.
- **Don't slouch.** You're walking with your hips again. Swing your arms a little. Walk like you own the sidewalk, even though you'd like nothing more than to lie down on it and cry.
- **Avoid talking if you can.** You'll pass for a twelve, maybe thirteen year old boy if you don't talk, but the second you open your mouth they're going to misgender you. You think about tearing out your vocal cords with the knife you keep under the sink. You think about learning sign language, trembling fingers folding around black coffee, but your hands are small and feminine and they'd give you away just the same. The barista calls you ma'am. You smile at her because it's the polite thing to do.
- **Don't cross your legs.** You feel like crossing your legs and your arms and if you had any other appendages you'd feel like crossing those, too; you want to fold into yourself until you collapse, a singularity, but you'll sit with legs wide because that's how a man is supposed to sit, trembling fingers folding around black coffee, "HAVE A WONDERFUL DAY, MA'AM."
- **If you're tempted to grow out your hair again, don't.** You want to look like Davey Havok in 2003 with black hair down to his elbows, but he's five foot ten with a jaw like a stalactite. You will never look like him. You will look like Lydia Deetz and people will misgender you. Buy a wig if you don't believe me.
- **Lift weights twice a week.** Getting out of bed is a struggle on its own, but having muscle on your arms and back makes people spend a little more time guessing before they ultimately misgender you. You think of slicing off your breasts with the knife you keep under the sink, but then you'll never have that scarless chest your A-cup might have afforded you. You hold back.
- **Don't look at yourself naked.** You'll wind up frozen, spending ten, twenty minutes at the mirror, pinching and turning and trying to stretch yourself into the man-like shape you're supposed to have but the waist will always be too small, the ass too big, the shoulders too narrow, and soon you'll be floating outside of a body that can't possibly be your own. Cover the mirror with a towel if you have to. In a year and a half you'll either be filling your veins with testosterone or emptying them in a warm bath.

Either way, no one will misgender you again.

Strategies of Containment

Rebecca Kumar
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East Biloxi 2006

1.

Susie Lê nicknames the boys after presidents. Nixon has thin lips that don't hold his spit back. When she kisses him, her lips get so wet and slippery that she has to pull her head away from his opening-and-closing fish mouth. In these brief lulls, she curls up her bottom lip and uses her front teeth to squeegee the excess saliva into her mouth. But she never lets him know that she's managing the make-out in this way. Nixon thinks she's biting her lip because she really likes him, like she's not kissing him for the money. But she doesn't want all that spit slavering down her chin and giving her pimples.

After each boy, Susie runs hard on the grey grass – from one side of the still Katrina – stricken football field to the other, letting the sea air work like an astringent on her face, breaking down the sticky residue of her time under the high school stadium bleachers. By the opposite goal post, she uses the underside of a broken aluminum bleacher to check her reflection. She makes an 'o' with her mouth and, with her open palm, wipes up and down her sore lips, sloughing away any chapped flakes that have arisen, an occupational hazard. She shakes her dark straight hair into a fresh ponytail. Finally, she rinses her mouth with a scalding green wash. Susie holds it in a clenched jaw and puffed cheeks, letting it burn into the spaces between her teeth. When it begins to irritate the top of her mouth, she swooshes it around, bleaching the flesh around her back molars. She holds the wash in until the pain is so unbearable she can only swallow or spit. She spits – and her tongue is left feeling like it's never going to taste again. There are times, when she's cleaned so well, held the wash in her mouth for so long, that the skin on the insides of her cheeks peels off in small translucent gobs that she has to extract with her fingers. That's when she feels as if she's never had a boy in her mouth.

With Kennedy there's no spit at all. He starts off kissing her quick, darting his head back and forth. The tips of his lips pinch the tips of hers. Then he starts biting her like that – like a chicken nipping at feed – on her lips, on her neck. He's misdirected too, thinking that Susie groans because she likes it. She lets him keep on like he wants because Kennedy pays her the most for a "no touching session" at $7 for 10 minutes. But one time he clamped down too hard on her mouth, transforming her lower lip into the ridged, red and pinky insides of a peach. When he saw what he had done, he gave her an extra $3.

Eisenhower prefers touching to kissing. Susie has a strict 5 minute rule for touching. The presidents can touch her anywhere for 5 minutes at $7 under her clothes. No squeezing, no poking – only touching. Susie doesn't touch anyone. Not for any price. She will not give it up this way. But once the boy she calls Johnson asked if she would get on her knees and just look at it. It smelled like talcum powder. He paid her $10.

The best kisser is Ford. He seems sincere. He's black but she calls him Ford anyway. He never touches her like Eisenhower, but he holds her close and presses up against her, and sometimes she almost wishes that he would. He once kissed her eyelids and then asked, "How does a Vietnamese girl get freckles?" He is better with the time than she is. As soon as his 10 minutes are up, he pulls away and hands her $5 and squeezes her hand softly.

She tells each boy that they were the best she has ever had and sometimes they pay her extra. Other times, though, they think she'll let her kiss them for free.

"Come on, baby," the white boys say, "Didn't you like it?"

"Of course," Susie smiles, "but you know how this works."

"It feels like a gift when you kiss."

"Oh, you're making me blush," Susie fakes shyness and giggles in the way that the boys probably imagine Asian girls to giggle.

"You don't pay for gifts."

"You're a flirt!" Susie teases, running the tips of her fingers across the front and back pockets of their blue jeans as if to look for a wallet.

And if they still don't pay, she makes herself cry and the money is in her hands.

2.

Susie likes that Biloxi is a beach town with Mississippi woods. On the weekends, in a pair of short shorts and kneepads, she walks past the small trickling inlets of grey water, lets her fingers brush the rough bark of old trees, until she arrives at a small clearing. She brushes leaves and ants off her folded comforter – which never fully dries after the rain, the humidity preserving the wetness. It smells like mildew and Susie breathes it in. She folds it in half four times and tests the padding. Satisfied, she crouches down in front of her soft landing and positions herself as if

to play leapfrog with no partner. She takes three slow and meditative inhales to begin and then leans her torso forward and tucks her head under her chin. She breathes deeply in-and-out fast and then faster, counting to thirty in her mind – shoo-shoo shoo-shoo -shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo-shooshooshooshoo-shooshooshooshooshooshooshooshoohooshooshoo-shooshooshoo shooshoo – before popping up onto her legs, sticking her thumb in her mouth, blowing hard, and passing out, falling forward onto the comforter.

She comes back to the sound of loud gulls – echoing through her foggy head. She rolls onto her back to see the sun beginning to set. She's covered in a light sweat, new mosquito bites developing on her legs. Her body feels numb and weightless, the world around her is tinted purple. Smiling, she gets up to knock herself out again.

3.

Susie began kissing boys for pay when her uncle began talking – blabbering – to the ocean. Her family and their church community were the first to return to Biloxi after the storm to find that the ocean was everywhere. Even Susie's thoughts seem to be crusted with the stink of rotting fish. The Lê family took the Eucharist in the parking lot of their destroyed church and then Uncle An dived into the Gulf in search of his disappeared shrimp boat. He emerged confused, his thin body quaking. He cursed the water and spat on the sand.

The family restaurant fared better than most houses and businesses. The general structure of space had withheld the winds, so before waiting for the country's formal assistance, they, with the help of the church, began to rebuild what they could. Uncle An, though, refused to participate – he refused to even fish for the family restaurant.

"Your uncle has always trusted the water to save us," Susie's mother reminded her, surveying the restaurant's devastated garden, planning in her mind where she would replant cilantro and where she would situate the chickens' cages.

Susie's mom told the story again and Susie pretended like she was hearing it for the first time as she systematically, obediently, dug the earth with a sharp bulb planter, making evenly spaced plots for carrots and onions, a never ending staggered chess board. She worked and listened her mother drone the tale once again. Uncle An bore no biological relation to her. He was a young fisherman – a new husband – in wartimes, on the delta of the Mekong. After the fall of Saigon, Uncle An, alone, took to the sea. He boarded the boat on which he and his friends used to fish. It was crowded. He sat, knees to his chin. A woman he would never see again placed Susie's father – a toddler then – into his arms. Countless boats left – just to leave. Some sunk in monsoon, others drifted into pirate territory, some stalled, the people starved or drowned. Still, there were those that were caught and brought back. Or those that were attacked by the Cambodians. In this country, Uncle An and Susie's father have been called "refugees."

Susie imagined that small boat fighting the pushes and pulls of the current, floating into a watery expanse. She thought about the chopper helicopters over her own Mississippi coastline, the ones that came too late last August, pulling up the lucky few who did not drown. Her heart picked up pace while she pulled shards of debris – glass, metal, wood, and plastic – out of the dirt, making row upon row of root vegetable graves, which, her God-fearing-America-loving family hoped, would return, realer than Lazarus of Bethany.

4.

At the psychiatric ward in the still rundown hospital, Uncle An sat on the edge of a faded mint-green colored chair and rocked his body in a back-and-forth, back-and-forth lope that, although steady and consistently rhythmic, made everyone around him, even the doctors, anxious. Above the wails of patients suffering from PTSD and borderline personality disorder, they told An that it was "time to retire" and "time to stop smoking" and "probably time to stop drinking, too." Susie's parents agreed and told the doctor that they would monitor him closely and thanked him for his time.

Uncle An continued to rock. He stared at the doctors and curled up his lip and did his Mick Jagger impression – the one that used to make Susie and her mother laugh. "Time," he sang, "is on my side. O yes it is!"

As the doctors rushed to administer pills to him, Susie heard her uncle recite, once again, the presidents' names in vain.

"Kennedys or Bushes," Uncle An, hummed to the Rolling Stones' tune, "You Americans are all the same."

5.

Susie counts her bills – $5, $5, $5, $1, $1, $1, $1 – and decides she should begin charging more for touching. She was, after all, outgrowing her pre-teen bras, no longer needing to stuff them with dishrags or water balloons.

Susie had hoped to make more cash, but $19 is enough, she thinks, to buy her uncle a pack of

cigarettes and 40 ounces of beer from the beach bodega. She is also able to buy a greasy envelope of fried fish. It has been some time since the storm, but these coastal gulls still seem starved and fly close to Susie. She breaks off a piece of fish and throws it far from her and watches as the birds trample each other and jab one another's bodies with their beaks just for a flake.

She finds Uncle An in his folding chair that faces the area of the Gulf where he used to fish to bring fresh seafood into the restaurant. He is bent over and she knows that he is whispering to the water. This is his favorite time of the day – when the sun is high and unforgivingly hot. The fish swim downward into cooler, clearer depths. The brown coastal water on the surface begins to rise up into the muddy humidity. These are the same waters of the Mekong, the same steam rising off the water and onto An's face.

Susie opens the 40 ounce bottle and puts it next to her uncle's bare foot; the pattern of fishnet is tanned into the top of it, toenails are missing from too much brine. She slides one cigarette out of the pack and leans over and offers it to his whispering mouth.

"I am telling the president what his soldiers did," he says lighting the cigarette, "in Son My."

"Yes, Uncle," Susie says. She unfolds a napkin and places a fried fillet on it to give to her uncle who is now drinking from the bottle quickly. "Have something to eat. It's still hot."

"Mr. President, let me tell you something," Uncle An almost growls.

Susie watches her uncle steady himself over the water. His reflection is faint so it's almost as though he's addressing himself. This is a practiced speech.

Uncle An gestures with graceful pomp down the coast, to the houses that remain boarded. There are bubbly scars on his arm from hooks and splinters. "My wife, Mr. President," he says but doesn't finish. "It's all ruined. There is blood in this water now."

Before the storm, there would have been plump white tourists bobbing in the water in the distance. There is barely anyone now. Down the shoreline she recognizes students from her high school, wearing jeans and sneakers despite the cruel sun. Some are Vietnamese too – the boys, she knows, sell cocaine up in Vicksburg.

"Well, c'est la vie!" her uncle laughs too loudly, putting the lit cigarette out on the tip of his tongue. "C'est la vie!"

6.

The Lês', restaurant is nearly empty again. It is lined with mirrors that only accentuate its vacancy. The Lês and their church community rebuilt more quickly than the rest of Biloxi. When they first reopened, they sometimes had no customers at all, only FEMA members and the coastguard. But tonight there are a few new faces in the booths and a few of her family's friends, singing karaoke to old Vietnamese songs, their monotone voices in sync with the flashing words on-screen. There are some Keesler airmen in perfect blue uniforms on one side of the bar, a father and his daughter sit on the other. They are no longer cooking with Uncle An's catch and the frozen, shipped seafood that they have to purchase hovers strangely in the brothy air.

"How is Uncle?" Susie's father asks.

"Better," Susie lies with her hand wandering nervously around her mouth and neck. She forgot to check for any marks that Kennedy might have left.

But her father is preoccupied with the restaurant and has already left her to seat a party that has just arrived.

As Susie ties her apron around her neck to go help her father, an airman at the bar asks, "The owners your parents?"

"Yes sir." Susie says, surveying the men. There are four of them, probably from Keesler.

"Say, do your parents play any American music on that karaoke machine?"

"You mean songs in English?" Susie retorts with unchecked attitude. She catches her raised eyebrow and her pursed lips and wonders if she might be flirting. She stops herself. "What would you like to sing sir?"

"Me? Sing? No. It's what I'd like you to sing." He's drunk and flirting too. He turns to his fellow airmen to ask, "What's that song that Marilyn Monroe once sang? In Korea?"

"'Do It Again,'" one of the men answered.

Susie feels sweat forming under the wires of her bra, clinging to her back. "I'm not allowed to sing at work," she says.

"Or you don't want to sing that song to us?" The other airmen seem to have disengaged, covering their mouths or focusing on their food. "Pretend you're like an Asian Marilyn."

"You sure she's eighteen?" asks one of the other airmen, quickly and quietly.

Susie pans the restaurant. Many of the tables far from the bar have a thin layer of dust coating. The wall by the door still has water marks. Overhead the ceiling would collapse in another storm.

"It's just a song, man," the airman says to his nervous friend. "Just a little song for us, sweetie. We're going to Iraq."

Members of the military were always getting free

dinners from her father if they just mentioned Iraq. It didn't matter if they were actually going. Susie imagines what these airmen were like when they were her age, when they were in the 10th grade. She knows already that she is not a Marilyn Monroe. She is something else for these American troops. She removes her apron and changes the music.

The metal-tinged flicks of an electric baseline cut through the restaurant –

and Susie remembers how she learned to swim. She was seven and she was with her family on the long dock that jutted out into the deep waters of the coast. After Sunday church they would often walk there. Susie remembers her parents' criticism: "This girl does not yet know how to swim! She is afraid of bathwater!" Before the feeling of failure could entirely set in, her mother tightened her grip on Susie's arm and flung her skinny body into the ocean. The impact knocked the breath out of her. Susie's eyes burned and she felt ocean things brush against her limp legs. She tried to grab onto the waves, but she wasn't able pull herself out of the water. And so she sank, terrified. It was Uncle An who could not stand to see her struggle for a simple lesson. And so he dived in. He lifted her up.

– then the drums and the psychedelic whine of the guitar filled the space. "Say A, say M, say E, say R, say I," Susie sings to the airmen, the patrons of her family restaurant. "American woman gon' mess your mind," she sings, "American woman get away from me," she sings.

Scarlett & Jarrod

Shante Mowry
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I see him on the first day of school.

Everyone stares.

He is new here.

He is dark brown eyes and dark brown skin. He is white teeth and nervous legs.

His bag rips. The bag is old, worn. It cannot manage the weight of notebooks, pencils, and a paper bag lunch.

We are both on our knees, picking up all that has spilled.

He is gentle hands and a warm smile.

No one likes him. No one but me.

They say, "He shouldn't be here."

They say, "Why'd he come here?"

They say, "He doesn't belong here."

I am glad he is here.

I am glad he came here.

If he doesn't belong here, maybe I don't either.

He has trouble talking sometimes. At least the way the teachers want him to.

"Speak up, boy," Mr. Baker says. He slaps his palm on his desk. *Fwap*. "You're going to learn to speak properly in my classroom."

"Yes'ir," he says.

He speaks just fine to me.

We have to choose partners in English class. We have to perform a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Everyone pairs off.

Johnny asks if I want to be partners. Everyone is scurrying around the room, finding friends. Everyone but him.

He sits in his seat, unmoving. Just looking forward. Like he's pretending to be anywhere but here.

I tell Johnny, "I already have a partner."

I sit next to him. "Do you want to be partners?"

He looks at me, as if I just awoke him from sleepwalking. "You and me?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Do you want to?"

He nods his head and gives me his brilliant smile. "I'd sure like that."

He tells me, "My name is Jarrod."

I tell him, "I'm Scarlett."

Jarrod tells me he's adopted.

About how his parents couldn't afford to keep him.

About how his parents had seven other children to look after.

About how his parents said he was so smart, they had to let him go.

Because they couldn't give him the opportunities he deserved.

Jarrod tells me his new parents are real nice.

About how they buy him clothes without him even asking.

About how they give him seconds at dinner without him being hungry.

About how they ask him to read the Bible because they like his voice.

About how they take him to church even though no one wants him there.

I tell him about my family.

About how I'm the only kid.

About how my Daddy said he wanted me to have a little brother, but Mama doesn't want another baby.

About how I wish I had a sibling so I didn't feel so alone sometimes.

And Jarrod said he was sorry.

For me.

He picks a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

"But they kiss," I say.

"We can just skip that," he says. "Or we can pick somethin' else."

"No," I say. "We can do that one."

Mama asks me, "Where are you goin'?"

I tell her, "I have to do math homework."

"Where at?"

"At Mary's."

Mary is a girl I hang around a lot. Except lately she's been avoiding me because I hang out with Jarrod.

I don't want to lie to Mama. But I can't tell her the truth or I won't be allowed to leave.

Mama turns back to the stove. "Well, be home before dark."

He says, "I think we oughtta practice."

I'm in his house for the first time. It's a real nice place. Bigger than my house, even.

"We've been practicin'," I say. "We both know our lines."

"No, I mean all together," he says. "And we oughtta practice the kiss."

My heart thuds.

"Unless you wanna skip that," he says. "That's fine. We don't have to do it. Miss Perry prob'ly wouldn't like it, anyway."

"No, we should," I say. "We oughtta keep it true to the story. We're just acting."

"That's right," he says. "Just acting."

He keeps looking at me. I wait for him to kiss me.

"Well," I say. "Are you gonna do it or what?"

He nods, but doesn't move.

So I lean in, get real close, and close my eyes. I press my lips to his.

And I don't want to stop.

We do the same thing in front of our class. We kiss.

We hear gasps.

A chair screeches.

Miss Perry hurries toward us, ripping us apart. My shoulder stings.

She hisses, "That inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated in my classroom."

All the faces that stare at us are disgusted.

Johnny says, "Sick."

Mary thinks *Romeo and Juliet* is about love.

She is wrong. It's about hate.

Unfounded, nonsensical hate.

After school, we go to the playground.

We slide on the slides, we swing on the swings, we teeter on the teeter-totter.

He pushes me on the swing so I go high high high up.

His pushing gets lighter and lighter.

I ask, "What's 'a matter?"

He says, "I'm sorry I got you in trouble."

"I got myself in trouble."

"No. You didn't."

A month goes by.

I thought they would be nicer to him now, but it's just the opposite.

We walk together after school. He always walks me home even though his house is closer.

Kids point, adults jeer.

The town falls into hate, while I fall into love.

Mama doesn't like that I like him.

She says, "He's no good for you."

She says, "You better stay away from that boy."

She says, "A white girl's got no business runnin' around with a black boy."

Listen to me, I say.

I like him, I say.

He's nice, I say.

She doesn't hear anything.

"I don't like it," Mama says. "I don't like it one bit."

Daddy says, “Let her be.”
Daddy says, “He’s a nice boy.”
Daddy hears everything.
“He’s a black boy,” Mama says.

Mama doesn’t say anything to me in the morning anymore.

I walk in the kitchen. I eat the eggs and toast on the table.

I don’t try saying anything.

I know she won’t hear me.

He’s holding my hand. We’re in the grocery store.

Everyone, everyone, stares at us. We’re used to it by now.

We leave the grocery store. He holds our picnic in one hand. In the hand that doesn’t hold me.

A couple white boys walk by us. They are disgusted. One spits at him.

I hold on to him tighter.

“Don’t let them get to you,” he whispers to me.

But they’re not spitting at me.

I’d rather they did.

Mary is talking to me again. “I know what you're going through. Everyone rags on me for datin’ Randall.”

“Why?”

“Because I'm a skinny girl and he's not a skinny guy. They say I'm too pretty for him.”

“What do you think?”

"I think he's the nicest boy I ever met."

"That's what I think about Jarrod.”

“I hate it here,” Jarrod tells me. “But I love you. I don’t want to be here, but I don't want to be without you either.”

“I'll go with you.”

We both smile, even though we know it’s not the truth.

Someone vandalized Jarrod’s house.

They TPed the whole place, even the trees, and they spray-painted on the street in front of their house. And their car.

They wrote, “Nigger lovers!”

Jarrod’s parents finally up and move before the year is over.

Jarrod tells me all about New York. How it is so different from here.

I hate walking by his house and seeing it empty. All I want to do is go inside and cry to him about missing him.

We write letters to each other. His penmanship and his grammar improve with every letter because his mama's teaching him how to write.

Jarrod's mama decided to homeschool him, and they're going to send him to private school when he’s ready.

“They say I’m smart, but I just have to get some of the knowledge most kids my age already have.”

When I pray at night, I don’t just think in my head anymore. I whisper it aloud, hoping God will hear me better.

“Dear God, please bring Jarrod back to me someday. Take me to New York. Send me wherever he is. But please don't keep me away from him forever.”

Mary asks, “How are you doing? Now that Jarrod’s gone.”

I think it’s the first time I've ever heard someone else use his name.

“Okay,” I tell her. “I miss him a lot, but we write to each other.”

Mary nods. “That’s good. Where'd he go?”

“New York.”

“I hear it’s nice up there.”

I don't have anything else to say.

“I'm real sorry about everything, Scarlett,” Mary tells me.

I say, “Thanks. Me too.”

Daddy takes me up to New York in May, just after school lets out.

Mama doesn’t approve, but Daddy says he doesn't care.

They have a big fight the night we’re supposed to leave. Incidentally, the night Daddy announces the news that we’re leaving the next morning.

“You're going to travel across state lines just so she can see her little black boyfriend?” Mama screeches.

Why do all of their arguments take place in the kitchen?

“Not just that,” Daddy says. Ever calm. “We’re going to see the area. Look at colleges.”

Mama says, “She’s fifteen! And she is not going to school up North!”

Daddy says, “The schools are better up there. She could use a change of scenery. Maybe we all could.”

Mama's voice gets real low and hushed. “If you are suggestin’ that I *move* up there, you got another think comin’.”

Daddy says, “I'm not suggestin’ you do anything.”

He walks out of the room, leaving Mama to yell at his back.

New York is just lovely in early summer.

Jarrod's family lets us stay at their house while we visit. Jarrod accompanies me and Daddy to see colleges.

He's even more handsome than he was. He's taller, his arms are growing muscular, and his shoulders are wider. His smile is bigger, too.

Every chance he gets, he whispers, "I love you," in my ear.

He says, "You'll love New York in the winter. There is snow *everywhere*. I could make so many snow Scarletts!"

I laugh at his enthusiasm.

I love how full he is of life. Full to the brim and bursting.

Jarrod gives me a long, long hug when Daddy and I leave to go back home.

Jarrod's parents offer to pay for a train ticket for me to come visit again. I tell them I'd like that a whole lot.

When I get home, there are letters open and strewn across the living room floor.

Letters for me. Letters Jarrod wrote and sent to me while I was visiting them in New York.

I think of him writing them in the dim light of his room, late at night while I slept downstairs. Letters he wrote for me to come home to.

Mama opened all of them.

She's sitting on the living room floor, tissue clutched in her hand. She's crying.

When she sees us, she cries harder.

She jumps to her feet.

She hugs me.

She says, "I am so sorry. I am a terrible mother."

And even after it all, I hug her back and I say, "You're not a terrible mother," and I mean it.

She says, "That boy really loves you."

I nod.

Her voice breaks when she says, "Almost as much as I do."

She knows now. She knows it's real.

things to dance to

Robby Nadler
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No one found the afikoman during Uncle Jackie's infamous seder of '94. It was infamous because Jackie, at the age of seventy-three, went face-first into the Pavlova. The Pavlova was Dana's contribution, and no one knew what it was. Something with eggs that she read about in a newspaper back in America. The kids were twenty minutes into their search when they heard the cries from the table. They all, except Marko, went to check the commotion. Marko kept searching until the paramedics arrived.

Marko is now being phoned by Jackie's widow, Helene.

You wouldn't believe where he hid it!

It's three in the morning. This is one of the nights Marko's wife has used their "agreement" not to be in the house. Theirs is a marriage caught somewhere between separation and reconciliation. In therapy, Marko refers to it as *Cleveland*.

Keryn?

Marko, the afikoman!

It takes a minute for Marko to realize it's Helene. He doesn't remember her name, but he has an idea that she wears a ring on every finger, sometimes two. Uncle Jackie wasn't his real uncle… a relative on his father's side— but blood. Jackie made money not being stupid with stocks and had a house in Savyon to show for it. He was a big shot professor that many Israelis hated because he said on more than one occasion y*ou even give back Jerusalem for peace*. Jackie's father was killed by an Arab mob in '36, which made it difficult for people to dismiss him as a lefty. But Marko doesn't know these things. He only knows that this woman, who was old before, is now older.

You wouldn't believe it. He hid it in the Elvis records! I found it while looking for things to dance to.

It's a Wednesday, but why be mad? He wonders if she called his mom for his number. Is she tracking down all the kids from that night? Not even he remembers anyone but his "cousin" Judy. She was a relation by marriage, or so he told her to make her feel better about his kissing her breasts in a hallway closet. The memory of Judy softens him, so he plays along.

Which one was it in?

Pot Luck. *The one with the pot on the cover.*

Keryn always recites the statistic that says the chance of divorce after a child dies is only 16%. They never had a child. In the same pamphlet, it also mentions choreographers have much higher divorce rates than mathematicians. They're neither, and they have no friends who are good with their bodies or numbers in those ways.

Marko doesn't know the album, but he tells Helene it's a good one. She laughs and hangs up.

The story goes that while Dana wiped the parve whipped cream from his face, Jackie choked his last words: *Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim!* Because he's already awake, Marko sits on the covers, pulls his cock through the fly, and thinks for the first time in years of Judy.

Needle and Threads

Caroline Schmidt
Emory University

I found the condoms in the smallest pocket of Josie's backpack, slick foil squares, just two of them left in their collapsed cardboard box. I had only been looking for a permission slip when my fingers brushed the box, reached for it almost intuitively, as if they had known something all themselves.

Josie was asleep down the hall. It was a small house, with thin yellowing walls, and from the kitchen I could hear my daughter snoring. If I walked several feet I would see her warm and heavy, legs long and coltish, already extending beyond the edge of the twin bed, and then all that dark blonde hair tangled on the pillow. Josie had tiny hands, doll-like, with pale ivory nails and seashell palms, faintly pink. To imagine those hands splitting a corner of foil, fishing the small yellow thing out of its wrapper, smoothing it over a man—those couldn't be my daughter's hands. Josie was still young enough to need a life-jacket at Bartlett Lake. Just yesterday she pronounced *specific* as *pacific*. On a wooden shelf above her bed there was a small collection of porcelain dolls, their faces pink and bare. It was sex or dolls. Where one image began, the other had to end.

It was Nancy Belman who had reminded me to look for the permission slip in the first place. How could I help but be furious with her in some strange, grave part of me? She had uncovered something I didn't want to know, had led me to its hideaway.

"The trip to the Planetarium, Elaine," she had said on the phone, only an hour earlier. Nancy lived several doors down in a stucco house even smaller than mine. She had a girl my daughter's age, and together they rode the bus to Glennwood Middle every morning while Nancy and I carpooled to Mickey's Diner in matching blue aprons. "You know, the one the seventh-graders take every year. Josie hasn't given you the paper? Tara told me they were due yesterday."

"Shit," I had said, tucking the phone under my ear and reaching across the bathroom counter for my comb. My hair lay heavy against my back, still wet and fragrant from the shower. "Sometimes I wonder if Josie has early dementia." She was always forgetting things—a jacket, long division, to kiss me goodnight. But anyone could see she was bright beneath it all. I knew it best when she played volleyball, crouching low on those long legs, eyes bright and narrowed, watching for the ball. She looked older than me on the court, striking the ball over the net until it smacked against the floor.

"Oh, you know seventh-graders," Nancy said. She sighed, her breath coming through low and gravelly. "The problem is the listening—the directions are always in one ear and out the other."

I combed my hair slowly, watching my naked reflection in the mirror. We talked like this nightly, Nancy and I, our voices low and hungry over the telephone. Child support checks, grocery bills, the customers at Mickey's who never tipped virtuously, daughters that couldn't bother to listen—there was so much fussing to be done, so much resentment to share.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it this month," Nancy was saying. I readjusted the phone, touched my belly in the mirror. When Josie was born I had grown curvier, had gone bulimic for several months until I realized a single mother couldn't afford bulimia—all that good food gone to waste, all that money rinsed away. Still, there was something cleansing about it that I missed, something that felt like relief or confession. When I had kneeled in front of the toilet I could pretend I was praying.

"It's only a few more days until September," I said. "You and Tara should come over for dinner tomorrow night, if you'd like."

"Oh, it's fine," Nancy said. "I'll find a way to make do. We always do." I knew Nancy had refused on principle—not just out of pride, but for politeness. Two more heads at the table would mean less money for us the next day: a smaller lunch, a few more days without milk or ice-cream. On the first of every month Nancy and I cashed our checks, splurged on fresh peaches and mangoes at the market. Each time I bit into a fruit I thought of my ex-boyfriend, Josie's father: his money stocking our fridge, filling the gas tank, the only part of him he would give to us anymore.

It was past midnight when Nancy and I had fretted enough and said goodbye. I walked to the kitchen, still nude, the tile solid and cool under my bare feet, and replaced the phone in its plastic cradle. Josie's backpack was on the floor near my feet. So here is how it happened, in the end: I picked it up, opened it, found the condoms.

I brought the cardboard box to the kitchen table. It was late. I could hear the cars outside racing past, a purring that never stopped. The heat from the day hadn't broken. Even inside the house there was no relief; I was dry and raw, shaking vaguely, my fingers unable to let the box go.

Years ago, before Josie, I had purchased the very same brand when I first met my ex-boyfriend. The

sex had made me heady, even until the very end. He was a competitive biker, a stuntman, in town for the America's Extreme Motorcycling Games. Every girl for a dozen square miles knew Samuel West. He could do things with a bike that I couldn't believe—dip it down to the black tar on the apex of a turn, lean back on one wheel and handle it like a matador, cross Cheshire Road where the streets turned to desert, ride it into the flat red sands of Arizona and leave behind a hot veil of dust. When he competed, he rushed off slopes and ramps, he and the bike swinging into the air for several splendid seconds until it arced to the pavement. Afterwards, we would make love in the shower, his skin still frosted with dust and sweat. He could do things with a woman's body, too, that I could not believe.

I had spent the better part of that year on the back of that motorcycle. I still dreamed about it, the weight of it beneath me, its smoky sound. Or sometimes in my dreams I watched from far away, my knuckles white with unease as Sam competed. Even as the box of condoms glared at me from the kitchen tabletop, I could still see him, stark against the white-gold of the Arizona sky, his muscles taut as he hung in the air.

"Josie," I said. My voice was too low to carry—I did not want to wake my daughter from sleep, only say the name over and over. My only child, thirteen, just a year past the start of her period. What could she know about intimacy, about things that made you whole and broke you apart? *Josie, Josie*: not a calling but some sort of plea.

The kitchen was flushed with the brassy light of the outside street lamps. It burned through the gingham curtains. Before Josie, before Sam even, I had learned to sew. The stitches came fast and natural against the gentle hum of the machine. While my neighbors slept I would sit with the machine, foot flush against the pedal, tending the patterned cloth into dresses, stockings, scarfs. I had made the gingham curtains when I was eighteen, snipped off the trailing threads, hung the curtains in the crook of the sunlit window. And then Samuel had come around, and I had sewed for him, feverishly, clipping thick black cloth for riding gloves, darning his uniform, mending the thick gashes in the fabric after a fall. Sometimes I thought of him winding into other cities, Albuquerque or Dallas, farther and farther away from us, and perhaps he was still wearing those gloves, his uniform still carrying my fabric, perhaps even my fingerprints deep inside. When he left me, I could not sew again. The machine sat thick with dust in my closet. All the needles and pins must be dull by now, all the fabric faded and damp.

Each year I had promised I would sew something for Josie—a dress for a school dance, a coat for windy days, an extra blanket for her bed. Still, I could never bring myself to drag the machine from its hiding place. Deep inside the closet there was a quilt with only two squares to be finished. Its threads were bright and heavy. I had intended it for our bed, for Sam and I in the wintertime, and then September had come—a baby inside me, and Samuel's uncertainty, and all the beautiful women he still wanted, all the cities still to visit on his motorbike. Josie and I, we had not been enough. How could I look at a quilt after he left? I never wanted to see it again.

The refrigerator purred. I was tired, so tired I thought I might drop my head to the table, sleep right here in the kitchen, the latex smell of the condoms sifting into my dreams. Down the hall, the sound of my daughter snoring broke for several moments, resumed. Who else had known that precious sound, had seen her twisted in the sheets? She could have taken a boy home from school, let him sweet-talk her into bed, skin against young skin. She could have kissed him goodbye before I came home from work in my apron, damp and oily and drained. Had she wanted it? Did she know what it was like, my own young daughter, to want somebody deep inside you, a hook inside the belly, unfurling you open?

When she opened her bedroom door the next morning, her eyes still cloudy with sleep, I was waiting for her.

"Listen Josie," I said. I put my hand on her shoulder and she looked up, yawning behind her palm. "Tell me the truth—are these yours?" I held up the box. In the morning light it looked feeble and crumpled, pathetic even.

Her lips parted, just a bit, so that I could see into her mouth, deep and dark. "Where did you find those?" she said. In the early mornings her voice was always soft and throaty, rich with sleep. "Get out of my stuff!" Her hand flicked forward; within several sudden seconds she had snatched the box away, thrown herself into her room, and slammed shut the door.

I had been waiting for a denial, a lie even. Some unconscious part of me had been hoping for an excuse, a rationale to explain things away and return our universe to its natural and neat order: Josie was holding the box of condoms for a friend, maybe, or she had collected it from the street, a piece of litter, with the mind to throw it away when she got the chance.

"Don't touch my stuff, *Jesus*. I can't believe you

went through my bag without asking. I would *never* go through your things." The words were muffled behind the door, and I could hear her moving around inside, opening drawers and closet doors, kicking things around. "It's called privacy, Mama."

"We can talk about privacy after you explain what you're doing with a box of condoms," I said, rapping my knuckles on the door. I was already half-yelling, the rehearsal I had practiced just an hour earlier rapidly falling to pieces. "Josie?" I said. "Listen, baby, we need to have a conversation about this right now. Please open the door."

The door swung open without warning; Josie stood close and bright in front of me, breathing hard. She still had her daisy-print pajama pants on, light cotton things she had had for several years, but she had changed into a black top with skinny sleeves. She was pulling a denim miniskirt over the pajama bottoms, and as she shimmied her way into it I noticed the swell of her breasts. When had these emerged, become something full and sultry? How had she gotten this old? When I put her to bed the other day, she had been a newborn, her eyes big and dark: Samuel's eyes.

"Baby," I said, squeezing her arm too tightly. "What are you doing? Do you know what you're doing here?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"Then you are absolutely not ready to be having sex," I said.

"You don't even understand, Mama," she said. "You wouldn't get it."

"Josie, I was in middle school less than ten years ago," I said. "Talk to me, baby. How long has this been going on?"

She had turned her eyes to the tile, and I reached under her chin, drew her face to mine. "This isn't a game. Is somebody pressuring you, Josie?" I was scrambling now, grasping at stray pieces of my script. "I worry that you've made some bad choices. It's natural to want sex at this age, but giving in is not the right answer in the long-term."

There was an empty moment of silence as I cringed. It sounded as if I had memorized a pamphlet—but I could hardly think straight, could hardly breathe. Even as my Josie stood there, her hair tangled, the denim skirt furrowing above the pajama bottoms, wearing a slipper on one foot and a black sandal on the other—even as she stared at me, her face flushed, I could see her a dozen miles away in another bedroom. Would she strip her clothing off slowly, revealing expanse after expanse of skin, as I had done for Sam so many years ago? Call someone's name, forget the condom in the frenzy of it all? I must have made a dozen wrong turns. Twenty-one, pregnant and lonely, hadn't I known I wouldn't be suited for motherhood? Here was the very proof. Each day at the diner, all the French fry grease that clung to my hair, all the tables I washed, my aching feet—it was all for her, to see her sleeping, full and warm, breaths easy and unhurried. Still, it had not been enough.

"I'm being careful," Josie said. "Now can you please move for a second?" She pressed on my arm. "I need to brush my teeth."

"We are not done here," I said. "I don't care if you're late for school. No phone for the rest of the month. Maybe two. And I'm going to ask Nancy if we can trade shifts. I'll be here every day when you get home from school. You better be coming straight home, every day."

"Mom!" Josie cried.

"And I'll be talking to some of the parents," I said, my voice growing loud and rushed. "This is unacceptable. Do the other moms know what's going on here?"

"That's not fair, you know it's not fair. Please," she said. She had started to cry, her face wet, her hands already blotting her cheeks.

"Jesus Christ, Josie," I said. "Listen. Can you please listen to me for one second? I know how you feel, baby, I really do. But you just don't understand how important this is, that you be more responsible—"

"I am responsible!" Josie said, her hands flying into the air. "My grades are always good. I always do my work and my chores. You wouldn't even know because you're not around."

I breathed in, sharp. "You're grounded," I said. I had never used those words before; Josie had never needed much more than a prodding—extra chores, a week without a cellphone.

"Mama," she said, her face scrunched up, her eyelashes dark and damp. "You don't understand—I'm not a baby anymore. Everyone does it."

"I could really care less," I said. "I really don't give a damn. You are not getting pregnant. I don't care what it takes."

"That's what the condoms are for!" she cried.

"Don't you get smart with me, Josie."

When she rose up, then—almost my height already—and told me that she hated me, I almost didn't flinch. I had said the same words to my own mother, long ago, the memory still coarse in my mind. Still, something happened, something almost outside my control: the sunlight coursed through the window. It sunk onto my baby so that she stood in a circlet of light on the tile, her face glistening. And then my hand—all I can say is that I felt the heat of her cheek as I hit her, enough to make her lurch back with the

force of it. When I pulled my hand away, her face was already flowering pink.

I used to know how to tend to injuries. I knew exactly how to clean the abrasion, plaster it with white cloth from my sewing, ice the swollen and bruised flesh. Sam was masked in scars, his legs covered in whole strips of mottled tissue. Each time he fell I would lay him on the ground, wash his cuts with peroxide, make love to him until the stinging had stopped.

"Baby," I said softly. "Josie." She did not look at me. Her skin was cherry-red, like a garland of hibiscus pinned to her cheek. "You're too young."

I was sorry. I was sorry for the hit, for being poor, for not giving her a better talk about sex or babies or men. I was sorry Sam had left us, that she had no one but me, crooked and furious. When I reached out to pull her close, thinking to rinse her cheek with peroxide, she turned away into her bedroom and did not say a word.

I watched in silence as she moved in her room. She was gathering things from her closet and dresser, shoving clothing into a purple tote bag.

"What are you doing?" I said as she stuffed in several books, a silver charm bracelet.

"Leaving," she said. "I don't want to be here with you." Ramming a bra into the bag, she pushed her way past me, her skirt inching up over the pajama pants.

"Josie—" I called after her. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, baby."

But she was already halfway into the garage, the door sweeping shut behind her. I stood for a moment, dizzy. It was only when I heard the sputtering roll of the car engine that I realized she had swiped my keys.

Josie had run away once before, when she was five, taking one of her porcelain dolls and a sleeve of chocolate sandwich cookies. She had made it to the end of the street before I had found her, had taken her into my arms and carried her all the way home. The memory was precious to me, comical even. But I could barely breathe now—my daughter driving? The road behind us was a major street, a torrent of cars rushing past. I had seen more accidents there than I could count on one hand. And worst of all—Josie had never been behind the wheel before. I doubted she knew much more than which pedals to press. She wouldn't make it if she so much as backed out of the driveway, slipping into the road in my small and dented sedan.

I felt my stomach roll—a cavern in my belly, urgent and empty. I charged through the hall, flung open the door to the garage. A mother could move fast, if she needed. Outside, the sky was amber with sunrise. The wind scraped at my face, dry and fevered.

"Please, Josie!" I said, my voice echoing through the concrete garage. "Stop for one minute." I tugged at the passenger door handle, but she had locked the car, her face dark and set behind the windshield. "Josie! What do you think you're doing?"

She rolled down the passenger window an inch. I could smell the soapy scent of her skin, the way it hung in the air and slipped through the window crack.

"I'm going to call CPS," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hitting a child is abuse," Josie said. I could see that she was still crying, hiccupping softly.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Come on Josie. Don't be ridiculous. Get out of the car and come back inside."

"Corporal punishment is against the law," she insisted. "Mrs. Heanley says using physical force to punish a child is ineffective parenting."

"I thought you said you weren't a child," I told her. My face was so close to the window that my breath fogged the screen. I sighed. "I'm sorry, Josie. Mrs. Heanley is right. I shouldn't have done that. But you need to understand that your actions have consequences. Your behavior—"

"I'm old enough to know about all this stuff. I've already learned about STDs. I did a whole report on scabies."

"Scabies? Is that even an STD?"

"God, Mama, haven't you even done sex ed?"

I stared at her. Really stared at her—her dark eyes and the groove just above her lip. When she was twelve, she had accidentally shaved off half her eyebrow trying to trim it; I had caught her filching my eyeliner to fill in the gap, though the hair had grown back now, soft and blonde.

"Characteristic symptoms of scabies include itching and mosquito-like bites," she said.

The engine of the car rumbled, low and deep. Mr. Shepherd from three doors down walked past with his mutt, smiling at me from the sidewalk. I glanced away and tugged on the door handle again. "Josie, this is so inappropriate. Get out of the car. If you don't get out now, you won't get your phone back for three months."

For one hysterical moment, I thought I might laugh. Josie was already a half-hour late for school, and I had missed the start of my shift; I was sure that I had missed a dozen calls already from Nancy. And yet the sight of my young daughter in the driver's seat, slippered foot on the brakes, reciting facts about scabies—I loved her.

There was a screeching as a car skid past, and several accompanying horns honking. I looked again at Josie's feet. "Don't you dare push that gas pedal, baby," I said. "Please, it's not safe for you to be in

that seat." I felt the weight of her, inside the car. How fragile she was. The possibility of the car rolling several feet back—I couldn't bear it.

"I'm tired of you," she said. Her voice sped up then, her eyes flashing up at mine, as if to gauge a reaction: "I'm going to go live with my daddy."

My breath must have caught, or I must have flinched, because she went on, her words faint and hesitant, turning down a road I couldn't have expected: "How come you never talk about him? I can't even miss him because I don't know what he was like."

My hands would not stop shuddering. They opened and released of their own accord, searching. Josie rarely mentioned Samuel except to ask a stray question—*Did he play any instruments? Did we have the same hair? Did he like pizza?*—and the silence had grown thick over the years.

"Mama?" she said.

"Yes, Josie?"

"Do you miss him?"

I looked at my daughter through the window. "Yes," I said. "I miss him every day." I saw him again, as I did so often, hurtling down empty roads, city to city. "I'm not sure where he is, though. We can look for him if you'd like."

She nodded at me.

"Okay," I said. And then—"I think he would have been really proud of you, baby. Maybe not right now, because you need to get out of this damn car, and not for the condoms, but you would have made him really happy," I said. And it was true: he would have laughed every time she rolled her eyes, would have found every part of her funny, if he had stayed.

"Okay," she said. She rolled down the window several more inches. "Mama?"

"Yes, baby?"

"I'll think about it."

"Think about what?"

"About you know—maybe waiting a bit more. Taking a break from the—the condoms."

"Good," I said.

"And I don't really want to live with daddy."

"I know, baby," I said. "Will you come inside?"

When she opened the car door and climbed out, her daisy bottoms trailing along the concrete, the purple tote bag abandoned, she did not come into my arms. Instead, she walked into the house, me several steps behind her. She was collecting things again: odd things, candles and a dried bouquet of baby's breath that I had bought when the check came in at the beginning of the month.

"What are you doing?" I said. "What are these things for?"

"I'm making a funeral service for daddy," she said, her hands full of her old rock collection: smooth white stones and jagged gray ones.

"What are you talking about?" I said, grabbing at her shoulder. "He's alive."

"I know," she said. "But he's not here."

I didn't say anything for a long time. Instead, I went to my own room, searching in the back of the closet, digging for something I hadn't wanted to see for several years. I found the unfinished thing above my sewing machine. It was brighter than I had remembered, a collection of shadowy blues, the threads still strong and vivid even after so many years. I took out my needle, several spools of thread. I did not need a machine; my fingers knew the way. Perhaps they had been waiting for this, patiently, many years.

As Josie lit the candles, I had almost finished with my sewing. I was making my final stitches, the quilt becoming whole and unbroken, the needle bowing up and down, a particular worship.

"Come here," I said. I snipped the last thread, draped the quilt around our shoulders. We turned out the lights in the living room and sat shoulder to shoulder, watching the bright hot flames in the dark. How long we rested, I couldn't say. All I know is when Josie blew out the candles, we climbed into bed, the quilt still around our shoulders. Even as late afternoon came we did not rise, letting the day begin without us, ignoring the ringing of the telephone. Perhaps it was Nancy, calling from Mickey's Diner; perhaps it was a boy from Glennwood Middle calling for Josie, wanting her. Or maybe it was even Sam, calling—as I had once wished so often—to apologize. He needed us, he would say. He had made a mistake, he would say. But I let the phone ring. I stayed still, my arms fastened around my daughter, the quilt warm and heavy above us, and let things be.


CREATIVE
NONFICTION

It's Coming

Erik Hallin
Young Harris College

"A total and utter success," is what the doctors told my father when he woke up on June 23rd. No more sleepless nights, cold from sweat while twisting and turning to escape the pain shooting like a knife from his spine out to his hips. No more getting out of the car after an hour of driving, trying to walk off the agony that numbed his back. No more sitting at the dinner table with red eyes, holding his fork with white knuckles, his face growing paler and paler until he had to go lie down. This was the summer my father would get his life back.

Arthrodesis refers to the fusion of two vertebrae into one by using screws to stabilize a gap where a damaged disc has withered away. The surgery would take less than four hours according to the shiny pamphlets the doctor gave us, which included detailed pictures of a surgeon shoving what looked like a nipper into a patient's mutilated back. The pamphlet continued by revealing that a staggering 95% of the patients did not experience any complications associated with the surgery at all, and of the 5% percent that experienced complications, the vast majority still fully recovered and had a "better" life after the surgery. The doctors thus called it a "safe" medical procedure with minimal risks, especially for those, like my father, who fused vertebrae L4-L5.

"It couldn't have gone better," he told my mother over the phone with a slurry voice, still high on pain medicine. When hearing the news, I hugged my mom and sisters while laughing like a madman. Ever since I had gotten home, I'd had a strange sensation balancing on the periphery of my consciousness. When I allowed my mind to wander to more trivial things, the feeling was as palpable as a train rushing toward me, but when I tried to define this ominous sense, it always eluded my mind, which left me fearing what might happen that summer.

As the youngest son of two successful entrepreneurs, I'd spent most of my childhood at home with my older twin sisters while our parents were busy with work. However, two months before I turned ten, our parents decided to sell 96% of their company in order to spend more time with their children. My father had devoted this time to my soccer career and had barely missed a practice or game as I grew from boy to man. Our relationship had developed beyond being merely father and son during the countless hours spent together in the car, talking about everything from how to run a business to the memories of his first kiss. My father was one of my best friends.

The day after the surgery, the gravel spattered as I pulled up in front of my house, which looked like any Swedish house. The wooden walls were painted with an iron red color, with white corners, and the roof was made out of orange tiles. Even though the grey sky cast a gloomy light on the building, I still felt warm inside at the sight of it, tall and majestic, with the calm river running past our wide backyard, and the view of a vast ocean of green grass on the other side of the water. The village was located in a valley, blue mountains covered by trees surrounding the pasture. As I took a deep breath and let it all soak in, I felt at peace. This was my home. Yes, its location was rural, but to me it was serenity, since the mere walls of my childhood home exhaled memories of spending every Friday night curled up in the couch with my sisters in front of the open fire, watching the *Midsomer Murders* with my tiny hands firmly grabbing the blanket, ready to dive down under the surface of the soft fabric when the plot became too bloody.

My mom waited on the stairs, still wearing her work clothes, a baby blue sweatshirt with the family company logo on the chest and a pair of dark grey pants made out of a durable fabric. Unlike my soft hands, her palms were rough and filled with calluses after a life filled with hard work. In contrast to my green eyes and fiery red hair, her eyes were clear blue, her hair was curly and brown. She smiled as I stepped out of the car.

"Your dad has been up walking today, but he's in bed now. He's totally exhausted!"

"How's Anders?"

"He's good! It was a heart attack, but a minor one. I talked to Marina earlier and she said he sounded perfectly fine. He even wanted to go home today."

A sigh of relief made me forget the train of doom I had been sensing since I returned home. I gave my mother a smile and a hug before I walked up to my room, thinking that this summer might turn out okay.

My mother's brother, Anders, and his wife, Marina, lived across the street in the small village that I grew up in and every Christmas, Easter, birthday, and New Year's Eve was spent with them. Hence, when Anders woke up with chest pains the morning after my father returned home from the surgery, my mother was the first person Marina had called after the ambulance came to pick him up. My mother had told me what had happened before I left for work that morning, and my mind had been a blurry sensation of lethargy since. Anders had five children, four of

them still living at home, and when Marina was institutionalized ten years ago for a couple of weeks due to "severe depression," Anders had taken on the role of sole provider and uniting force of the family. I shivered thinking about what could have happened if his heart attack had been critical.

My mom's voice echoed from the kitchen downstairs.

"Erik, dinner's ready!"

I walked down to the kitchen where my mother and Emma, one of my twin sisters, were sitting talking at the table. The kitchen was set with platters of boiled potatoes, fried pork, and beans. Emma greeted me with a nod and a smile, her blond hair shining in the kitchen light.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"I think he's still in bed. He's probably asleep though. I didn't want to wake him up," Mom answered, placing a spoonful of yellow potatoes on Emma's plate.

As she finished the sentence, my parents' bedroom door opened with a squeal and I could hear my father dragging his feet against the living room floor, a dreadful sound that could not be heard prior to the surgery. Even though my back was against the door, I felt his presence as he entered the kitchen. I turned around and a fist colder than ice grabbed hold of my heart. His blond hair was tangled and greasy from sweat, his face was the grey and white color one has before vomiting, and he was holding the kitchen counter with white knuckles, as if his legs would give in any second. The light reflected on his forehead that was covered by pearls of perspiration. I met his gaze, his watery eyes reminding me of a deer looking into two headlights before collision.

"I'm not hungry," he mumbled. "I think I'll go back to bed."

I looked at my mom, who looked at Emma, who looked at me. I stood up.

"Dad, how do you feel?"

"Um, not too good," he said with a voice so weak I had to close my eyes to hear it. "It feels like I'm about to pass out. I think I'm just tired."

I helped him out through the hallway, his hand a claw that clung on to the back of my Adidas t-shirt, and back to their bedroom, where he laid down with a moan. His skin burned against mine when I put my hand against his forehead and panic started to grow in me like a wildfire.

"Are you sure you're okay? Should we call the doctor?"

"No, no, no, I'm fine. I just need to rest."

I nodded and walked back into the kitchen where my mom stared out into space and Emma sniveled while looking down on her plate, big, salty tears landing on her stack of boiled potatoes.

"What should we do?" I asked my mom, but she did not take her eyes off the void. "Mom, what should we do about Dad?"

She jumped in her chair as if she was hit by an electric shock and turned to me.

"I don't know," she said with a broken voice. "Maybe he's right, maybe he's just a bit tired."

"Mom, did you not see him? There's something wrong. Give me the number to his doctor. I'll ask him what he thinks."

I never reached my father's doctor, since when I described to one of the nurses the way my father looked when he entered the kitchen, she raised her voice to a scream.

"GO. TO. THE HOSPITAL. NOW. Your dad is suffering from an infection, which can happen after a surgery. It could either be a UTI or there might be bacteria in the incision wound. Regardless, I still strongly encourage you to go to the hospital. It could be fatal if not treated."

Hearing the word *fatal*, I hung up the phone without saying a word of gratitude for her advice.

"Mom, they think we should go to the hospital."

"Erik, I'm not sure. I still think we should wait and see."

"I'm taking him to the hospital."

He was semi unconscious as I gently lifted him out of bed and into my car as fast as I possibly could without hurting his two vertebraes that were fused less than 48 hours ago. Reality hit me like a fist in the stomach when we staggered through the front door. I was carrying my father out of the house where he'd raised a family, not knowing if he would ever return.

Driving through the woods from my home village to the hospital one hour away on roads resembling the crater-filled surface of the moon proved to be a challenge, since for every bump and hole I managed to hit with my car flying down the patched asphalt, my father moaned with closed eyes and clenched teeth.

The pine trees kept swishing past the windows in a furious speed while I managed to make my father swallow down two morphine pills with some water. The act seemed to take out the remainder of his powers as he did not make a sound for the rest of our speedy trip. No matter how many bumps I hit, his eyes were shut, his head leaned back.

As we reached the gigantic white and red cube of concrete known as Karlstad's Hospital, I stepped outside the ER and sat him down on a bench in front of the two automatic glass doors. I ran back into the car to find a parking spot. Getting out of the parking lot I heard a familiar voice booming from one of the

hospital's open windows.

"HI, ERIK!"

My uncle's broad grin could be seen even from the seventh floor as he cheerfully waved in my direction. His face radiated such warmth that I almost forgot the circumstances we were in, but that was the way my uncle was: a happy person.

"Your mom told me what happened to your dad! Don't worry, everything will be okay!"

"Thanks!" I shouted back and shook my head. Clearly it had been a waste of time worrying about Anders' health, but the thought left me wondering. If the train of omen would not be stopped, and my uncle was fine, what did that mean to my father?

After talking to various doctors who took a multitude of blood samples, it was concluded that it was a severe UTI, but still "not in any way dangerous," as the young, female doctor described it while giving my father a cup. "I just want you to fill this with urine to be 100% sure, then the nurse will come in and take you to your room."

My father nodded and pulled down the shiny door handle without assistance. The pills the doctors had given him had evidently kicked in as he even gave me a weak smile before he closed the bathroom door. My phone rang.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Erik, how's it going?"

"Well, the good news is that it's just an UTI, but the bad news is that they want to keep him over the night, just to be on the safe side."

"That's still good news, honey! So you'll come back home soon then?"

The bathroom door opened and my father staggered into the room and collapsed on the bed, trembling violently.

"Yes mom, everything's fine. I'll come home soon. Call you later."

I hung up.

"Dad, are you okay? Dad, what's wrong?"

"Cold. I'm so cold," he managed to stutter with blue lips.

He was lying in the fetal position, trying to lock his knees over his hands to prevent them from shaking, but he shuddered with such force that for a second I was afraid that he'd fall off the bed.

The door opened yet again and a plump woman walked in, wearing blood-red lipstick, which in contrast to her purple scrub and platinum blond hair her made her look like a clown.

"Help him!"

My voice was shrill and uncontrolled. The nurse nodded, her double chin wobbling, and pressed the red alarm button on the wall.

A septic shock occurs when toxins from an infection enter the bloodstream and initiates a full-body inflammatory response. This intrusion causes the blood vessels to expand, which leads to dramatically falling blood pressure, extreme chills, respiratory distress, hypoxemia, and organ failure. Septic shock is the most common cause of death in intensive care units in Sweden.

Four doctors wearing navy blue scrubs rushed into the room with wild faces and tried to pin my father to the bed. The older of them, a man in his forties with swaying brown locks and wrinkles in the corner of his eyes, shook his head and opened the door. They rolled the bed out into the crowded hallway while putting an oxygen mask over my father's face. They punctured the skin in his left antecubital in order to get the antibiotics straight into his blood while shoving patients and nurses out of the way. None of them looked at me while I followed with a paralyzing chill in my chest, my mouth dry from fear, and the train of omen coming closer and closer.

We passed through two massive automatic doors. In the large hall with bright lights, beeping monitors were hung on the white walls with even space between them. The majority of monitors were attached to patients wearing white and blue hospital gowns, all begging for relief from the pain. The room was supposed to be where all the sickest people of the hospital were located, but as we entered, all eyes were turned on my father. His eyes were wide open but he was not there, his body still shaking uncontrollably, and his skin pale. The doctors hooked him up to a monitor that revealed that his heart was beating 196 strokes a minute, his blood pressure was 70/40, and the oxygen content of his blood blinked red at 64%. One of the doctors tried to put another needle in his right antecubital to increase the antibiotics, but his arm trembled with such force that it was impossible to find the vein.

I stood at the end of the bed with my hands over my mouth, witnessing my world fall apart. Once I looked on the other patients in the room and a wrinkly, old woman gave me an unreturned smile of pity, but other than that, my eyes remained on my father. The clown nurse in purple walked up to me and put a fat hand on my shoulder. Maybe she thought I was one of those idiots who thought Geoffrey Chaucer was the blonde dude in Jersey Shore or maybe she simply had no idea what to say to someone seeing his father die, so she whispered:

"It's okay. When you get an UTI you can get shivers like this. He'll be okay."

The urge to slap her burned in my right palm,

but I simply nodded and said with a low voice:

"Okay."

If I'd considered myself a Christian, I might have praised God for what happened in that room, since even though I was sure this was the place where my father would die, the trembling finally ceased, and his vitals went up. The doctors removed the oxygen mask and gave him a cannula, and for the first time in an eternity, my father looked at me with his sad eyes.

Yet again, he was moved. This time it was to the room he'd spend the night. The walls, ceiling, and every piece of furniture were blinding white, which made it resemble an asylum, except for the pictures. On the walls were oil paintings portraying colorful meadows with red and pink tulips and yellow sunflowers under a blue sky. I wanted to tear them down, rip them to pieces, and throw them out the window.

My father lay in the fetal position among the white sheets, his lips silently moving as if he was telling himself a story that was too horrid to utter. The only time he called for me was when he needed my help to go to the bathroom. I sat there for hours while nurses came by and left. They all tried to ensure me that I should go home, that there was nothing I could do, but I shook my head and they understood well enough. I did not have to say it out loud. They did not force me to admit that this could be the last time I saw my father alive. When the big, circular clock over the bathroom door showed 1 AM, my father mumbled something resembling my name.

"Erik, go home. Tell your mom I said hi. Tell her everything will be okay."

"Dad, I don't want to."

"Erik, please. I… I don't want you to be here."

I stood up from the chair next to his bed and walked over to the door.

"Goodbye, Dad." I whispered, but he had already drifted away into the land of pain.

Walking back through the empty hallways of the hospital on the way to my car, I stopped at a bulky vending machine parked in a long hallway. Seeing its lights shining on colorful packages of candy, I remembered Remus Lupin telling Harry Potter that one should eat chocolate after experiencing a traumatizing event. I picked up my wallet and bought myself a Snickers with a 20kr bill. Holding it gently in my hand like a treasure, as if eating this piece of chocolate was the only thing in the world I had control over, I walked back to my car and sat down. The taste of nougat, peanuts, and milk chocolate hit my tongue and the tears started coming. I tried to contain myself by leaning my forehead against the steering wheel and let the tears drip down on my knees. My chest tightened up, I couldn't breathe, so I picked up my cellphone and called my girlfriend.

The conversation was a series of my sobbing sounds mingled with small outbursts of pain, but the few words I managed to pronounce still got the message across. I thought the train would reach its destination tonight, and I would be fatherless tomorrow.

However, the doctors managed to keep my father alive that night, and two days later he was allowed to come home. During those two days, dozens of people came by to hear how he was doing, one of them my uncle who had come home the day after I'd seen him at the hospital. He walked through the front door as if our last encounter had been the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm feeling great!" he said. "I just wish they would let me go back to work on Monday, but the doctors say I have to rest for a couple of weeks." He continued describing how they had made the incision in his wrist and then gone through the arm up to his heart where they had put a stent. Hearing him cheerfully say, "I got in by 10.30 and by noon I was eating lunch in the dining hall," I could not help but smile, thinking my father was right and I had been wrong. Everything would be okay.

When my father came back to the house, I hugged him and could feel the ribs on his back. I realized how much thinner his face looked.

"I will always have my cellphone on me. If anything happens, you call me, not Mom. There is no point in making her worried. Deal?"

"Sure," he said with a faint smile, well aware that I had not shared any of the details from that night with my mother.

The next morning I woke up twenty minutes after my alarm had gone off. Stressed and lethargic after a sleepless night, I did not have it in me to find a pair of matching socks. A black and a white would have to do. Half running, I put on a pair of light blue jeans and a checkered black and blue shirt and went straight out to the car parked in front of the house. Realizing I hadn't said goodbye to my father who was still in bed, I contemplated going back in to let him know I left, but I figured I did not have time. I would see him later that night anyways.

The 30th of June 2015 was just another day at my summer job at the local bank office, which was exactly what I needed. I had had enough of hospitals, dying fathers, and the goddamn train of omen. I needed normal, safe routines again. When I arrived at 8.00 a.m., my supervisor Anna and the office manager Hans greeted me at the door. Hans wore the same stained jacket he always wore, and Anna sipped on her usual cup of coffee saying "World's Best Mom,"

written in big, bold letters. We opened the vault while chattering about the crisis in Greece, and then I went to my desk to see if the card company had reimbursed one of my customers whose credit card had been debited by a company in Latvia that he had never heard of. The complaint was still unresolved, so I proceeded with sending some queries to human resources, and unlocked the door for opening hour at 9.00 a.m.

At 9.53 a.m., Tony Anderson, one of the regular customers, walked in with a stack of cash, asking me to make a deposit on his account. He scratched his bald head and thoroughly kept track of my fingers as I counted the bills. With the familiar sound of my iPhone going off in my pocket, I threw the stack of money down on the counter, despite Tony's surprise. My heart was throbbing as I fumbled with the phone and finally managed to answer the call without looking at the name on the screen. I thought I could see the train growing bigger and bigger in the corner of my eye as Emma's broken voice whispered in my ear.

"Erik, you need to come home. Anders had another heart attack last night. He's dead."

It takes fifteen minutes from the office to my house, fifteen cold minutes of existence that my uncle would never experience. My mind was numb as I pressed down the gas pedal, my car rushing in 110mp/h. When I pulled up at the house and ran across the street, a yellow and green ambulance was already parked on the lawn. The house had a big wooden porch with a four step stair that Anders had built six summers ago and on those steps my family sat crying: my mother, my sisters, my cousins, my aunt, and my aunt's sister and parents. I hugged them all, starting with my fourteen-year-old cousin Jacob, and finished with my mother. I tried to tell them that everything would be fine, that everything would be okay, even though I knew it was a lie. I sat down next to Jacob, his icy blue eyes staring out into the void, his body shivering, and I put my hand on his shoulder, knowing it could have been me.

I would like to believe that I would have done more for him if I had known that he was the one who had found his father dead in bed that morning, but what exactly can one do to erase a picture like that from a boy's mind? Instead, we sat silently on the wooden stairs while the sun beamed down on us from a blue sky as if it wanted to mock me for ever having faith in a happy ending.

When the undertaker arrived, he asked who could help him carry out the body. As none raised their hands, I stepped forward as a volunteer.

Anders had died in his sleep and was thus still in his and Marina's bedroom on the first floor. When I walked in to the dim room, the electric atmosphere of death hit me like a wall and the shock tightened around my chest. I realized that a corpse is nothing like in a movie. When life leaves a body, rigor mortis kicks in, making it as stiff as a statue. The skin turns a white-purple and the lack of bowel movement creates an odor of vomit, urine, and feces. The smell was sharp and made my nose wrinkle, but I tried to keep my face neutral out of respect. At first I was scared of looking at him, but when I turned my eyes to my uncle's pale, stone face, I realized that this was not him. Anders had been full of life and happiness, a person that would always crack a stupid joke to make others smile. This was just the shell that was left after him.

When we lifted the body, a distinct slushing sound could be heard, as a mixture of gastric fluid and blood flowed from his mouth. A compassionate smile spread on the undertaker's wrinkled old face while he tried to clean up the brownish stain from the white, fuzzy carpet. When we again tried to move the body, the undertaker held the head still as we lifted the body up on the stretcher and staggered through the front door. Painful tears burnt my eyes as I remembered helping my father out to the car less than a week ago. I was now carrying my uncle out of the house where he had raised a family, knowing he would never return.

In 1781, a group of industrial workers built the small wooden church of Gustav Adolf by hand on a hill overlooking the blue waters of Lake Degelunden. More than a hundred years later, my family arrived to the woods surrounding the church, and it had been the setting for every funeral, baptism, and wedding in my family's history since. The 30th of July 2015, the church was more crowded than I had ever seen it, as a wide stream of black-dressed people flowed through the open gates and squeezed together to create more seats on rows that were already filled to the breaking point. An ocean of flowers in sparkling orange, purple, and blue were laid around his white coffin on the altar, under the painting of Jesus on the cross, and to the tunes of Sabina Ddumba's "Effortless," hundreds of people walked up to the coffin to say their goodbyes to one of the kindest humans I've ever met. While people kept walking by to share their condolences, my family sat crying in the three front rows, thanking visitors for the support, but waiting for the people to leave.

When the church was empty, a group of men and women I'd never seen before carried Anders out to the graveyard, and we followed them out. His lot had already been prepared with white roses and

photographs of Anders in a suit smiling into the camera. When we had all gathered around the grave, they started lowering the coffin.

A shrill screech echoed among us as Marina fell to the ground, sobbing violently. Linnea, Anders' sixteen year old daughter fell into the arms of my sisters, hyperventilating loudly with tears flowing down her face. My mother stood silently crying in the background, her face twisted in agony. My dad, pale faced, tried to comfort her with an embrace, but his eyes were also red from tears. My legs felt light. I wanted to run, to flee, but I contained my instincts to become an animal in a cage that meekly looked at the people I loved the most losing themselves in sorrow. There was nothing I could do and I knew it. I was useless.

Jacob walked up to the grave and looked down at the coffin in which his dead father lay. His face was still, but tears were dripping down on the white painted wood. I walked up behind him and held my arms around him until more family members walked up and joined the embrace, all crying loudly. We stood there inhaling each other's pain, our tears landing on the soil where our forefathers had been buried for centuries, while humming our pain in a melancholy lamentation.

I glanced over the green grass of the cemetery, realizing it was still there. The train was still rushing towards me, and it would never stop.

Excerpt from *What Inga, Joey Bishop, and Andy Lippincott are All Yodeling About*

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Gay men didn't die before Andy Lippincott. We disappeared or were remembered, but we didn't die in the sense that dying is the opposite of living—to put a period to life lived up to that moment. Instead, we died with lives we didn't live under euphemisms. *Longtime companion. Pneumonia. Bachelor.* Not that this façade was strange in the historical sense, but what was different in the '80s was that we were no longer interested in self-erasure. Many of us weren't hiding anymore. The public, however, had other demands.

For the longest time Reagan wouldn't mention it. The media talked about it but not about us. We were sick and didn't know why, didn't know how to stop it, and everyone was scared. I try to explain it to kids these days like this: imagine it's night, and a fire is burning down your house with you in the bedroom—but this fire produces no light. You smell the choking smoke, feel the lick of the flames encroaching. But how can you navigate to safety when you can't see the blaze? Who's ever heard of an invisible inferno? But that's what it was like. And it's in that fear of our world burning down that society forgot about us as people. We became horrible posters of what could become of a body, of the destroyed canvas of skin marred by Kaposi. Nothing more than warning signs against heterosexual transgressions.

But Andy didn't mind being on the frontlines because he was a comic strip character. He wasn't even a Peter Parker or Bruce Wayne, which is to say a man with superpowers or an ordinary man performing superhero feats. No, he wasn't even featured in those sorts of comics. The now mostly forgotten Andy Lippincott was a minor character in the funny pages' strip of *Doonesbury*.

Debuting on January 27, 1976, Andy was a lean cut of man, the bones of his face akimbo. A brown mop, the kind stylized through volume, not product, by men like my father long distanced from Vietnam, rendered him an attractive offspring of a Richard Nixon and John Kerry love affair— not that Andy himself came off as presentationally handsome

(though, that kind of refusal for physical perfection seems a hallmark of all of Garry Trudeau's characters). The world's first introduction to Andy was of him dour-faced, nose in a book. Joanie Caucus, one of the comic's central characters, approaches with all of the gusto that her blonde-haired, pastel sweater over white-collared shirt, women's liberation backstory can muster. Andy, you see, has been hogging a particularly useful tort book at the Berkeley law library.

It's important that Andy be introduced to the world as a gentleman. He apologizes by rationalizing how he became wrapped up studying an early sex discrimination case from 1949. Joanie, who made a name for herself in the comic by leaving her husband and teaching women's rights to children at the childcare she worked at until attending law school, is smitten by the kind, thoughtful man monopolizing her book. Hindsight, this is dramatic irony in that Joanie's palpitating heart will never belong to Andy, but for a real-time reader this was not the case. In a dozen more comics, Andy and Joanie will impress each other, the latter falling deeper and deeper in love. Trudeau develops the relationship as asides– one-sided asides. We watch Joanie prep herself in front of her bureau before a date. We follow her as she gushes to her roommate, Ginny, about all of Andy's best features. Halfway through the story arc, intuition surfaces, and Joanie realizes something is off about her budding relationship with Andy. Andy never says how he feels, never takes her in his arms. At first, she's rational: he must be married! It isn't until Ginny offers Joanie the sagacious advice to *Just ask him!* that the narrative arc begins its descent and history begins.

February 11, 1976: Andy, as always, is dressed in his black vest over a collared shirt (unbuttoned at the top), a striped, loosely tied tie with a full Windsor knot, and a pair of slacks. Again with a book in his face. Trudeau is not giving his readers a hint with fashion choices, but he's playing into a comedic trope of the time: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* episode where Phyllis' brother is "dating" Rhoda, reverse-engineering the storyline with Jack Tripper's existence in *Three's Company*, and Blanche's brother in *The Golden Girls*. The setup is simple: the perpetually single girl who deserves an admiring beau hits it off with the seemingly perfect gentlemen (who exists for a hot second) only to realize the comedic twist in a karmic gotcha! In the case of *Doonesbury*, when Andy explains he's gay, Joanie's first reaction is *What's wrong with that? I'm usually cheerful too.* Even though it's a joke that wouldn't work today because "gay" as synonym for "happy" is rote rather than practical speech, one can still hear the prerecorded laugh track go off. After a beat, she catches on and asks, *Are they sure?*

To Trudeau and Andy's credit, there's no pandering or long-winded explanations. Readers are spared psychologists, overbearing mothers, absentee fathers, and every other creation story one might plug in. Andy is simply allowed to exist as a gay man. Of course, there are flaws in the execution. Joanie's reaction is akin to a reveal of a horrible diagnosis; she mourns over the loss of what Andy and she could have been as revealed through the next few publications of the comic. And, because the plotline was always about Joanie, Andy only exists as a liberated woman's punchline—the impression being Andy will always be in that law library, reading someone else's book, because he has no other reason to stake a spot in this universe. Aside from this brief interlude in Joanie's love life and a short stint in Ginny's election campaign, Andy was seemingly written out of the series. Nonetheless, this was the first time a cartoon character came out (even though Snagglepuss had been parading around for a generation). As the Jewish refrain in the Passover song "Dayenu" explains, it would have been enough for us.

However, destined to become more than obscure trivia for the most diehard of Doonesbury fans, Andy returned to the comic on February 4th, 1989, as the first comic character to have AIDS. But for many, he wasn't just the first comic character: Andy was the first person in America to have AIDS. Before Andy, the only people who contracted AIDS, excluding unfairly contaminated heterosexuals infected via tainted blood transfusions or dentists, were gay men, and that was GRID. Even when the facts became clear and the world started catching on about whom the disease could afflict in that immunity was not privileged for the non-queer, AIDS remained a sexual disease of panic and retribution taking the form of propagandic missiles launched at gay men. And we were easy targets chastised for immorality. We were promiscuous. We used drugs. We were nameless effigies to be burned by a public that needed to set aflame the terror of a black plague for a new world.

For some context, if a decade can associated via an emotion, for gay men the '80s was schadenfreude. This is the most difficult thing for young people today to wrap their heads around. I've always wanted to teach my students Samuel Delaney's *The Motion of Light in Water* because it's a beautiful memoir in the way memoirs were once printed without that type of self-awareness now typified with the advent of reality T.V. and a social media machine fed by selfies. The

writing is crisp, the examinations unapologetic, and I'm always fascinated by the rendering of Marilyn Hacker, Auden, and an assortment of people I'd only before known as collections of words suddenly gifted to me as carnal embodiments. But I don't teach this book, and it's not because sex abounds in the work. No, it's because my students wouldn't understand the sex beyond sex— even the queer students. Take for instance the scene where a young Delaney passes time on a pier in Chelsea and has grown tired after his third partner. In the middle of oral sex, Delaney simply untangles himself from a stranger's mouth and guides a different stranger into the kneeling man's mouth. Dozens of mouths, cocks, and asses are on that pier— in public— during the post-midnight hours, reconfiguring as if they were all puzzle pieces that fit regardless of how you assembled them. A kaleidoscope of bodies where every rotation is as satisfying as the last.

My students, even the ones who are abstinent, all recognize sex is pleasurable. But I fear that's all they would see on that pier: hedonism. After all, how else would one describe a bareback orgy comprising strangers? It's not only that AIDS today is a treatable condition. Throw out same-sex marriage, *Modern Family* and *Glee*, and Grindr. When I was a kid, I used to dream that the world would change and that I could have a "normal" life with another man the way I used to dream I possessed latent superpowers, which is to say both were impossibilities. Contrast that with today where in spite of things still not being equal if you're queer, children get to grow up with the same message that people of color and women have been fed now for generations: even though you're not treated equally, in theory you're one of us. There's a young woman in my class who cannot live ten minutes without picking up her phone; does she know it took almost a thousand years for women to be graduated from Oxford after men had? Would she finally pay attention if confronted with the opportunity she's squandering that so many others fought for her to have? But that is the effect of successful change: each generation thereafter knows even less of why their presence alone raises a debt of gratitude that cannot be repaid.

To know the brutality of police raids or the McCarthy era as more than a history lesson is to feel something no human should. Of course, I was too young for that, but being raised in an Orthodox Jewish community provides its own kind of manacles. I knew I was queer quite young, which means I have few memories of life before I was an outcast. In a world where religion is the milieu of your existence the same as air, you quickly learn you are a cancer to your family. I was aware of that even at age seven. I did not come out until I was in a police station and forced to confess my sexuality under the prodding of an officer (guided by my mother) after a bungled attempt to run away from home. I was fourteen, and I had already tried suicide twice by then. I would attempt once more shortly after.

One of my happiest memories during that period of my life was my treks to West Hollywood. Despite not carrying any money and being too young to get into the bars (which were closed because I could only make my way there during daylight hours), I would happily walk the three miles, each way, even if it meant I only had twenty minutes to peruse the sidewalks before turning back. When I had the time, I usually carved a path to A Different Light, the neighborhood queer bookstore. It was there, scanning the covers of *My Antonia*, *Billy Budd*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *A Passage to India*, that I realized there was more to the authors I was taught in school than my lessons let on. I also enjoyed the store because there was a pornography rack that no one ever bothered me at as I skimmed through the pages of *Inches* and *Freshmen* (I'm not sure if I passed for eighteen at that age, or if it were simply understood amongst the staff that there exists a necessity for teenage queer boys to experience queer bodies without shame). I always maintained the fantasy that one of my journeys would result in some serendipitous encounter with a handsome stranger. There would be love and sex and running away. I don't recall ever speaking to any person in that store on any of my travels.

Even if that bookstore existed for me merely as a shell with pictures of books I couldn't afford with money or out of safety, I ventured back as often as possible. Standing in the presence of people like myself was an exhale from the taut existence I was trapped in. It allowed me to imagine a world routine of life precluded even at the edge of dreaming. So how wonderful it was to be awake, to be burdened in one world and know there was a cusp of possibility waiting. When I came to it, sex, the geographic battlefield of the queer body, lifted that existence to a space where words are futile. So despite not living the party myself, I fathom that what the '70s ushered in was an end to a life of deprivation. I see those clandestine bodies smashing against each other with totality of centuries of pain, ridicule, and imprisonment as a backdrop for carnality. How could anyone not become caught in the frenzy when the act itself was the ability to live? I cannot teach Delaney because my students don't possess the schema to encounter those scenes as anything but depraved men feeding in the bacchanal minutes of darkness. They

would cringe, and I would be a Judas for trying. After all, AIDS was *loved* for its decimation of gay men, and you could find the right surgeon general just salivating to announce that all gay men had to do to stop the spreading was give up the sex we had barely had enough time to enjoy. Why didn't they just ask us to stop breathing?

And this is why we owe Andy Lippincott a great deal even though most people today have never heard his name. At the apex of AIDS terror, the world was watching Andy— and for many, it was the first time seeing what it is was like to be gay and sick beyond the stock images and news reports that implied we brought it on ourselves. Remember, this was a world where schools refused to let HIV+ children set foot on campus and political discussion about gathering all gay men and sequestering them, forever, was treated as a humorous idea with some genuine potential. Imagine standing up to that level of irrationality when you are at your weakest. So Trudeau, no longer satisfied with the sideman gig Andy originally played, set out to transform a one-dimensional flash in the pan into a comic legend.

Reading the comics today for the first time, a contemporary reader at the start might be wary of the direction of the story. On March 27, 1989, Joanie Caucus is in the limelight. AIDS is ravaging San Francisco, and Joanie works for an octogenarian congresswoman who represents the district. Trudeau depicts Congresswoman Davenport as someone who is genuinely empathetic to devastation as well as someone out of touch. At a town hall meeting, she fields comments and questions from concerned citizens but doesn't understand "straight" as lingo for heterosexual— cannot process there are heterosexuals with AIDS asking for her help too. The crowd shouts down the congresswoman with *AIDS!* after she avoids calling the beast by its proper name via the euphemistic *the great unpleasantness*. No matter how much she feels for her constituents and friends who are dying, the congresswoman is stuck: Trudeau never lets the reader have the impression she has a sense of the gravity of the issues at hand or the urgency in which much more has to be done. In this regard, Trudeau has grown up. No longer is the surface sufficient where having a gay man exist in name only gets the job done. Part-comic relief, part-harangue, Trudeau isn't afraid to set up the elderly woman as the punchline to a didactic joke that begins with … *although AIDS will soon have claimed more American lives than Vietnam*….

After barely surviving the town hall meeting, the congresswoman isn't mad. She's simply sad with reality. She tells a male staffer to send flowers to various gay men in the hospital. In the middle of Congresswoman Davenport's listing the floral recipients, Joanie overhears Andy's name. Joanie's response is *OH, MY GOD*…. For those with perfect memory, readers will recall this is the identical response she gave when she learned Andy was gay.

Here's where the potential danger manifests. Does Trudeau revert to his gay sidekick ways where Andy's illness becomes a narrative to co opt for the sake of watching Joanie watch Andy die? At first, that's the direction the comic seems to wander toward. Joanie, like any concerned friend, immediately visits Andy in the hospital. It's a two-week affair that begins with a nurse warning Joanie that Andy's condition has left him emaciated; upon seeing her old friend bed-ridden, Joanie faints. The punchline? Andy complains how fruitless his power to make women swoon is to him. There are more jokes, many conversations with the doctor. In certain ways, these scenes are a window into some very truthful conversations, such as how an AIDS patient can catch a fungal infection normally only found in cats and chickens (Andy's response is to mimic clucking sounds from the other room).

In other ways, these scenes are a letdown. Despite two weeks' worth of "screen time," Andy's face is never shown to the reader (he's always out of frame or obfuscated by a pillow; only the tip of his long nose is rendered). Possibly this was a conscious decision to retain Andy in memory as a healthy person, but if so it's quite a disappointment for a storyline that seems abrasive in its desire to push readers' buttons as direct proxy to the country's collective ignorance about AIDS. How can Trudeau go so far only to back down at the last moment? Even worse, these scenes marked the start of Joanie's running incomprehension of how Andy maintains his humor instead of playing the sad/angry dying man (Andy will later respond that he does indeed feel anger, but anger pushes people away, and when you're sick, you need all the people you can get).

Perhaps this was all part of a clever scheme, or, perhaps, someone got ahold of Trudeau and gave him some pointers. Whatever the reason, Andy returned in June of that year to his own week-long storyline. Without Joanie. The plot is simple: Andy's pneumonia has cleared up, so his doctor is releasing him. He's moving back home, heading back to work as a lawyer, and giving everyone 110% of his wit while doing it. What's more, we see his face— see the face of a man living with AIDS. Until May of 1990, Andy would return every month or so as if we were checking in on him. He celebrated a birthday. He prerecorded footage to be played at his funeral. He

reentered the hospital. Some of these events were more dramatic than others, but the small ones have stayed with me most. That's because it's so tempting to think of a sick person as illness, as caught in a constant cycling of a Dylan Thomas poem. But there's a difference between one's life when one is sick and one is dying.

The point where I realized how visibly sick I looked to others occurred during my senior year of college. It was the day I needed to drop off a paper in the English office and bumped into the professor who hated me because I wrote a graphic short story about bestiality in his creative writing workshop when I was 19. I couldn't write fiction for years I was so scarred by his public shaming of me in front of the whole class. Now, he felt sorry as he watched me barely exist like a shadow at dusk and asked, like all of my friends and other professors had, if I had visited a doctor yet. When people whom you know have you on their list of those they never want to see again start showing empathy toward your skeletal appearance, you know there's a problem.

There wasn't a minute of my life then when illness wasn't a factor, but that doesn't mean I lived my disease. To me, that day has always been about the time I went to hand in a paper. What Trudeau successfully captured in his vignettes of everyday life, say Andy's AIDS birthday party, was an understanding that serious illness becomes a lens that changes how a person sees life but does not irrevocably alter the foundations of routine. AIDS or not, people have birthdays. But when you have AIDS and a birthday in 1989, you will receive from your friend who also has AIDS a small box that contains a bottle of experimental treatment, and it will be your favorite present. In this way, Andy guided the world through the minutia and entanglements of life in an unflinching but respectful journey.

The power of the daily comic is its ability to focus on a singularity and magnify it to a day's worth. That's why every beat counts. Readers never knew when Andy would return to focus because *Doonesbury* has always been an ensemble piece where the character in the limelight usually shifts after six days. Trudeau smartly tapped into this unknowability as a parallel not only to the every person's unknowable death but also every person's un-prophesied future. This is why as a sick person reading these comics I developed a deep attachment to a two-dimensional drawing: he was a how-to manual. Andy took to the dying light with a poise many of us could not muster. He wasn't always funny, though the balls to have wit in the face of death was a marvel for those of us who had forgotten how to laugh during this era. There's the poignant moment when readers watch Andy's mom realize she'll outlive her son. Andy lies in bed at home because there's nothing more the hospital can do. And though his hair is in place, his eyebrows thick and sharp, his eyes are lost. They droop. Andy is exhausted in many ways. His mother sits in front of a window and is burdened as any loving mother would be. Her eyes are wide. She places a hand on her son's torso. Andy, done with levity if only briefly, says that when he dies he'd like to be cremated and have his ashes scattered over the Bay. For every laugh, he too made us close our eyes and breathe.

Like most deaths from illness, Andy's was not sudden but foreseeable. The buildup coincided with the story arc of *Pet Sounds* being released on CD, a smallness he didn't think he'd live to see. Published over several days, *Doonesbury* had readers observe Andy, now bald, and Joanie, now exhausted, exchange the intimacies of friendship as a lead-in to goodbye. It's striking how just a year before Trudeau had hidden Andy from readers, but, over the course of months and months, we watched a relatively healthy, mobile, full-haired Andy be reduced to frailness. This time Trudeau had made sure everyone saw Andy from all angles and did so on Andy's terms.

It's a Wednesday, and light pours from Andy's smile as he explains how Sounds was the basis for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club*. This is the third consecutive day readers have been treated to Andy's musings on *Sounds*— as if that quiet exchange between Andy and Joanie could be stretched for years if not decades, each day readers being wowed with a new insight, a new joke regarding Andy Lippincott's love for The Beach Boys. In that moment, it seems as if he cannot die, that if a CD can restore such vitality into him there's hope. And because Andy is only a drawing, we as the reader know there's a possibility in him being saved. A cure. A miracle. An it's-all-just-a-dream revelation. All those endings are sloppy, but in life we rarely argue with how we get what we want as long as we do. Then, erupting in panic, Andy confesses he left the oven on. Joanie placates him by saying she'll get it on her way out.

May 24th, 1990: in the first section of Thursday's *Doonesbury* (drawn in the traditional four-part weekday panel), Joanie kneels in front of the oven. She tells Andy it's off. She seems to be smiling. There's a kettle on the range, and it seems important in its nothingness. Panel two is a close up of Joanie turning over her left shoulder. Her face has changed, but fear hasn't sunk in yet. Apprehension would be the best word to describe it. She asks Andy if he's heard her, then tells him that it's scary when he cuts out on her like that. Panel three breaks our hearts.

Joanie has become a silhouette with mass. We watch her from the foreground with her body away from us. There's a purse hanging from her left shoulder indicating she's ready to leave. The only other inhabitant of the picture is the top of a chair. It too is black. We see its four posts interrupted by the blinding white that occupies the majority of the frame as if to suggest that Joanie and the chair were only negative space. Joanie's turned away because she's facing him. She calls outs one thing the artist has scribbled over the top of her head: *Andy?*

The last panel doesn't show us Andy's face. He's posterior to us as he lies in bed, the baldness of the back of his head and the stripes of his pajamas the only visibilities that he once existed. The room seems to be alive as if to suggest he's only sleeping. The bedroom window is as large as it's ever been. A curtain is pulled back so that nothing is obscured. There's a city and an outside and clouds beyond it. Following the vanishing point, on the sill are books, a vibrant plant, and the music player. Emerging from it are two musical notes that hover in the air around the lyrics *Wouldn't it be nice*…. After a year-long, public battle with his disease, Andy Lipincott left us.

Through these small, sporadic vignettes broadcasted over the globe, Andy reminded the world that gay men were people too. That when we were dying, we didn't vanish. We withered away sometimes with friends and family, sometimes not. We had good days and honest conversations. We talked to the people we needed to and distracted ourselves about inevitable ends. We broke the hearts of those people who had the audacity to love us and still love us through and past the end. We died in the mundane ways that all people did, and like all people, our deaths were just as tragic.

When I was researching the history of Andy Lippincott, I stumbled upon someone's journal entry about this last comic:

"Eighteen years ago your death filled me full of sadness, and on the morning I opened the Guardian and read about the last moments of your life, I cried. I had followed the last tragic weeks of your life as AIDS overwhelmed your ability to resist the inevitable. Every time you fought back it just got stronger, and still you faced it all with a stoicism I couldn't understand. If I had been you, I would have been so angry. I would have spat out my frustration and railed against the world. Instead you checked out listening to the Beach Boys playing 'Wouldn't it be Nice.'

"A lot of people, real people that I actually knew have died since that day in 1990, some I expected to lose like my Mom and Dad, and others got ill and died. One got a lift from a guy, traveled a few hundred yards, and hit a tree. Death is like that— it comes to all of us, but when it does we seem surprised. We know when we drink too much we will get drunk or if we eat too much we will get fat, but we never seem to come to terms with the fact that if we live too much then we die. I remember your death because it was the first that actually meant something to me, and although you were a character in a cartoon strip that didn't seem to make much difference."

So when I say I want to learn how to die like Andy, I think this is the measuring stick; if anyone writes that about your life like that— people you never even met— then you know you did something right.

Hash Tag Trend

Ashley Nelson
Clark Atlanta University

45 min. outside of Sanford, Fl
A year before #IAmTrayvonMartin

We walked alongside James L. Redman. The road completely deserted besides us, six Black girls making our way from my house to my best friend's house at twelve in the morning. We had just finished binge watching *Criminal Minds* before making this journey, disobeying my mother's wishes.

"Don't y'all go walking late at night. If Dani doesn't come, then y'all just going to have to stay here," my mother warned us before going to bed. I reassured her we weren't idiots and knew to wait for Dani's arrival. Dani was a freshman in college and the only one of my friends who owned her own car at the time. Whenever we went anywhere, Dani was always the designated driver.

I was perfectly content with waiting on Dani to arrive; however, my best friend wasn't. As episode after episode played, Dani was still nowhere to be found. My best friend grew anxious and came up with the brilliant idea to walk to her house. Uneasy about the idea, my twin and younger sister tried to convince us all to stay but they were outvoted. Besides, it was only around the corner, how dangerous could it be?

So we walked alongside James L Redman Road, the six of us, making our way from Langford Dr. to Bates St. Not a sound was heard as the streetlight guided us on our journey. Our walk was pretty peaceful besides the few times we would prank each other into believing a serial killer was after us.

"Run!" my best friend Kayla said before she sprinted up the street. We all ran after her, neither of us wondered why we were running. A moment of terror flashed over me as I tried making my way towards the front. I did not want to be the one left in the back. Before I knew it, my best friend was bent forward trying to catch her breath as she laughs.

"Man, Kayla, quit playing! This shit ain't funny, I really thought someone was after us," my friend Keiya said.

"Told y'all we shouldn't have watched that last episode," my younger sister said in between deep breaths.

When continued our walk down the street before it happened. As we reached the Octopus car wash down the street from my house, a truck sped by us. My best friend, being the complete idiot that she was, yelled "Hey!" after the truck like she usually did when we had our late night adventures. Not paying her any mind, we all laughed and continued our journey towards her house, which was only five minutes away. It wasn't long before my younger sister spoke.

"Hey, y'all. Is it me or is that truck slowing down," she asked.

"Girl, you're just paranoid. That truck ain't slowing down," my best friend responded, dismissing the idea.

"Ahhh, Kayla, I don't know," I said. "That truck is really slowing down."

"Y'all seriously need to stop watching *Criminal Minds*," my best friend said as she continued to lead the way with us following closely behind.

"Oh, shit!" my twin said. "It's making a U turn."

We stared down the dark road ahead, watching the truck turn slowly towards us before cutting off its headlights.

"Uhh, you guys," my little sister said before stopping in mid-stride. The truck revved its engine twice. "I don't think I like this."

"Quit being scaredy cats you guys, they just messing with us," my best friend said.

"No, Kayla, you playing," my other friend Yazz said, stopping in mid-stride as well. My twin, Keiya, and I followed suite, forcing Kayla to stop.

The truck sat in the middle of the street with its lights off. If it hadn't been for the one dimmed streetlight just beyond the truck, we would have not known the truck was still there. After what felt like an eternity, we decided to continue our journey, cautiously, looking in the direction of the truck to make sure we weren't greeted by any surprise. As soon as we hit the Central Autobuses station for the migrant workers next door to the car wash, the truck flashed its bright lights before speeding towards us. Not a single thought was given before my friends and I dispersed, breaking off in groups of two as we headed in different direction. Two took off towards the woods behind both buildings while the other two hid behind the car wash next door to the bus station. My younger sister and I hid on the side of the bus station, making sure we were well out of sight from the truck.

The truck's physical location was unknown but judging from the sounds of the revs of the engine, we knew it had to be close. A deep voice boomed into the night sky, "Woo hoo! We hunting niggers tonight!"

I immediately made eye contact with my sister whose eyes bulged outwards as she stared at me. Our backs pressed flat against the building, neither of us made any sudden movements. I prayed softly to

myself. *Lord, please just get me through this situation. I don't want to die like this! Please, Lord, just let me make it through.*

Growing up, we had heard lots of stories about Blacks getting lynched in neighboring communities on the outskirts of Plant City, specifically Keysville, which was five minutes south of my small community of Bealsville. I remembered my mom telling me about my great uncle who had Alzheimer's. He stayed with my aunt down a dirt road surrounded by other family members houses. One day, he wandered outside and was missing for weeks. His body was found in the woods of Keysville. No one knew for certain what really happened to him, but we all had our suspicions of him being chased down and hanged. It wasn't long before the rumors started--the white man had gotten to him.

My little sister peaked her head around the side of the building, the headlights flashed in her directions and she took off towards the fence near the woods. I, who didn't want to be left behind, took off after her. As I crossed through the parking lot, I saw the truck nearly fifty feet away speeding towards me. I didn't have time to climb over the fence like my sister, and because it looked relatively small, I thought I could clear it. Wrong! I nearly landed face first in the asphalt but that didn't stop me. Fearing for my life, I continued to run. We didn't stop running until we were well past the pawnshop as we reunited with the other four girls behind a café on the next street.

"Yo, Kayla. What the hell?" my friend Yazz started. "Some shit always goes down when I'm with you."

Laughing, my best friend said, "Oh, come on you guys. You have to admit that was fun."

"Are you crazy?!" I asked. "Being hunted by a bunch of rednecks in a big ass truck with headlights and confederate flag on the back is not my idea of fun."

In fact, it was the exact opposite. Every day, I watched classmates and elders wear the Confederate flag proudly on their shirts. It was a flag I was taught in previous history classes that stood for the continuation of slavery, yet I was told it was a representation for Southern culture. My fifth grade teacher made this perfectly clear for me when she escorted me out of the classroom after I called a classmate of mine racist for having the flag as a sticker on his binder. And as for me, she continued, a prominent product of the south, I should embrace Southern culture. I chose to never speak out against the flag again; after all, it was a part of my culture as well. But in this moment of terror, with the truck bearing down on us, Southern culture was something I feared and could not accept.

The truck came around the corner of the café.

"Oh, you got to be fucking kidding me!" my twin yelled before sprinting across the street into Big Lots parking lot. I could not believe they were still-hunting us like prey. We could hear their laughter over the engine, as we involuntarily participated in their sick game of hide and seek. Eventually, we ran out of hiding places. We had nowhere to go as we stood in the front of Big Lots. We knew our chances of outrunning them on foot were slim to none so we decided to accept doom head on. We stood side by side and waited for the truck to reach us.

That was a year before the #IAmTrayvonMartin hash tag.

Senior Year 2012

Dispatcher: 911 police, fire, and medical.

Female: Um, maybe both. I'm not sure. There's just someone screaming outside.

Dispatcher: Ok, what's the address they're near?

Female: [Address omitted]

Dispatcher: Ok, is it a male or female?

Female: It sounds like a male.

Dispatcher: And you don't know why?

Female: I don't know why. I think they're yelling "help" but I don't know. Just send someone please, crap.

Dispatcher: Does he look hurt to you?

Female: I can't see him and I don't want to go out there, I don't know what's going on. [screams can be heard]

Dispatcher: Do you think he's yelling "help"?

Female: Yes.

Dispatcher: Alright.

Female: Just…there's gunshots.

Tears streamed down my face. We were still living in that same house on Langford Drive. My twin and I were doing homework in the living room while listening to the Michael Baisden radio show on the Internet when we first heard the news.

"An unarmed black teenager was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida, supposedly by a neighborhood watchman. He was wearing a dark hoodie while only carrying a bag of skittles and Arizona tea."

My homework did not get finished that day. The 911-phone call kept replaying over and over in my head. Sanford, Florida, was only 45 minutes away from my house. It could have easily been my brother, friend, or cousin lying in those streets. I cried myself to sleep that night.

The next day at school was a pretty quiet one. This was surprising because normally, when anything

that pertained to Blacks in the media, it was always the topic of discussion in my honors classes, where I was usually the only Black girl in class. When my older cousin was stabbed on campus, my world history teacher had no problem telling students it was gang related. I attempted to correct him by telling him my cousin was never in a gang but by then it was too late. The rumor circulated fast among the masses.

No one seemed to mention anything about the Trayvon Martin incident in class. My friends and I began to hold a discussion about it at lunch but we immediately ended the conversation quickly upon the impact of it all. An unarmed Black teenager murdered. Identified killer still a free man. Later in the day, I found out two of my classmates were related to Trayvon Martin. They were absent in school.

Over the next few days, I learned more about what happened the night Trayvon Martin was killed. I learned that the guy claiming to be a neighborhood watchman was self-appointed and that this self-appointed neighborhood watchman deliberately pursued Trayvon Martin against police wishes. That night, self-appointed watchman George Zimmerman walked away a free man.

The time had finally arrived. The day when I finally realized how ignorant my intelligent classmates were. I knew I couldn't avoid this subject for too long in school; however, as I overheard some of my classmates talking about the case, I knew this wasn't going to be pretty. It never was, especially when race was involved.

There was a time in my American Government class my teacher thought it would be great idea to have a Socratic debate on the topic of whether illegal immigrants should be allowed to work in this country. Apparently my classmates, who were predominantly White, only spoke of Mexicans as illegal immigrants inhabiting the U.S. Every time we spoke of other European immigrants, they would dismiss the topic, saying they were not the ones causing the most problems in America. One boy went as far as to say Mexicans were responsible for the crime rates being high. When we simply tried to correct him (and by we, I do mean the very lacking presence of minorities in the classroom at my "diverse" high school), he began his response with the phrase "it be these niggers." I must admit, my friend's response before this comment was highly offensive and rude to the White students in the classroom when she said, "it be these white people you see on the news kidnapping and molesting children." Not once, did she ever call their race outside of their name. Honestly, I couldn't tell you what else he said. I immediately shot up from my desk, along with the other two Black students in the classroom, and made a beeline for him. Before I had the chance to wrap my hands around his scrawny neck, my teacher grabbed me and yelled at the other Blacks in the classroom to sit down. Apparently, we were not mature enough to handle a Socratic debate. My teacher didn't even bother to address the racial slur, just like the many other teachers who never addressed racial incidents on campus like rap being referred to as "coon music" in the parking lot or snide remarks of "who let the dogs out" when Black students walked by. These were incidents I was all too well accustomed to.

"What did you expect?" one of my classmates said. "I would have thought he was a thug too because of his hoodie."

I rolled my eyes. For this to be an honors class, the ignorance was beyond stupidity.

"Don't you wear a hoodie when it rains?" I simply asked him. I chose my words carefully. I didn't want this to turn into the same incident with the Socratic debate where we Black folks were reprimanded for being unruly.

He ignored me. Typical.

"Well, I support George Zimmerman. I heard he was a thug anyways and smoked weed," another one of my classmates said. They rest of the class nodded in agreement.

"But don't you do dip in class?" I said. I must've really hit a nerve because I was no longer ignored.

"What did you expect for him to do? Some guy you don't know wearing a dark hoodie walking through your neighborhood. I would have shot him, too!"

"If some guy I don't know was walking through my neighborhood late at night with some hoodie on, I would stay the hell away from him, duhh! George Zimmerman knew what he was doing when he pursued him!" I snapped.

"You're only saying that because he's Black," another one of my classmates said.

Alas, the race card had been pulled, like so many times before. During my freshman year of high school, when Obama was running for President, I was often told I was only voting for him because he was Black. This was true. Just as true as your parents not voting for him because he was Black.

I was ready to go in. Inform them all of the injustice we as Black people are still facing today. Yes, slavery was some years ago but so was the Holocaust. Do we tell Jews to get over that? People are so scared to be labeled Anti-Semitic, they are allowing Palestinian Arabs to get mistreated in Israel. But we should get over slavery, right? No one told the Jews to get over the Holocaust. Why shouldn't we

acknowledge the Black Holocaust?

I took to Twitter and Facebook that night, venting my frustrations about the injustices of Blacks in society. This was the start of it all. A new social movement--how millennials utilized social media to become activists.

"When Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago." – President Barack Obama

#IAmTrayvonMartin

Black Twitter emerges.

#IAmTrayvonMartin #DangerousBlackKids #JordanDavis #ICan'tBreathe #CrimingWhileWhite #BlackLivesMatter #HandsUpDontShoot #IfTheyGunMeDown #NMOS14 #YouOKSis #TamirRice #WalterScott #JusticeForFreddieGray #SayHerName #SandraBland #SandySpeaks #WhatHappenedToSandraBland #CharlestonChurchShooting #WeWillShootBack #WhoIsBurningBlackChurches #TakeItDown #FreeBree #KeepItDown #SamuelDubose

It's almost the end of 2015 and not much has changed since the Civil Rights Movement. Racism in America was thought to be a thing of the past by those who do not experience racism on a daily basis. I too, was a victim of believing this as well despite my own personal encounters with racism from my peers. Opting for a less dramatic term like prejudice, I used this to justify their actions: From being told by a teammate I could never go to her house because her grandpa didn't like Black folks to being forced to "censor" my viewpoints on important issues because I did not want to make my counterparts feel uncomfortable in class, yet I'd been living my entire life uncomfortable.

Growing up in a small city in the south, I believed many of these incidents to be normal. No one told me otherwise, and when these incidents did occur, hardly anyone was ever reprimanded. It was not until I reached the campus of Clark Atlanta University I learned these incidents were issues in society. My freshman year, I was taught by a wise professor how Westernized our educational system was, which hinders our capabilities of embracing diversity. She had no problem calling us foolish for embracing Western culture blindly without loving our roots. We, as Black folks, must be Westernized to seek employment in America, yet that does not have to define our core existence. We must love our own culture just as we were forced to love Western culture. Her class unveiled vital information for me that I was not taught in high school, the start of my changing viewpoints. As I looked back on my educational experience, I began to find a lot of things unacceptable, starting with the celebration of Multicultural Month at my high school during the month of Black History.

Bree Newsome was another reminder of the foolish things I believed to be acceptable while growing up. When she climbed the flagpole to remove the confederate flag, hash tag #TakeItDown, she shed light on the experience of my fellow classmates with the flag. I was amazed to discover the flag was against dress code at some of their schools. The confederate flag was not a norm for the rest of nation. In fact, it wasn't a norm for the entire south. Bree Newsome proved that when the rest of the world rallied behind her, banning the selling of this flag in stores and online. I no longer thought it was normal for high school students to be grouped together according to race just because my high school found it was okay: the black wall, redneck wall, Mexican wall, privileged white prep wall, etc.

When Mizzou students successfully protested the resignation of their President, colleges nationwide stood behind them in solidarity as they fought for equality on campus in light of the many racial incidents and cultural insensitivity. Students on other college campuses supported Mizzou during this difficult time. Posting pictures of black outs and prayer vigils on social media with #StandInSolidarity and #PrayForMizzou. Clark Atlanta did one of its own, which I had the pleasure of participating in. With #CAUSupportsMizzou, we gathered in front of our school sign in all black, right fist in the air.

When I was experiencing racial discrimination and cultural insensitivity in high school, I never chose to take action like these students at Mizzou did. There was no reason to because nothing was going to change. Whenever the black students complained to administration, they simply brushed it off. Even if I would have decided to advocate on the behalf of the Black students at my high school on Twitter, six years ago, Black Twitter was never even heard of. I took the easy way out. My senior year, I decided to attend a university where I felt wanted. I decided to attend an HBCU. Here, I was not constantly reminded of my position in society until recent incidents in the media.

Altercation after altercation, Black Twitter has gained momentum bringing global awareness to

1. "A large network of black twitter users and their loosely coordinated interactions, many of which accumulate into trending topics such as #IAmTrayvonMartin. Black twitter is a group linked by their culture, language and interest in specific issues and topic with a black frame."

social injustices nationwide. A simple hash tag #IAmTrayvonMartin, has expanded into a global community connecting every Black who had ever experienced oppression due to systematic racism. What would have taken months for Blacks to gain enough national attention for a petition to be signed, only takes a matter of seconds for Black Twitter to create a stir on social media demanding justice. Hash tags such as #IAmTrayvonMartin and #BlackLivesMatter link us together through the unfortunate events that continue to reoccur in the media. As a member of the Black Twitter community myself, these hash tag became life lessons for me as I retweeted and posted statuses about these social injustices. Former classmates from high school unfriended and blocked me the more I posted. I was no longer censored as I engaged in critical discussions of race; I am no longer ashamed to talk about race; and I no longer justify the former actions of my peers but now hold them accountable the more involved I become with new hash tags emerging. Black Twitter reassures me: I am not alone.

As my mind travels back to the incident of us, six black girls walking alongside James L. Redman, I can't help but wonder: what if something had happened to happen to us that night? Rather than rev their engine twice before speeding past us, what if the three men decided to get out, grab us, and hang us in the woods of Keysville? How others would have reacted? Would they have even cared? Or would our murders be justified because we were out past curfew, like the black girl who was body slammed by a South Carolina officer, whose actions were "justified" due to the teen insubordination? Would we have made national news? Would Raven Symone ask where our parents were at on *The View*? What would our hash tag have been? If the police would have showed up, would we have been safe? Or would we have died in jail like the other black females did this year?

Alas, this is what it feels like to be Black in America today. And as I'm writing there is a new hash tag emerges:

#BlackOnCampus

Inertia

Caroline Schmidt
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Even now, as I lace my shoes for a run, I see my sister: her figure stark against the white-gold of the Arizona sky, her skin flushed and wet with heat, a flock of crows in the backdrop. Her eyes on mine, just for a moment—a stride or two, maybe—as she turns to check that I am still behind her, trailing like a shadow. By now, years after that moment, she prefers the gym elliptical. Her old running shoes have gathered dust in the closet, the neon colors fading. Still, the image is automatic, like a reflex—*if running, therefore sister*.

Do you want to take a break? she said that afternoon. The question was rhetorical; I always wanted to take a break, to catch my breath for several seconds or several hours. *If you want to stop running, take five more steps*, she said.

And then what? Stop? The words emerged huskily from my throat, my breath scraping, a stitch building in my ribs.

No, she said. T*ake five more steps and keep running.*

Wow, I said. *Great advice. Really helpful there*. For several beats our footsteps synchronized. Our shoes stirred the fine red dust of the desert. I stayed close to her, never allowing more than several feet to stretch between us, my body like her echo. The heat twisted into us, thick and silent, and as we followed the grooves of the path, it seemed we were the only two living things. We breathed, and we moved, and we pressed onward.

Why do certain moments endure, their images bright and clear through the perpetual haze of memory? I could not have known then what I do now: that these split seconds would come to me years later—potent and unyielding, sudden as ghosts—as I emptied pill bottles onto my bed sheets, filled a cool glass of water, and prepared to swallow them all.

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Before the pills, I visit my sister in Portugal. The wind-beaten cliffs of Cape St. Vincent rise sharply out of the sea. Patches of wildflowers cling to the rock; to the North lies a lighthouse with a cherry-red beacon. My sister and I stand on the cliffs with our jackets zipped to our throats. The wind knots our hair—strands of it are swept into my mouth—and all of the pictures from that day will show us pale and stiff, our lips cracked in the cold.

Many years ago, the tour guide says, sweeping his arm out across the horizon, *the Romans thought Cape St. Vincent was a sacred place. They believed it was the*

edge of the world. Before us, there is nothing but vast and unknowable sea. After miles and miles it stretches into a smooth horizon, its edge fringed with sky.

My sister sips wine at my side. She is twenty years old; soon she'll graduate and work for the Red Cross. She cares deeply about things being fair in this world. When we share food, we must split it into exact parts: cupcakes bisected into perfect halves, pizza slices counted out and divided. She is fashionable and poreless and has good taste in music. She frowns when I talk about death or orgasms or radical feminism, and if she is ever late to an appointment, it is quite likely my fault.

She has never particularly *liked* me, I think—I am almost certain of this, even now—and still she protects me as a mother would, her presence like a cloak around me: shielding, tender. When we hug, our bodies do not fit together. She is too willowy, collarbones sharp as wands, her waist spare and stiff. We do not know how to share secrets in the dark or how to make the other laugh. I cannot offer her much, and still, she never leaves me alone. When she was younger, she won two goldfish at the state fair. Reluctantly she took them home, named them without pleasure, sighed all the way to the pet store to buy them provisions. Every weekend she cleaned their glass bowl, frowning, scooping them gently from the tank, her hands soft and cupped. For years she cared for them, not because they were amusing, or beautiful, or satisfying, but because they needed her.

We wander along the rim of the cliffs. A newly-wed couple asks us to photograph them. They put their arms around each other, the sea leaping behind them. I lean over the edge as my sister snaps the picture. A year earlier, my friend plunged to death at a concert. He was drunk, had scaled the wall of the arena, for a dare, maybe—it makes no difference. They gave some of his ashes to his best friend, who buried them in the ground with the seeds of a Mesquite. It is still a baby, just a sapling, too young to know what is weaved within its roots.

Carly, my sister says, her voice faint against the throbbing wind. *Come here. They're going to take a picture of us now.*

I move away from the edge of the cliff. We pose for several photographs, then force our way through the wind to the grasslands ahead of the cliffs. I pick lavender stalks on the way, long stemmed and fragrant, their corollas the pearly purple of a snail's shell. By the time our bus winds its way back to the hostel, the flowers have already wilted, their heads growing heavy and soft in my arms.

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Months before, the night a man locked me in his room, my sister beat on his door with her fists. She has tiny hands, bony and sharp-knuckled, and after he opened the door to release me, they pulled me towards her. I closed my eyes, tucked my body against hers, and breathed in the scent of her shampoo, something floral and sweet.

He didn't really mean to; I had wanted him. He told my sister these things as she shoved him away and carried me outside, and because I was half-asleep against her, my ears pressed to the yellow silk of her blouse, I heard none of this. These are words I learned from her when I woke the next morning, acid taste on my tongue and my dress stained all down the front. We had been drinking; I had been sick in the bathroom while my sister carefully tied back my hair and handed me mints. When she put me to bed in a friend's room, he slipped inside, and he climbed into bed with me. The sheets were rough against my legs. He stripped off his clothes. Something hot and foreign in my mouth.

He's not a bad person, I told her in the morning. I was seventeen. The sun was just rising, light passing through my curtains in the slow lazy way of a yolk breaking. I was sick enough that it was hard to speak; the words slipped out of my mouth in knots and tangles. *I was flirting with him,* I said.

Carly, she said. Her lips pressed into a tight line. In the pale light, this slash of hot red might have made me think of cherries, cardinals, hearts. *Stop it,* she said. And then, quietly: *Did he make you? All the way, I mean?*

No, I said. *I don't think so. I don't think so.*

She stared at me. *Go to sleep,* she said. *Drink some water, and go back to sleep, and don't get up until you feel better.*

I drank some water, and I went back to sleep, and I didn't get up for a very long time. When I woke, I found that my sister had left a plate on my bedside table: several Saltines and two Advils. I took everything and cleared the sleep from my eyelids. Beyond my room, I heard my sister singing, her notes slightly off-pitch. The sound paused, then resumed. She was making lunch, I think. The knife struck the chopping board many times, cutting apples, or onions maybe. I lay still for several more moments, listening for her movements, listening to her carry on—the voice growing louder as she reached the chorus, the knife moving faster in unbroken rhythm—until I found the strength to rise.

In Portugal, later, I would remember this moment. Cape St. Vincent, the edge of the world, isn't really an ending. It is a surprise almost, something of a relief, to think of the world as round: everything coming together, no sharp edges or brims, an infinity of

curves. The slow migration of the blackfin. The bodies of the runners moving through the mountains. A silver-backed bird passing the lighthouse. The sand below moving with its own strange and helpless desire.

I would think of the Romans, standing at the edge of the Cape where I stood, their tunics hanging in pleats, brooches glittering gold in the sunlight. Still, they couldn't have know what I knew, that things always carry on, even if our sisters must the weight.

****

The urge to sprint is almost impossible to dismiss. It builds deep inside the chest, a craving for release, for liberty, as immediate as the impulse to draw breath. It is a need for velocity—shoes grinding into the dust, the wind hot and brittle on your face. To deny it feels like surrender.

During high school, my sister and I ran two years of cross country together, winding through the desert preserves or down long, unswerving roads. The scent of creosote was always thick in the air, the cacti tall and spiny, thick yellow snakes warming themselves in the sunlight. In the city we ran miles upon viscous tar, passing abandoned apartments or dipping under the squat shadows of concrete buildings.

Before she graduated high school, my running improved suddenly. Our runs became tedious for me—in my mind I practiced algebra, or French, or invented riddles and poems. I stayed behind my sister, my steps deliberate and heavy, her shadow always eclipsing mine. Still, it is hard to ignore the longing to move faster. The November of her senior year, our cross country team tensed for the start of a race, I passed my sister and did not look back. I might have finished in fourth place, or twenty-seventh—all I know is that, after my feet struck the finish line, my sister did not finish for a very long time.

My cross country team was close. It is hard not to be close, I think, when you see each other in the most vulnerable moments of a run—aching, wet with heat, uncertain if you can go on. We showered together every morning, shared socks and ice packs, arranged dinner parties the nights before races: long coils of spaghetti, hot loaves of sourdough, everyone buzzing and heavy. We were a loud group, jokey and wild, our voices shrill when we cheered each other on. You're a beast, we would say, our hands cupped around our mouths, hoping that our teammates could hear us beneath the tumult of breath, footsteps, pain. You got this. And my sister's voice, silvery, threading through the crowd: *Carly, Carly,* she would say. *Keep going. Don't stop now. Don't stop.* And I wouldn't: I would take five more steps and keep running.

There is something lovely about moving forward, the grass blurring below you. Now when I run I think of the word *solvent*, a word from the Latin *solvere*: to loosen, to untie, to set free. And to solve, to work through: the pleasure and freedom that arises from movement, the sense of having unraveled a tight knot that is chafing inside you. So we ran. We pressed forward through the hot winds. We felt something clenched inside us loosen.

That November, after I finished my race, my chest still burning, I turned back to the course. Girls swarmed the finish, body to body, and I watched for my teammates. The heat of movement coursed through me. *You're almost there,* I cried to Lexie, and Kerrigan, and Holly. *You're doing so well. I'm so proud of you*. And then, if there was a runner from a rival school approaching swiftly from behind: *You're about to get passed. Don't let her win.*

I do not know how long I waited for my sister to round the bend of the finish. My hand might have shaded my eyes, the sun white and unrelenting. Perhaps I was squinting as I saw her, her shape nebulous at first, sharpening as she grew closer. I would recognize her uniform, yellow and navy, and then all that dark hair against it, her bangs sweaty and matted, her arms tucked into her sides. She would have been breathing hard, licking her lips, bracing for the final sprint.

I stayed silent. I did not cheer for her, or even call out her name, the way she had done for me, so many times. To do so would be to acknowledge that I had finished before her, that my words could comfort or sustain her. *I'm sorry,* I thought. Her mouth was twisted with exertion, her muscles taut, and for a moment I felt dizzy, disoriented. It was as if, for one moment, we had been reversed, a nauseating instant where she needed me. She rushed past me, so close I could almost hear her own inhalations, and still I said nothing.

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Everything that defines me has happened in the summertime. There is something magical about it, almost, as if things don't function quite right without the structure of school to keep everything neat and operative. Each summer, I run over 250 miles, a few with my sister, a few with close friends, but most of them solitary and remote. I run at night, when the heat breaks, the tar setting again; I run in Colorado, threading through trees, counting Iceland poppies and pashmina roses; I run during the monsoons, my shoes swallowing rain. It is my only sense of religion: an offering of sorts, or a prayer.

It is the summer after my eighteenth birthday when I empty the pill bottles. The pills gaze at me

from their perch on the sheets, a hundred gaping eyes, open and waiting. Just earlier, they were hidden within the drawer: housed neatly in their respective bottles, innocuous enough, some round and flat and powdery, others stretched thin into cylinders. *Listen,* they say. *We've been expecting you.*

Outside, the air is bright and sharp. All that morning things had been shiny: fields of kelly green Horsetail, stalks tall and black-ribboned, twin spines of mango trees, hot orange light and no shadows to be found. I had been having trouble hearing sounds, and I found myself in places without knowing how I reached them.

Sorry? I said to the woman behind the counter. *You said fifteen dollars? You want me to pay fifteen dollars for a card that's defective because you guys didn't make the cards resilient enough?*

Ma'am, she said, and what was left of her smile vanished. *I didn't set the rules. You can talk to my manager if you'd like.* She pointed to a glass door behind her.

No, I said. *I'm fine. It's okay.*

I already gave you a discount, she said. *It's normally twenty-five, okay? But you can have a new card for fifteen.*

I blinked at her. I was not sure what day of the week it was. To my left, past a smeared window, I could see a flock of yellow balloons suspended in the wind. I thought of the word *untethered*. I thought of the words *mourning* and *vacant* and *apparition*.

Here, she said. *Smile for the picture.*

The camera flared white, and when she handed me the newly printed card, its ink still tacky, I saw that I was crying in the photo. I was still crying when I handed her fifteen dollars, all in ones. I cried all the way to my apartment until I lit my pipe and took a long drag and coughed out a pearly veil of smoke.

****

I call a friend. I am laying on my bed, the pills beside me like lovers: ibuprofen, fluoxetine, bupropion. *Cody,* I say into the telephone. *I'm thinking about doing cocaine.*

His laughter reaches me through the wire.

No, no, be serious for a minute, I tell him. *This isn't a joke,* I say. *What do you think?*

What do I think? he said, his voice blaring through with a force that makes me pull the phone away from my ear. *I think you're crazy, he said. I thought you had standards.*

And what ever gave you that impression? I tell him.

Promise me you'll at least wait until you're feeling better, he says. *You can do cocaine, maybe, after you've gotten out of therapy and stopped taking meds. Maybe. We'll consider it then. Promise me you'll wait.*

Okay, I say. I hang up. I fill a plastic cup with water from the sink. I sit on the edge of my bed. My hands open and close.

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I could tell you what kept me from swallowing the pills was that I got a message from my friend reminding me we had plans to run at four, or that it was the endorphins that hit me after we had finished, or that it was the trees in Lullwater Park, looming and permanent, their trunks binding me to this world. I could tell you that it was the image of my sister, appearing suddenly before me, her eyes on mine, holding me here. *Take five more steps,* she would say. *Don't stop now.* These things all happened.

But to hinge this decision on incidents and memories—they cannot carry this burden. We choose to live another day, and perhaps another, and all I know is this persistence. The ashes of a body feed the roots of a tree. The sea spits and froths and wets the face of a rock. We run and unclench the knots; we keep moving forward.

Here is what I know: in a dream, my sister is teaching me to strike a match. I am fumbling with the matchstick, raking it too slowly against the striker. *Again,* she says. The dream is dark: still no flame. *Again,* she says. *Again.*

When I wake, and rise from my bed, I can still smell the woodsy scent of the matches. My sister's perfume lingers in my sheets, in my drawers, on the fabric of my clothes. Even as I open the window curtains, some version of my self is still dreaming. Some version of my self still draws the match against the box, obeys my sister, waits once more for the blaze. I hear her even now, in this room. Her voice is a tether in the dark. Again, she calls, and I listen. I tie back the drapes, and break open the slats of the blinds, and let the light in.

Reflections on a Face

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Mary Lou Phillage hypnotizes me every time I come to see her. Her office is small and plush, a sofa guarding the side wall, the lamps glowing sickly yellow. A wooden cuckoo emerges from its home every hour. Outside, it is summertime, mica glinting in the concrete, everything pale and dazed in white light.

We have a regular routine here. Mary Lou asks first about my mother—her colleague, many years ago—and then my week. After, she will gesture to the sofa. I will remove my shoes, lie supine on the cushions, unfurl a plum-colored afghan over my knees.

"How are you feeling today?" Mary Lou asks. She gathers several pillows from a wicker basket, tucks them around my body. Her hands are blue with veins, the skin freckled with sunspots, and when she folds a pillow beneath my neck I can see them trembling, unsteady with age.

"I'm okay," I say. This isn't counseling; I don't have to be honest. "Thank you."

She continues the swathing process: fleecy blankets bundling my feet, quilts pleated into fourths and gathered around my waist. Next comes a sleep mask, thick and downy, wine-colored, and I slip it over my eyes, let the light vanish. Phosphenes slide beneath my lids.

"You are safe and warm," Mary Lou says. The swaddling complete, she retreats to her office chair, her voice growing slightly distant. "Focus on your breathing," she says. I can hear her fiddling with something on the desk, and the music comes on now: mellow and warm, something with a violin, and bells.

"You're inside your mother's womb," she says. "You have not yet been born."

It is the fourth time I have heard these words, and by now the absurdity of the situation has dulled. It always begins like this: I am not yet myself. I am not Caroline, not seventeen, not even an infant. I might be small as a nickel, embryonic and slippery.

"Every time I say the word *relax*, you will feel *ten times* more relaxed," Mary Lou says. The whole affair seems vaguely phony, synthetic. I'm never quite sure if I'm actually undergoing hypnosis, or if the whole thing's a sham. And then, too, there's the indulgence of it: a whole plush hour for sprawling, cocooning, listening to affirmations. *You are beautiful. You are safe. Loved. Important.* They are nurturing in a way that seems almost narcissistic. Still, they seem to help, at least temporarily: for a week or two after each session, I am more careful with myself, more tender, my fingers less clinical when I touch my stomach, or my thighs.

"You are exactly where you need to be," Mary Lou says. "There's no need for worry. You are climbing down the ladder of alertness." I practically know the words by heart now; it all sounds the same: You are descending deeper into relaxation. *You are discovering a profound perception below your lucid mind.*

It's hard not to fall asleep. For the last several sessions, I've awoken to silence, uncertain when Mary Lou stopped speaking. It doesn't matter, anyway; even if I snored, she would still say I had fallen into trance. Every time our sessions finish, she beams, as if she is proud of me, lying there half-asleep, my wrist dangling off the sofa, my body smothered in fabric.

"When you're ready, return to the edge of consciousness," she says. The session is nearly over; there are empty gaps in my memory, moments I must have fallen asleep. "Take your time. Climb up the ladder."

I untangle the sleep mask from my hair, blink at the lights, and look over at Mary Lou. She is upright in her chair, smiling, her ankles crossed. "Very good," she says. "You were in a deep hypnotic state."

"Thank you," I say. The music is still chiming. The cuckoo bird springs out of his chamber. Together we return the blankets and the pillows to the wicker basket. We are both moving slowly, her body perhaps sluggish with age, mine with sleep or hesitance or disorder.

******

A month from now, I will declare myself officially eating-disorder free. It might have been the hypnotherapy, though I have my doubts, or the counseling, or the dietician, or the seven books that my mother bought, all of them bearing long, inky inscriptions: rueful love notes from my parents. In the end, it makes no difference: whatever the reason, I have arrived at that clean, and empty, expanse of recovery. I do not step on the scale fourteen times a day anymore. I do not scurry, a strange and desperate rat, between the vending machine and the bathroom, back and forth, over and over, my shoes nearly etching the floor. I stop kneeling on the bathroom floor, sacrifice or prayer. There is something relieving about recovery: it is like when you are having a hold-your-breath contest with your friends and you finally give in, come up for air.

Still, though, there's something that doesn't sit right. *I'm fine,* I say to everyone. *I'm okay now.* But I still dream of taking a vacation from my body: hanging myself on the clothesline-- first the face, the mouth swallowing wind, each ear turned towards a

different birdsong, my eyes closed to the light. The breasts next, pinned to the line, faintly sadistic. Then the waist, hips, two thighs. I want to walk without a body, no hands, no fingernails, not even a nerve. It's not that I want to be beautiful-- it's that I want to be nothing.

******

Months later, I learn of Gourdon G. Gallup, Jr., founder of the mirror test of self-awareness in 1970. Here is the test's basic premise: after a non-human is marked with paint, it is placed in a room with a mirror. If the animal, noticing the paint on the mirror image, touches his own body in the location of the mark—thus demonstrating that he is aware he is seeing himself in the mirror—then the animal is presumed to be conscious, to have a mind.

"There are a lot of problems with this, of course," my friend says. We are walking in Lullwater preserve. It is spring: everything is blooming around us, pashmina roses and grape hyacinths, the flowers fragrant and swollen with rainwater. My fingers are sticky with blue popsicle.

"A lot of false positives," I say. "Paint and mirrors—so little to hinge consciousness on." Later, I'll read articles criticizing the mirror test: its black-and-white results oversimplify the complex and developmental experience of self-awareness; the test assesses contextual awareness—an understanding of the self in relation to others—rather than the single acknowledgment of an identity; Gallup's conceptions neglect to consider the influence of the mirror as a physical object. There are numerous flaws with the study, it seems.

Still, I found something compelling about the mirror test. In Lullwater, a moth flits behind us, and I watch it closely. *Here you are,* I want to tell it. Y*ou're in Atlanta, and you're alive, and you're only a moth,* I would say. *Do you understand me?*

"Right," Collin says. He finishes his popsicle, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "So many want to perceive this test as hard proof, when it seems to me more like an indication."

"A hint," I say. The moth has vanished. "A hint of self-recognition."

******

When I was young, seven maybe, I held my face close enough to a mirror to fog up the glass. I opened my mouth, looked at my tongue, my throat, my gums. Everything was pink and soft and pliable. My mother came in the bathroom then, smiled at me.

"Silly goose," she said. "What are you doing?"

I closed my mouth. My teeth clicked together. "Nothing," I said.

She stood behind me, then, her hands on my shoulders. "Look at you," she said. "You're beautiful." She smoothed my hair back, her fingers cool against my forehead.

Together, we watched my reflection—my angular shoulders, the scar on my right thumb, the white seam of my hair part where my skin shone through. I didn't look away, not even when my mom turned to finish cooking, maybe, or to call her brother. I stared at myself, this me-and-not-me, perhaps even touched my lips to the glass to kiss her. I had the strange sensation that I did not know this girl in the mirror. She had freckles in places I was absolutely sure I did not have freckles. Her eyes were not my own.

How long I stood there, I cannot say. Maybe only minutes—perhaps an hour. I tended to my reflection like you might tend to an infant. I wanted to be careful with her, this visitor.

"Hi," I said, and she mouthed the words back. Still, only my voice sounded in the bathroom.

"Oh," I said. "You're mute." And then, because I was seven: "Stop copying me."

"Stop copying me," she answered, only again there was no sound but my own.

"I love you," I told her.

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Later, I would remember this moment at strange times: while I was shaving my legs in the tub, or picking out a new book to read, or in the strange silvery moments before sleep came. I must have watched myself in the mirror hundreds of times after this one, fascinated with my own reflection, with this twin, an inverted clone.

Still, I cannot call these moments to mind—all I know is that, by age twelve, I had already begun to cover the mirror. I taped blankets to the wall: they hung like curtains over the glass. There was a thin, navy blanket I had stolen from an airplane; the cloth worked particularly well, light enough to stay put, dark enough to hide what I didn't want to see.

"It's for an assignment," I would tell my parents whenever they passed by, their heads tilted in confusion. "A school project."

"Okay," they would say, and the blanket would stay up for a few more days. My bathroom was the guest bathroom, though; whenever we had company the blanket had to come down. On those days, I turned off the lights and peed in the dark. I did not want to see my reflection because I was angry at it, at how unpleasant it was, my eyebrows thick and black, my eyes dark as hollows. I had strange bangs that didn't lay flat with my widow's peak, so I parted them in the middle like a disfigured pair of curtains. The hair on my arms was too dark against the skin. My lips were thin and cracked.

At school I daydreamed about my desk sinking into the floor, slowly, so that no one would notice. I would slip beneath the linoleum and no one would be able to look at me. Mirrors would not be invented. Everything solid, and opaque.

******

My father works for a small architecture company. He oversees the accounts, keeping mainly within his cubicle; still, he's no stranger to the worksites, where the houses materialize, sprouting from the earth like colossal exotic blooms. He knows the latest design trends—glass porches, terrariums thick with succulents, arched wood ceilings, bronzy burnished metal. Mirrors, too. Always mirrors: sculptural ones, mosaic ones that appear like shattered crystal, collections of framed mirrors above a vanity. Sandblasted mirrors and backlit mirrors. Mirrors reflecting chandeliers, mirrors among staircases, mirrors on the surface of coffee tables.

"They add depth," my father says. "They expand rooms."

In the fall of my fourteenth birthday, after my father receives a bonus at work, we renovate our home. My father drafts the blueprints, and my mother selects paint shades. When everything is finished—the carpentry complete, the smell of sawdust dissolving—the house gleams: suspended mirrors framed in copper, a whole kitchen corner reworked into glass, transparent French doors that open to the backyard. Everything is lovely, really. Still, when the sun sets, and the lights flush bright in the kitchen, all the glass turns dark and opaque. The windows become mirrors; the mirrors pools of light and shadow. My reflection trails me like an alley cat. I can't get away from it, this dark hair, the child face, the florid skin. I'm in the walls, and the doors, even the shiny surface of the granite counter.

So I begin showering with the lights off. It is easier to be formless this way. Even when I wash, water clipping my cheek, soap glazing the back of my neck, the dark makes it easier to pretend. I am vapor, I tell myself. I am the steam on the tile. In my mind, I make a long slit down my back, spread open the skin like wings, crawl out of my body.

The shower floor is slick; it's easy to slip in the dark. I fall several times, the side of the tub bruising my hip.

My mother's voice reaches me through the water: "Are you okay?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I tell her. "I dropped the shampoo."

After the shower, I climb into bed, my hair cooling the pillow. Like everyone else, I dream of winning the lottery. Not to travel, though, or to buy a home by the ocean, but for plastic surgery, all the procedures I can dream of. This is how I fall asleep: I imagine the cash in my hand. Half of it to charity, sure. But first a nose job.

******

It wasn't so much that I was upset about lacking beauty, it was that I couldn't stand how guilty I felt when people had to look at me. *I'm sorry,* I wanted to say, as if I had ruined their day by crossing their line of sight. *I'm sorry*.

I'm sixteen when I get my first kiss, and sixteen when I first sleep with a man. The room is dark and bare, the sheets rough against my legs. A square of sunlight flashes through the window. He is already on top of me by now, the fine hairs on his thighs glinting bronze in the light. In between kisses, my teeth make a tiny clicking noise. I'm so nervous they are chattering.

"Maybe you should get a towel," I say, when all of our clothes come off. "For—in case there's blood, you know."

"Okay," he says. He lets go of my ass and moves off the bed. He is still wearing socks, thick white ones that sweep halfway off his calves, and when he turns I watch him—the muscles of his back, the fat of his shoulders.

I wait. The shadows in the room swim up the walls. Outside, I can hear the cicadas, sweet and grating.

"Here," he says, stepping back into the room, handing me a napkin. "Are you ready?"

"A napkin?" I say. "Are you serious? I don't think that's going to work."

"Oh." He stares at the paper for a moment before dropping it. "Here," he says, turning to his closet. "How about this?" From the shelf he pulls a pale green washcloth, just larger than his palm.

"Forget it," I say. "Maybe this isn't the best day for this."

"No, no, just give me a second." He fishes in his closet for a moment, then slams the door shut and runs his fingers through his hair. "Screw it," he says. "I'll wash the sheets if I have to."

The condom is a Trojan, the wrapper slick and metallic. The cicadas pause for a moment, then resume. When he does not turn off the lamp, I switch it off myself. It is hot now, too hot for covers, but still I pull the quilt over us, let my body settle into the dark.

It hurts, very badly. Still, the pain is not the reason I can't stop shivering. No, it's that when I look over his shoulder, all the way to his mirrored closet doors, I can see my reflection. My face, in that moment, is stranger than any story I have ever heard about mirrors: that they can show you infinity, that they're the key to time travel, that vampires don't

have reflections, that if you close your eyes and say *Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary,* she'll surface behind your mirror image. It is unthinkable to me that I am here, being wanted.

The boy above me closes his eyes, but I keep mine on the glass: gazing, greeting, memorizing. Just for a moment, I learn my face by heart.

******

That December, I dream of a baby—my baby. She is small and angry and fat, her hair dark as pitch; she cries like a goose, squawking, and if she is not crying, she is drooling.

Everything about her is beautiful. In the dream, I name her after myself: *Carly,* I call her, holding her to my breast, touching her ears, her fleshy knees. I feel her warm milk-breath on my shoulder.

There's not a man around, so I take her everywhere—to parties, everyone smiling, to work in a stark cubicle, to the library, where she shouts and whimpers until I take her outside, bounce her on my hip, say *it's okay. You're okay.* In the dream her age varies every so often, the way things do in dreams, shifty and convincing. Two months—then two years—a newborn again. I cannot stop touching her, this tiny woman, this small self.

There's something vain about naming a child after yourself, as if you are signing your name across a piece of artwork in a particularly large and overbearing manner. *Here, I made this.* But when I woke, and thought of my child—hazy now, the dream slipping away—I felt sick with adoration. In my journal I traced my name, over and over, in large loopy handwriting. *Carly Carly Carly.* I had never particularly liked my name before, but after the dream, I couldn't get enough of it. I heard the tiny child in my name; I saw her in my face. Like a mother would, I tried to love her.

******

In Advanced Placement Physics that year we learn about lenses, light, mirrors. This is how you measure focal length of a spherical mirror: place a mirror behind a light, project the image of the light bulb onto the wall with the mirror, measure the distance from the mirror to the wall and from the mirror to the light. None of the data makes sense to me; all the variables seem to blend together—S_o , S_i , , f —and I haven't the faintest clue what a ray diagram is. I'm not even sure what *optics* means, exactly.

Mr. Mueller, my physics teacher, has a crew cut and a slight limp. He paces between the rows of desks, his breath loud and throaty. "Light strikes a concave mirror and *converges*," he says. "Light strikes a convex mirror and *diverges*."

I think of Lewis Carroll's Alice, The Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat. If I squint enough, I can almost see them in the lab mirrors—a flash of blue dress, the dark coattails of the Hatter. The mirrors are round enough that that I don't have to worry about seeing my face—a recognizable version, at least. In Chemistry, last year, we learned about amorphous solids: matter without definitive structure or form. I was almost jealous at the time, imagining myself buoyant and suspended, everything insubstantial, ethereal. Yet my avoidance of mirrors has tempered a bit. It's almost impossible to elude them for an extended period of time; your reflection knows how to keep itself familiar. It appears in the most unexpected places: on the kitchen counter, in the shape of a toaster; in a glossy photograph, where you might even be smiling.

After the bulimia had gone, only a taste like curdled milk still faintly lingering, I felt hollow. It was as if the disorder had filled me up in some way, had occupied my body. Perhaps my body, in the end, had needed attention; perhaps it wanted to be seen, to fling back the blankets on the mirrors, to stare hungrily, to find its own image. To kiss the mirror and say I love you. *I love you.*

******

So I began slowly. I eyed myself in the dark panes of glass along storefronts. Walking home from school, a bus passed me: for just a few milliseconds I found myself in its windows, my hair tangled in the wind, my chest rising with breath, my eyes open wide. I peeked at my reflection in a compact mirror—not leering, not the way boys would, but the way a mother might, the way Mary Lou Phillage might, hypnotizing me, beaming.

On a Tuesday afternoon I flicked the light on in the bathroom. No blanket to be found. I was eighteen years old, and I had a body with a stomach that curved into itself, and a round open face. My thighs touched; I could feel them. My hair was dark and unruly, wild as roses. If I was pretty, or ugly, I couldn't say. All I know is this: I thought Gallup might be right. *Here I am,* I said. Right here, in this glass, and in my body. *I might know you,* I said. *Hint of recognition.*


ONE-ACT
PLAY

Extra-Ordinary Problems

Morgan Bilicki
Young Harris College

Cast of Characters

ASSISTANT: female, stern. In glasses and business skirt.
ROBERT: male, somewhat preppy and dorky. In grey suit and bowtie.
CUPID: male, baby-faced with curly blond hair. In white clothes and carrying a harp.
EASTER BUNNY: female, self-centered. In pastel dress, bunny tail, and bunny ears, and carrying an Easter basket.
GUARD 1: male, huge. In security outfit.
GUARD 2: male, large. In security outfit.
PATRICK: male, red hair, fierce look. In all green with a top hat.
SANTA: male, hipster look combined with classic Santa look. In red shirt, suspenders, and hipster glasses.
MRS. CLAUS: female, grey hair and traditional Mrs. Claus look. In red dress and apron with a purse.

Place

A Fictitious Mental Therapy Office
Setting: A small office, devoid of decorations. A desk and chair, a trash bin, filing cabinets, and a potted plant. Elevator music is quietly playing in the background.
At Rise: Enter Assistant and Robert. Robert is carrying a cardboard box.

ASSISTANT

So you'll be working in here.

ROBERT

Wow, my very own office?

(Begins placing random office trinkets around room.)

ASSISTANT

It used to be a closet.

ROBERT

…Well, it's something, at least! Better than being Dr. Goldberg's "assistant." Well, ha! You can get your own coffee, Goldberg! (Pause.) Say, will I get coffee delivered to me whenever I want it?

ASSISTANT

No.

ROBERT

Still, it's a step up. So… what exactly will I be doing in here?

ASSISTANT

A patient will be sent in, you'll evaluate them, and recommend a doctor to them.

ROBERT

And that's it?

ASSISTANT

That's it.

ROBERT

And the guy before me? I was told he had an astonishing resume. What happened to him – why didn't he get the job?

ASSISTANT

He did. And he quit after a week.

ROBERT

A week? Ha! What a moron.

ASSISTANT

I give you two days, tops.

ROBERT

What?

(ASSISTANT leaves.)

ROBERT

Heh, I'll last. (Places last decoration; puts box by the trash bin.) I'll make it way longer than Mr. Perfect Resume, with all that talk and no game. (Sings) I'm the winner, he's a loser, I'm a –

(ASSISTANT opens office door.)

ROBERT (High-pitched.)

Agh!

ASSISTANT

Your first patient is here.

ROBERT

Ahem. Yes. (Sits at desk.) Bring them in.

(Exit ASSISTANT; enter CUPID.)

ROBERT

Hello, I'm Robert. And you are – ?

CUPID

Cupid.

ROBERT

Cupid? As in "Valentine's Day" Cupid?

CUPID

Yeah. Let me guess: they didn't fully explain the operation they got going here, did they? (Sits and strums a few notes on harp.)

ROBERT

Not… not exactly. No.

CUPID

Typical.

ROBERT

Uh, so – why are you, ehrm, here today?

CUPID

I am not getting proper recognition – or respect – for my work.

ROBERT

Go on. (Writing notes.)

CUPID

Everyone else thinks they're so great. Well, guess what! My job is just as important! No! It's more important! And let me tell you, I'm good at it.

ROBERT (Snorts.)

Uh huh.

CUPID

What?

ROBERT

Well, nothing. It's nothing.

CUPID

No, you laughed. Why'd you laugh?

ROBERT

Uh, well in high school, I fell madly in love with this girl – Tiana – and she – (inhales sharply) – she did not feel the same.

CUPID

Tiana… Oh! I remember you! You intercepted my arrow meant for Jimmy!

ROBERT (Stands up.)

Jimmy! Jimmy Powell? He was supposed to fall in love with Tiana?! But I hated him!

CUPID (Aside.)

Well, Tiana didn't. (Strums harp.)

ROBERT (Lunges across desk, seizing CUPID'S shirt in his fists.)

Now you listen to me! I loved her! I still love her! Look at me! This is the first paying job I've had in months! I'm even losing my hair – at this rate, I'll be bald before I'm thirty! And you want to know why? (Shakes CUPID.) All-because-of-your-lousy-MISTAKE! So don't you tell me you're good at your job!

(Enter ASSISTANT.)

ASSISTANT

What is going on here?

ROBERT (Releases CUPID.)

Nothing. Ahem, I believe you should see Dr. Howard. (Hands business card; sits down.) He's right down the hall. Have a nice day.

(CUPID glares at ROBERT, then exits.)

ASSISTANT

Your next patient is here.

ROBERT (Exhales.)

Okay. Good, bring them in.

(Exit ASSISTANT, enter EASTER BUNNY.)

EASTER BUNNY (Sits down, sets basket on floor.)

My husband just doesn't appreciate me enough.

ROBERT

How so?

EASTER BUNNY (Scoffs.)

Are you even seeing me right now?

ROBERT

…Yes?

EASTER BUNNY

And, on top of all this (gestures to herself), Peter – my husband – obviously doesn't get how amazing of a parent I am. I mean, if he did, he'd be complementing – (to basket) NOT RIGHT NOW MOMMY IS TALKING YOU LITTLE BRAT – (to ROBERT) he'd be complementing me all the time.

ROBERT

You have kids with you right now?

EASTER BUNNY

Yes. (Lifts up Easter basket.) Some came with me today. They're my little angels, though when I was a kid I never spoke up while my parents were talking. I was too good for that.

ROBERT

Uh-huh…

EASTER BUNNY

Anyway, like I was saying, he just doesn't appreciate me enough. I work all the time, and hiding baskets and eggs isn't as easy – or luxurious – as I make it look (bats eyelashes at ROBERT) but, you know, someone's got to do it.

ROBERT

Well, uh –

EASTER BUNNY (To basket)

I SAID BE QUIET! (To ROBERT) And, while we're talking about it, Peter doesn't appreciate my parenting skills either.

ROBERT

How many, uh, kids do you have?

EASTER BUNNY

Four-hundred and thirty-seven. But I only brought six with me.

ROBERT

Oh.

EASTER BUNNY

Don't I still look good? (Poses provocatively.)

ROBERT

Y-yes?

EASTER BUNNY

Of course I do, honey! My babies will be lucky if they get even a teaspoon of my good looks.

ROBERT

They – they most certainly will. (Nervous chuckle.)

EASTER BUNNY

I really am quite special, you know. Peter just doesn't see that. (Pulls out a mirror from the basket, looks at herself, then fixes her hair while continuing.) He tried to help me decorate the eggs one year. You should have seen the pitiful job he did. I, on the other hand, make works of art. Too bad I have to give them to snotty-nosed children.

ROBERT

Uh-huh… I'm sure… (Quietly picks up phone and presses a number. To phone:) I've got a narcissist in here. Send backup.

EASTER BUNNY

What do you think of my dress? It's a little too "Spring" for my taste. I like darker colors better – they suit my complexion well – (To basket) MOMMY IS NOT DONE YET SO BE PATIENT – (To ROBERT) and it's so much easier to find them in the stores. (Enter GUARD 1 and GUARD 2. They pick up EASTER BUNNY and her basket. She continues talking, unphased.) You see, they make my tail pop, and they make my fur shinier, which, I mean, it's already perfectly radiant, but still…. (Exit GUARD 1, EASTER BUNNY, and GUARD 2.)

ROBERT (Slumps onto desk.)

Ugh…

(Enter ASSISTANT.)

ASSISTANT

Your next patient is ready.

ROBERT

Can I, uh, can I take a few minutes? Get some coffee, maybe?

ASSISTANT

No.

(Exit ASSISTANT. PATRICK walks in, sits down.)

ROBERT (Tired.)

Hello, I'm –

PATRICK

Blah! Jus' point meh tah me doctor. Don't take up more of me tyme.

ROBERT

Can I at least get your name?

PATRICK

Yew don't know who ah am?

ROBERT

No?

PATRICK

Why can't uh guy get sum recognition anymore? I plant da clover, put da pots o' gold at da end o' the rainbows, an' spread luck around da world! An' yew don't know who I am?!

ROBERT

… Are – are you that leprechaun?

PATRICK

DAT LEPRECHAN? DAT LEPRECHAN! (Gets up, starts throwing things and trashing the office while yelling.) I am Patrick! I am da face of St. Patrick's Day! How do yew not know meh?

ROBERT (Shields his head with his arms.)

Well St. Patrick's Day i-isn't a big holiday…

PATRICK

NOT A BIG HOLIDAY?!?! What do yew think puts da food on me table? What buys me son's shoes? What gets me wife tha' new oven she wanted? I hate da oven but SHE – NEEDED – IT! AGH! (Continues throwing things.)

ROBERT

I'm sorry – take the card and go!

PATRICK

GAH! (Snatches business card and storms out.)

ROBERT

My… office. (Whimpers.)

(Enter ASSISTANT.)

ASSISTANT

Your ten o'clock is here.

ROBERT

But… my office. Can I –

ASSISTANT

No.

(Exit ASSISTANT. Enter SANTA and MRS. CLAUS.)

MRS. CLAUS

I made the appointment – the least you can do is give me an hour. An hour, Santa! Is that really asking for too much?

SANTA

I don't want to talk to some doctor who thinks he knows everything. I'm fine, really.

MRS. CLAUS

You most certainly are not "fine." Sit down.

(SANTA and MRS. CLAUS sit.)

SANTA

I can't do this. (Stands up.) Look at him! He's barely twenty years old! What does he know about life?

MRS. CLAUS

He wouldn't be here unless he was capable.

SANTA

"Capable?" Ha! They'll hire anyone who can beat a drug test. That's it. He probably bribed someone and they let him in.

ROBERT

Uh, I'm right here…

MRS. CLAUS

So what? I don't care if he's a pot head or not. He's here to give us – you – help. Now sit down!

SANTA

No.

MRS. CLAUS

Sit down right now or I will cut off that beard you love so much.

SANTA

You wouldn't.

MRS. CLAUS

Oh, I would. And, I'll sell your bike.

SANTA

No.

MRS. CLAUS

Oh yes.

ROBERT

"Bike?" Like, a –

SANTA

It's a Harley.

ROBERT

Nice.

MRS. CLAUS

Can you help him? He's having a midlife crisis.

SANTA

I am not!

ROBERT

I'm not the doctor. I just –

MRS. CLAUS (To SANTA.)

Yes you are! You've lost weight from eating all of that green food, you dyed your beard and your hair, and you go around saying how you did stuff (Air quotes) "before it was cool." Don't get me started on the selfies.

SANTA

So what? I'm just taking care of myself. You were the one who told me to cut down on the cookies, so I did. And now you're telling me to go back to the way I was?

MRS. CLAUS

Yes!

SANTA

You were the one who told me to change!

MRS. CLAUS

I did not!

SANTA

Ha! Liar!

ROBERT

QUIET!

(Both stop arguing.)

ROBERT

You are Santa Claus – you're supposed to be jolly and fat! (SANTA flinches at "fat.") And you! Mrs. Claus! What happened to your kindness? Why are you fighting? You guys should be above this.

MRS. CLAUS

Oh honey, no one is above problems, least of all us.

SANTA

Yeah, at least we're not like the Tooth Fairy. Boy, wait 'til she comes in here. She has got P-R-O-B-L-E-M-S.

MRS. CLAUS

What is that supposed to mean?

SANTA

Nothing.

MRS. CLAUS

No, that's not nothing. What did you mean?

SANTA

Nothing.

MRS. CLAUS

No! You can't insult my best friend and then say it's "nothing!" What did you mean?

(Enter ASSISTANT.)

ASSISTANT

Your next clients are ready. Why are the Clauses still here?

MRS. CLAUS

What – did – you – mean?

SANTA

I take it back.

MRS. CLAUS

You can't take it back! Tell me –

ROBERT (Stands up.)

I QUIT!

(Everyone is quiet; they watch him march out of the office.)

SANTA

See? I told you: Drugs.

CURTAIN

That Doggie in the Window: A ten-minute play

Sarah Boudreau
Young Harris College

Cast of Characters

RYAN: a man in his early twenties. Wears a graphic t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers.
JACKLYN: Ryan's girlfriend, the same age. Wears a dress and sandals.

Scene

The waiting room of an animal shelter. Several folding chairs set up in a line, a small table with a lamp and some magazines.

Time
The present

(JACKLYN sits in the waiting room, legs crossed, one arm folded, scrolling on her phone. Enter RYAN, carrying a clipboard in one hand and a dog leash and collar in the other. He sneezes and rubs his eyes. JACKLYN does not look up from her phone.)

RYAN

Hey, so the lady at the desk said that we just gotta fill this application out, then we can go find our newest family member!

JACKLYN

(Finally looks up from her phone)

Nobody can read your handwriting. You better let me fill it out.

RYAN

(Hands her the clipboard)

Okay, good, good… I'll dictate, you can write down the answers, okay? We need to sound really good on this application. This place doesn't just adopt to anyone.

JACKLYN

It's a puppy, Ryan, not an orphan from a third-world country. Worst comes to worst, we can just buy one from a pet store.

RYAN

Wow, it's like you haven't listened to a word I've said for the past three weeks. "Adopt, don't shop," Jacklyn. "Adopt, don't shop."

JACKLYN

(Clicks pen)

Let's just get this over with. "Name" and "Marital status"

(RYAN paces as he talks. JACKLYN reads aloud everything she writes.)

RYAN

Ryan Weston and Jacklyn Marks--

JACKLYN

Oh no. I'm not putting my name on any paperwork. This was your idea.

(Writing)

"Ryan Weston"

RYAN

"Marital status".... in a relationship.

JACKLYN

(Writes)

Unmarried. Okay. Next one: "Job title."

RYAN

(Pauses)

Managerial position.

JACKLYN

(Writes)

Underemployed; works at Costco despite holding an engineering degree. "Type of residence"?

RYAN

Apartment.

JACKLYN

"Do you own your house or apartment?"

(Writes)

No, I live off of the good graces of my girlfriend.

RYAN

Hey! I pay rent.

JACKLYN

(Writes)

I rarely pay rent on time and instead spend the money on video games and delivery pizza.

RYAN

Maybe if you were home a little more often, I wouldn't have to entertain myself—

JACKLYN

Oh, so I'm supposed to entertain you?

RYAN

That's not what I— look, can we not get into this now?

JACKLYN

"How many hours per day will your puppy be crated?"

RYAN

Zero.

JACKLYN

Uh, no. I am NOT going to leave for work and have some little monster tear apart my home.

RYAN

How can you do that to a cute, innocent little puppy?

JACKLYN

Very easily. It's not allowed to jump up on the couch, either. Those little nails will KILL the leather. It's going to be crated, at least when we're both at work.

RYAN

You're always at work!

(JACKLYN shoots him a dirty look.)

Fine. We can get a nice, big crate and a nice, comfy bed for the little guy. Or little girl. We can go shopping. It'll be fun!

JACKLYN

"Puppies can get into just about anything. Have you taken steps to puppy-proof your home?"

(Snorts)

RYAN

Why's that so funny? I don't think it's so crazy to maybe put away some... certain items...

JACKLYN

Items? I hope you're talking about some of your worthless crap and not about the girls.

RYAN

Girls? They're Barbie dolls, Jacklyn, and everyone thinks they're kinda creepy. What kind of grown woman collects Barbie dolls?

JACKLYN

What kind of grown man spends a month making lists of puppy names and reading puppy training books with cheesy titles like *Puppy Fever* and *What to Expect When You're Adopting*?

RYAN

Can we get back to the application, please?

JACKLYN

"Why do you want to adopt a puppy from Furry Friends Animal Rescue?"

(Puts down clip board)

Yeah, Ryan, why do you, a man who is *allergic to dogs*, want to adopt a destructive ball of allergen that you'll have to take care of for twelve years?

RYAN

I had a Labrador when I was a kid, and I kinda miss it, you know?

JACKLYN

No, I don't know.

RYAN

It's nice to have something there that always wants to be around you, always wants to play with you and cuddle up to you.

JACKLYN

And chew on everything and destroy your home. Speaking of destroying your home--

RYAN

Jackie. Really? You're going to get into this now?

JACKLYN

(Pretends to read from the clipboard)

"How did the applicant manage to do absolutely no housework for the week that his girlfriend was out of town?"

RYAN

You always do the cleaning up! I figured you'd want to do it.

(RYAN stops short. He knows he's said the wrong thing.)

JACKLYN

(With heavy sarcasm)

Oh, yes, totally, Ryan. I love doing the dishes and washing your reeking, ratty old clothes. Why, I love housework so much, I want to do it all!

RYAN

Can we get back to the application?

JACKLYN

(Still sarcastic)

In fact, why don't we get *five* puppies? That way I will have plenty of mess to clean up while you sit on your ass all day!

(RYAN snatches the clipboard away from JACKLYN.)

RYAN

Let's get back to the application, shall we?

(Pretends to read)

"Why is your girlfriend so dead set against adopting a puppy, something that would bring love and joy to your life?"

(JACKLYN pauses. She doesn't like that he's using her own game against her.)

JACKLYN

Oh, yeah, clearly because I'm just a monster that doesn't want you to have love and joy. Look, I just don't think that a puppy would suit our lifestyle.

RYAN

What the hell is that supposed to mean? I didn't know we had a lifestyle.

JACKLYN

We've got our work schedules to think about.

RYAN

Your work schedule may be "day in and day out with no vacation time," but mine is more like "rarely." So I don't think it would be much of an issue. It's not like we go out of town that often.

(JACKLYN shifts in her seat. She pauses for a moment, thinking, then grabs the clipboard from RYAN.)

JACKLYN

"Will the applicant relocate in the near future?"

RYAN

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

JACKLYN

Look... when I went on that trip... it was for an interview.

RYAN

Why would you do an interview? Why would you interview in *Chicago* of all places?

JACKLYN

(Stands up from her chair to be on eye level with RYAN.)

It's got the best opportunities for my career. Ryan, I got a call Friday. I got the job. They really, really want me there. Do you understand how much of a mess it would be to move a puppy that far?

RYAN

Never mind about the puppy, Jackie. I don't want to move to Chicago. I've got family here. I've got... I'm not going to uproot my entire life. I don't want to move. I like it here-- don't you like it here? Don't you like our little |apartment and our little life?

JACKLYN

It's not—

RYAN

(Grabs the clipboard from JACKLYN)

"Doesn't the applicant's girlfriend currently have a stable, comfortable life?"

JACKLYN

(Pause.)

I want something bigger than our little life here. My little dead-end job isn't going to make that happen. Our little dead-end life isn't, either.

RYAN

It's not good enough for you? I'm not good enough for you. Why am I never good enough, Jacklyn?

JACKLYN

Look, hey, you could come with me to Chicago! I was looking into it; you could go to grad school-- I know you've been putting that off-- or you can get a job that's actually in your field-- you're better than working at Costco. You're smarter than that—

RYAN

(Cutting her off)

I'm happy where I am.

JACKLYN

You're seriously telling me that you're happy workings shitty hours at a shitty job like that?

RYAN

Unlike some people, my life doesn't revolve around work. Seriously, Jacklyn, is that all you ever think about? You don't think there's something more to life than some soul-sucking cubicle in Chicago?

JACKLYN

I want to work hard and be appreciated for it, so sue me. I'm sorry I don't find wasting my life away playing video games satisfying. Why don't you ever take some responsibility and go get a real job?

RYAN

(Raising his voice)

I. Don't. Want. To.

JACKLYN

(Sharply)

You're being a child. Can't you at least think about it?

RYAN

(Temper and volume escalating, waving his arms around, wildly.)

No. I've thought about it enough-- how could I not, with you shoving your ideas down my throat all the time. "Ryan, you need to get a real job. Ryan, you need to be a better person. Ryan, you need to be perfect." Have you ever thought that I am perfectly happy the way I am?!

(Drops the clipboard with a loud clang on the ground. Silence for a moment. RYAN retrieves the clipboard. He's ashamed of his outburst, but still angry.)

JACKLYN

(Softly)

I don't want you to change who you are.

RYAN

Really? Because it feels like it.

JACKLYN

I believe in you, Ryan. I want you to live to your full potential. I—

RYAN

Have fun in Chicago. I hope you like it there. I hope you enjoy living to *your* full potential.

JACKLYN

Ryan, no, look, I don't have to--

RYAN

I'll leave a check for this month's rent.

JACKLYN

I don't want it to be like this. Ryan—

RYAN

I'll go pack up my stuff. I'm sure it's making a mess, anyway.

JACKLYN

Don't you want to think it over a little more?

RYAN

(A pause.)

I've been thinking about this for a long time.

(A pause as his anger cools down.)

You're not happy, being with me. I know you're not. I've known this for a long time. For a while, I thought maybe if I loved you enough or something, you'd be happy.

(He shrugs, holding up the clipboard)

I hoped that maybe I could fix that…

(JACKLYN looks like she's about to say something, but no sound comes out.)

RYAN

(Softly)

Goodbye.

JACKLYN

You know that I love you, right?

(Silence. RYAN hands Jacklyn the clipboard. He exits stage right. JACKLYN sinks back into her chair. She puts her head in her hands. She appears to be crying. After a moment, she gets up and wipes the tears from her eyes. She picks up the clipboard and exits stage left.)

JACKLYN

(Off stage)

Hi, I'd like to adopt a puppy...

(Blackout.)

Obsessive Compulsive Destruction: A Play in One Act

Zoe Howard
Agnes Scott College

List of Characters

Elliot: An 18-year-old female college student with long hair.
Anxiety: Part of Elliot's unconscious mind that appears to be a 20-year-old woman.
OCD: Part of Elliot's unconscious mind that appears to be a 16-year-old teenager.

Scene
Elliot's college dorm room.

Time
Present.

SETTING: ELLIOT's bedroom, present. Her bedroom is comprised of a bed stage right, a bedside table to the left of the bed, a desk and chair stage left, and a lamp on the desk. The bed is messy and unmade, as a direct contrast to the neatness of her desk. The lamp is on.

AT RISE: ELLIOT is sitting on her bed brushing her hair. She stands up and puts her hair in a ponytail. OCD enters.

OCD

It's not right. You need to do it again.

(ELLIOT takes her hair out and puts it back up again.)

OCD

That's better.

(ELLIOT walks over to her desk and turns her lamp off. She walks away from it. ANXIETY enters.)

ANXIETY

Are you sure you turned your lamp off?

(ELLIOT turns around and turns the lamp back on and then off again.)

ELLIOT

Yes.

ANXIETY

But are you positive? Is it really turned off?

ELLIOT

I just showed you.

ANXIETY

You know, it would be awful if you thought it was turned off but it really wasn't and the bulb was malfunctioning and it set the lampshade on fire and then the whole dorm would burn down and all the students would die. You don't want that to happen, right?

ELLIOT

No.

OCD

I think you need to check it again.

(ELLIOT turns back around and turns the lamp on and then off one more time.)

OCD

But is it really turned off?

ELLIOT

Yes, I saw it was. You saw it was.

OCD

Can you trust what your eyes are telling you? Your eyes are lying.

(ELLIOT turns the lamp back on and off again.)

ELLIOT

There.

(staring at the lamp, blinking repeatedly)

It's off.

OCD

It is now.

ANXIETY

Whew! You just saved the whole dorm. That was close!

(ELLIOT starts making her bed. ANXIETY steps forward and gasps.)

ANXIETY

There's someone under the bed!

ELLIOT

(turning around)

What?! No, there isn't.

ANXIETY

Yes, there is! I saw their shadow!

ELLIOT

I really don't think there's someone under my bed.

ANXIETY
(cowering)

But what if there really is? He could be waiting to attack you when you turn away.

(ELLIOT gets down on her hands and knees and checks under the bed.)

ELLIOT
(standing back up)

There's no one there.

ANXIETY

He might have known you were going to look and hid when you looked.

OCD

Look again.

(ELLIOT kneels down, looks under the bed, and stands up.)

ELLIOT

Nothing.

OCD

Are you sure?

ANXIETY

He might be an escaped inmate!

OCD

A murderer!

ANXIETY

A serial killer!

ELLIOT
(fearfully)

Oh, okay.

(ELLIOT checks under the bed one more time.)

ELLIOT

There's no one there.

(pause)

What time is it?

ANXIETY

Oh my god! It's almost ten! You're going to be late for your scholarship interview!

ELLIOT

Oh no!

(ELLIOT runs to her dresser and starts adjusting the collar of her shirt.)

OCD

I think you need to check again.

ANXIETY

You're not going to get the scholarship anyway because your clothes aren't professional enough and that shirt makes you look chubby, and you're not smart enough, and why would you ever deserve the scholarship anyway?

(OCD and ANXIETY begin to advance on ELLIOT.
She turns around to face them.)

OCD

Did you really turn the light off?

ANXIETY

Who likes you anyway? Do you have friends who really care about you? Why would you get a scholarship that some other, better, student could get?

OCD

I think there's someone under the bed.

ELLIOT

I need this to stop. I need this to stop. I need to do something! You can't keep controlling me!

ANXIETY

There's nothing you can do.

ELLIOT

I have to do something. If I don't, you'll run my life, ruin my life.

ANXIETY

We don't run your life. We help you.

ELLIOT

It's only help if I want it! You're hindering me. I've missed out on a lot of things I really wanted to do because of you. I wanted to play basketball in high school, remember? You scared me because you said I didn't know anyone and didn't know where to go. I wanted to be able to play the piano but you wouldn't let me because you said I wasn't good enough. And the same with soccer. And everything else I tried to do I've had enough! And today-- you're not ruining today. I want that scholarship. I need that scholarship, and you aren't going to stop me. Somehow, I'll find a way to stop you from controlling me.

ANXIETY

It probably won't work.

ELLIOT

I'll find something that will.

(pause)

Green tea. There's something in it that makes you calm and relaxed. That's how monks meditate for hours on end. They're relaxed because of their tea.

ANXIETY

But what if you get sick from the tea?

(pause)

You don't even like tea.

ELLIOT

I don't like certain kinds of tea.

ANXIETY

Don't be ridiculous. You hate all kinds of tea.

ELLIOT

I heard that if you try something ten times, you'll like it.

ANXIETY

That is such a lie! You have been trying to like watermelon since you were four and you still think it's gross.

ELLIOT

Exercise, then. That works for a lot of people. I'll be healthier. I can go to the gym in the mornings and work out. I'll feel better.

ANXIETY

You aren't a morning person, so you'll be too tired to even do anything.

ELLIOT

I can learn to wake up early and going to the gym will make me more awake.

ANXIETY

That'll never happen.

ELLIOT

I can make it happen.

ANXIETY

But you might tear a muscle or dislocate your shoulder or sprain your ankle or get a concussion and have to go to the hospital. You might get an infection from the hospital and die, like Aunt Clarisse.

ELLIOT

Aunt Clarisse had cancer.

ANXIETY

But the hospital gave her an infection from dirty needles and she died. The hospital will kill you. You could contract Ebola from the hospital. Or AIDS.

ELLIOT

You can't get Ebola in the hospital. It's only in Africa.

ANXIETY

How do you know? You never know. They could have an Ebola patient in the hospital.

OCD

You need to check under the bed again.

(ELLIOT checks under the bed.)

ELLIOT

There's no one there.

OCD

Are you sure?

ANXIETY

What if someone with Ebola comes into the hospital and spreads the disease around? You're not safe from it then, are you?

OCD

(whispering)

What if the serial killer under the bed has Ebola? You could get it and die! There might already be Ebola in your room. You need to check again just to make sure!

(ELLIOT checks carefully, as though worried she might contract Ebola just by looking.)

ELLIOT

(to OCD, relived)

I don't see anyone.

(to ANXIETY)

And Ebola's only in Africa.

ANXIETY

No it isn't. Remember, there was that guy who started an outbreak in Texas. It's not just in Africa.

ELLIOT

But he came from Africa. You have to come from Africa to get it.

ANXIETY

That's not the point. The point is that you might die.

ELLIOT

I'll try something else, then. I'm going to think positively. I am going to do very well in my interview.

ANXIETY

What if you forget what to say or say the wrong thing?

ELLIOT

I know that I can get this scholarship if I try hard enough.

ANXIETY

But why would you deserve it? Have you done anything spectacular? Have you found the cure to cancer or figured out a way to breathe in space without that big, fat, ugly spacesuit? No. Cancer will still kill you and your head will still explode in space.

ELLIOT

(trying to ignore ANXIETY and change the subject)

I look nice today.

ANXIETY

Even though your shirt makes you look fat?

ELLIOT

It doesn't make me look fat!

ANXIETY

It really does.

ELLIOT

I'm not that fat. I just look a little chubby when I wear this shirt.

ANXIETY

Then why are you wearing the shirt?

OCD

I think you need to check under the bed again.

ELLIOT
(to ANXIETY)

Because it looks professional!

(to OCD)

Is there really someone there?

(to both)

You need to stop!

(There is a pause. ELLIOT places her hand on her chest as she tries to regain her breath.)

ANXIETY

Does your chest hurt?

ELLIOT
(thinking)

Um…

(deciding it does)

Yes.

ANXIETY

You're going to have a heart attack!

ELLIOT

No, I'm not. I think I'm just stressed about my interview. That's why it hurts.

ANXIETY

Stress can cause heart attacks.

ELLIOT

No, it can't. You're just making stuff up.

ANXIETY

You never believe me.

ELLIOT

Stress doesn't cause heart attacks and you know it.

ANXIETY

You never believe anything I say. You're going to have a heart attack and then you'll see: I was right the whole time and you never listened. You never listened. Never.

OCD

Never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never.

ELLIOT

I went to the doctor two weeks ago and had a physical and they said I was healthy. No risk of a heart attack. All he said was that I needed to do some breathing exercises.

ANXIETY

What breathing exercises?

ELLIOT

Like seven breaths in, hold it for four seconds, then breathe out for eight.

ANXIETY

(laughing)

You honestly think that'll work? Breathing doesn't do anything but keep you alive.

ELLIOT

I'm going to try it anyway.

(As ELLIOT does the breathing exercise a couple times, ANXIETY and OCD give her a running commentary on everything that is wrong.)

ANXIETY

Your stomach hurts. I think you've gotten food poisoning.

OCD

You need to chew your hair. You need to chew your hair.

ANXIETY

You've got a headache. It could be a brain hemorrhage or a brain tumor!

OCD

Bite your nails. Bite your nails. Bite your nails.

ANXIETY

I think you twisted your ankle going down the stairs to breakfast this morning. Doesn't it hurt?

OCD

Did you turn the light off?

ANXIETY

Wouldn't it be bad if you had a brain tumor? You might die.

OCD

You've got a spot of lint on your shirt. Wipe it off.

ANXIETY

You haven't heard from your mom today. She didn't text you to wish you good luck in your interview. What if something terrible happened? What if she got in a car accident?

OCD

Off, off, off, off, off, off, off, off.

ANXIETY

Maybe she got murdered.

(wailing)

She's probably dead!

(ELLIOT finishes the breathing exercise, which didn't do anything for her, as ANXIETY and OCD prevented the calm state that would have been the result of the exercise.)

ELLIOT

Okay, it didn't work.

ANXIETY

Told ya!

ELLIOT

I heard that the twenty-one minute cure works really well!

ANXIETY

Do you have twenty-one minutes to spare?

(ELLIOT looks at her watch.)

ELLIOT

No.

(gives up on the idea)

Passionflower. That calms your brain down.

ANXIETY

It's a sedative.

ELLIOT

So?

ANXIETY

Don't you know what a sedative does?

ELLIOT

It makes you tired.

ANXIETY

And so you'll just conk out in the middle of your interview, and the people interviewing you will have no idea what's wrong so they'll call an ambulance and then the paramedics will put you in the ambulance and they'll find out that you were just sleeping and then what will you tell them? That some voices in your head were just talking to you and you wanted them to stop?

OCD

You're crazy. You need to check to make sure the lamp's off.

ELLIOT

I can time it so that I don't suddenly fall asleep in the interview.

(checking the lamp)

It's off.

ANXIETY

No, you can't time it. How do you know how it'll affect you? You might fall asleep within two minutes or two hours. You have no idea!

ELLIOT

Okay, okay. That's out of the question. Grandma takes fish oil and she says it's good for reducing her anxiety.

ANXIETY

Fish oil? *Ew!* Why would you even put that in your mouth?

ELLIOT

It's not raw fish oil. They're pills. It's safe.

ANXIETY

How do you know?

OCD

I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know.

(ANXIETY smacks OCD upside the head.)

ANXIETY

No, you don't.

ELLIOT

People don't get sick from fish oil. Grandma doesn't.

ANXIETY

But there's a liver bleeding warning on the bottle. I checked when we were at Grandma's last.

ELLIOT

Liver bleeding warning?!

ANXIETY

I told you! It's dangerous!

ELLIOT

But Grandma's okay.

ANXIETY

Not everyone who takes it gets internal bleeding. But you might be the one out of a million that does get it.

OCD

One out of a million. You'll definitely get internal bleeding and die.

ELLIOT

Okay, okay, I won't take it. Instead, I'm just going to smile more, because I read online that it triggers happy things in your brain.

ANXIETY

Your teeth are crooked.

ELLIOT

No they aren't!

(uncertain)

Are they?

ANXIETY

Yep.

ELLIOT

Most people don't care about what your teeth look like.

ANXIETY

The interview people care. They want somebody nice-looking to get the scholarship, and crooked teeth aren't nice.

ELLIOT

That's not fair. They wouldn't not give me the scholarship just because my teeth are crooked.

ANXIETY

They won't give you the scholarship and then you'll never become a nurse and then you'll be homeless because you won't be able to get a job, and your whole life will be different, and no one will love you because you'll be ugly and dirty and homeless, and your teeth will get even worse.

ELLIOT

Well, I won't smile, then.

ANXIETY

I think that's for the best.

ELLIOT

Mama always said I had a nice smile, though.

ANXIETY

All mamas say that because they want you to think you're special, but you're not.

ELLIOT

No! Stop! Stop! You're wrong!

(long pause, composing herself)

Lemon balm is good for you.

ANXIETY

And if you overdose, everything gets worse.

ELLIOT

I won't overdose. I'll be careful.

ANXIETY

And you might die.

ELLIOT

No, I'm not going to die. Lemon balm can't kill you.

ANXIETY

If you overdose, you die. And what will happen when you die? Your family will miss you, and they won't have even seen you before you died, and they'll be so sad, and you don't want your mom to cry. She never cries, but she'll cry a lot if you die. And you'll have to die without seeing your mom and that would be the worst thing to ever happen. And there will be a funeral, and flowers, and pictures of you at the memorial service, and your family and friends will think about all the things you could have done and all the places you could have gone and all the children you could have had and--

ELLIOT

(frantically)

Stop! Stop! Stop! I won't try lemon balm, okay? I don't want to die and make everyone sad! I can't do this anymore! You know what?

(striding over to her desk and opening the drawer)

I have *these*.

(ELLIOT takes out a small orange bottle with blue Sertraline pills in it and shakes it.)

ANXIETY

And?

ELLIOT

(opening the bottle and pouring a couple pills in her hand)

I'm going to take them.

ANXIETY

Ha! No you're not.

ELLIOT

Yes, I am.

ANXIETY

(leaping forward)

Dr. Avery prescribed those for you three months ago. Are you sure they're still safe?

(ELLIOT inspects the bottle.)

ELLIOT

They're good for exactly 364 days. They're still good.

ANXIETY

If you take them, it could make your anxiety and OCD symptoms worse.

ELLIOT

Could it really?

ANXIETY

It can. Your life would be so much worse. You wouldn't want that, would you?

ELLIOT

I think it's only for the first couple weeks that--

ANXIETY

Would you?

ELLIOT

No, no.

ANXIETY

Right. So you need to put the medicine away.

ELLIOT

But... But I think--

ANXIETY

You need to put the medicine away.

ELLIOT

Oh, okay.

(ELLIOT puts the pills she got out back in the bottle and starts to put it back in the drawer.)

OCD

I think you should check under the bed again.

(ELLIOT remembers why she took the medicine out in the first place.
She doesn't put it away and instead places the bottle firmly on the desk.)

ANXIETY

What are you doing? Are you crazy?

OCD

(whispering)

Yes.

ANXIETY

You can't take them! What's going to happen to you?

ELLIOT

Nothing's going to happen to me. I'll be better, and everything will be okay.

ANXIETY

No, you won't be better! What about what I just told you? And there are side effects you have to think about.

ELLIOT

Like what?

ANXIETY

Read the bottle.

(ELLIOT snatches up the bottle and reads.)

ELLIOT

"May cause drowsiness. Use care when operating a vehicle, vessel, or machine." I'm not going to be driving anywhere. I don't even have a car.

ANXIETY

It says "machine." A computer is a machine.

ELLIOT

It's not talking about a computer. It's talking about equipment and stuff.

ANXIETY

Well, it's not specific, so it *can* include a computer. Keep reading.

ELLIOT

"May cause dizziness." I can just lie down if I get dizzy.

(ANXIETY grabs the bottle out of her hand and reads off it.)

ANXIETY

"May cause health problems. Discuss with doctor."

ELLIOT

That's not what it says.

(ELLIOT grabs for the bottle but ANXIETY holds it out of reach.)

ANXIETY

Is too. I just read off it.

ELLIOT

But you didn't read the whole thing!

ANXIETY

Yes, I did!

(ELLIOT succeeds in getting the bottle back.)

ELLIOT

(reading)

"Third trimester use may cause health problems." *Third trimester!* I'm not pregnant! You didn't read the whole thing!

ANXIETY

Yeah, well… Where's the information sheet about it?

(ANXIETY rifles through ELLIOT's desk and pulls out the paper that was stapled to the bag at the pharmacy.)

ANXIETY

Aha!

ELLIOT

What are you doing?

ANXIETY

(reading)

"A small number of people (especially people younger than twenty-five)"--that's you--"who take anti-depressants for any condition may experience worsening depression, other mental or mood symptoms, or suicidal thoughts or attempts."

See, it's dangerous! You might commit suicide!

ELLIOT

But I'm not depressed! And it said a "small number of people." That means it probably won't even happen to me. Also, it says suicidal *thoughts* may occur, not only suicidal *attempts*! You don't just jump to trying to commit suicide as soon as you take the medicine. Give me that!

ANXIETY

Wait! I'm not finished!

(holding the paper out of reach and reading)

"Side effects may include nausea, dizziness, drowsiness, dry mouth, loss of appetite, increased sweating, diarrhea, upset stomach, or trouble sleeping." All that could happen to you.

ELLIOT

I really doubt that.

(ELLIOT grabs for the paper again.)

ANXIETY

Wait! There's more!

(reading)

Blah, blah, blah... "easy bruising or bleeding, muscle cramps or weakness, shaking, unusual weight loss." Blah, blah, blah... "Get medical help right away if any of these rare but serious side effects occur: black or bloody stools"--

ELLIOT

Ew!

ANXIETY

--"vomit that looks like coffee grounds"--

ELLIOT

Ew!

ANXIETY

--"eye pain, swelling, or redness, vision changes (such as seeing rainbows around lights at night, blurred vision), fast heartbeat, loss of coordination, twitching muscles, unexplained fever, or unusual agitation or restlessness." Geez, that's a lot that can go wrong. Are you sure you still want to take this?

ELLIOT

You're skipping stuff! You're doing what Mom calls "selective reading." You're ignoring all the important stuff and just reading me the worst things out of context!

ANXIETY

(ignoring ELLIOT)

Look! You could have an allergic reaction! Rash, breathing problems, swelling. Ah! Look what it says here at the bottom of the paragraph: "This is not a complete list of possible side effects." There are more? What are they trying to do? Kill you? That's what it looks like.

(finally handing over the paper)

I told you I wasn't exaggerating. That's what it says. Right there.

(ELLIOT inspects the paper.)

ANXIETY

You know what else it will do?

ELLIOT

What?

ANXIETY

This medicine will completely rewire your brain. You won't be the same person you are now.

ELLIOT

What? No, it won't!

ANXIETY

Sertraline interferes with the metabolism in your brain. You could be an entirely different person after you take it. Remember that article we read? The first thing it said was how everyone taking these meds has to accept that their brain will change.

ELLIOT

I'm not... I can't be *that* different, right?

ANXIETY

If your brain changes, your personality will. Remember Phineas Gage?

ELLIOT

An iron pole went through his face. Totally different.

ANXIETY

But his brain was changed and he was really different afterwards, remember?

OCD

Remember? Remember? Remember?

ANXIETY

You see, it's the same!

ELLIOT

If I had an iron rod shoot through my head, I think I'd be different, too.

ANXIETY

You're ignoring the point.

ELLIOT

I'm not going to be like Phineas Gage! I'm not going to get an iron rod in my head!

OCD

The serial killer under the bed with Ebola might stab you with an iron rod.

ANXIETY

You'll be someone you don't recognize. Your family won't recognize you. Your friends won't recognize you.

ELLIOT

I'm willing to take that chance. I think it'll be worth it in the long run.

(ANXIETY prods OCD to jump in.)

OCD

Sertraline is like death.

ELLIOT

No. No. You can't say that. Not death, life.

OCD

Death.

ELLIOT

No! It's like life.

OCD

Sertraline is death. Death. Death. *Death.*

ELLIOT
(anguished)

Stop! Life! Life! *Life!*

OCD

Sertraline means certain death.

ELLIOT
(desperate)

I'd rather have the medicine kill me than live the rest of my life with you!

(There is silence.)

ANXIETY

Look, it probably won't kill you. You'll just be really different. Like, your brain will rewire itself and you'll be a different person. Do you want that to happen?

ELLIOT

But... But I want to be different. I want this to change.

ANXIETY

You don't get it, do you? You won't recognize yourself. Your friends and family won't recognize you. You may think things are getting better, but in reality, there's nothing worse than living in a body you don't know. Why would you do that to yourself?

ELLIOT

If I live in my body, then I know it.

ANXIETY

That's not always true. You'll end up having multiple personalities: Elliot on the medicine and Elliot off the medicine. You'll never know which is the real you. Your family will see a different you and wonder where the first you went. It won't be the same for anyone!

ELLIOT

And I can take more medicine to fix that.

ANXIETY

Then you'll have to deal with the side effects and personality changes from those medications. I know what you're going to say, and if you take medicine to fix that, then you'll just be going in circles and nothing will ever change.

OCD

Going around in circles. Make sure it's an even number. You can't have bad luck.

(ELLIOT picks up the bottle again and contemplates it.)

ELLIOT

None of that could even happen to me.

ANXIETY

But it could.

ELLIOT

Yeah, and we'll never know unless I try it, right?

OCD

You have to count the pills.

ELLIOT

(taking them out one by one)

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. There are thirty.

OCD

Are you sure you counted them right?

ELLIOT

Yes. There are thirty because I'm supposed to take one every day for a month.

ANXIETY

There are thirty-one days this month, so you'll have to start next month.

ELLIOT

I don't have to start next month because when I run out of pills I'll just get more. It doesn't matter when you start taking them!

ANXIETY

You can't trust yourself to only take one.

ELLIOT

What do you mean?

ANXIETY

You might take several pills at once and overdose! You'll overdose! That's what'll happen!

OCD

You'll overdose and die! Count the pills to make sure you only take one.

ELLIOT

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.

ANXIETY

What if you take them all at once?

ELLIOT

I won't take them all at once.

ANXIETY

You might not be able to stop yourself. Your hands have a mind of their own. They do what they want when they want, and they might want you to die.

ELLIOT

I control my hands, so they won't do something I don't want, right?

ANXIETY

But your brain controls your body and if you don't have control of your brain then your brain will tell your hands to take more than one pill and you won't be able to stop it so you'll overdose and die. Possibly.

(ELLIOT takes out one pill and puts the bottle away in her desk.)

ELLIOT

(holding the pill out for ANXIETY and OCD to see)

One pill. *One!* Only one! I won't die and my hands won't try to kill me. You'll see!

(OCD and ANXIETY see that ELLIOT is serious about taking the pill and start panicking. Their following lines run together and they talk over each other.)

ANXIETY

What about the side effects? Dry mouth, headaches, nausea, trouble breathing.

OCD

Count the pills! I think there's someone under the bed.

ANXIETY

You'll be someone different. Everyone will hate you. Everyone already hates you.

OCD

Are you sure you turned off the light? On, off, on, off, on, off.

ANXIETY

Dizziness, drowsiness, loss of appetite, increased sweating, suicidal thoughts, diarrhea, upset stomach, trouble sleeping.

OCD

There's someone under the bed. Did you turn the light off? Count the pills again. Thirteen. Count again.

ANXIETY

The metabolism in your brain will change. You'll be a different person. No one will recognize you. You'll be a stranger! Who are you? Do you even exist? *Who are you?*

(ELLIOT is overwhelmed by OCD and ANXIETY's frantic attempts to keep her from taking the medicine. She can't hear or think anymore. She needs something to ease this chaos.)

OCD

Count the pills. Count the pills. Count the pills.

ANXIETY

Eye pain, swelling, redness, blurred vision, fast heartbeat, loss of coordination, twitching muscles, fever, restlessness.

ELLIOT

(lifting the pill to her mouth and screaming)

I can't take this anymore!

(ELLIOT puts the pill in her mouth, drinks some water, and swallows. Immediately, there is a long silence. OCD and ANXIETY stare at each other and at ELLIOT in disbelief. As though doubting her existence after taking Sertraline, ELLIOT holds her arms out and looks at them. She wiggles her fingers, moves her head around, and takes several deep breaths.)

ELLIOT

I did it. And I'm the same as I was before. I'm the same person!

(OCD and ANXIETY regain their voices, but they are much softer and feebler now. ELLIOT is much more confident.)

OCD

I think there's someone under the bed.

ELLIOT

There isn't anybody under my bed.

ANXIETY

But what about the side effects?

ELLIOT

I'll deal with the side effects if there are any when I come to them.

OCD

Are you sure you turned the lamp off?

ELLIOT

The lamp is definitely off. Don't you dare say that it's not because I can see it.

ANXIETY

Your clothes aren't professional enough.

ELLIOT

My clothes look just fine.

ANXIETY

But--

ELLIOT

(forcefully)

No buts! I have an interview for a scholarship and there are no buts about it today.

(OCD and ANXIETY start backing away, slinking further and further into the background.)

OCD

Sertraline is death. Death, death, de--

ELLIOT

Look, I'm *not* dead. Did you expect me to just drop to the floor as soon as I took it?

ANXIETY

It's not working. I don't think it's working. You should have put the medicine away.

ELLIOT

If it's not working, why are you weaker than you were before?

ANXIETY

But your brain. Your brain is different now. You're a different person.

ELLIOT

Nothing is different except that I have more control over everything. And that's a pretty big difference, but it's not a bad one. I am still the same person. You're wrong!

(OCD and ANXIETY have almost backed offstage at this point.)

OCD

Check under the bed.

(ELLIOT ignores OCD.)

ANXIETY

You might commit suicide.

(ELLIOT ignores ANXIETY, and with that, they disappear off the stage altogether.)

ELLIOT

It's so quiet.

(pause)

I like it. I can actually think now.

(ELLIOT's watch beeps the time. She is startled.)

ELLIOT

Oh!

(realizing)

It's time to go to my interview!

(ELLIOT grabs her jacket and adjusts her collar. She takes a deep breath.)

ELLIOT

You can do this. Let's go.

(uncertainly)

But... What if I don't say the right thing?

(thinking, then throwing arms up)

You know what? Who fucking cares anyway?

(ELLIOT looks in the direction OCD and ANXIETY disappeared, turns away, and walks offstage. Curtain.)

onix

Robby Nadler
University of Georgia

Cast of Characters

SON: Early 30s. Stage version should look older than his prerecorded version (not necessarily in age but in feel).

MRS. TZIMMERMAN: 60s. Stage version should represent a younger and more frenetic version than prerecorded version.

SCOTT: 40s.

HUSBAND: 50s.

WIFE: 50s.

YOUNG MAN: 20s (if that).

DOCTOR: Middle-aged.

SECRETARY: Young.

Scene

Dinner table.

Time

Present.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

This play is a hybrid of live-action and pre-recorded footage. Only SON and MRS. TZIMMERMAN exist on stage. SON delivers all on-stage (O.S.) lines to the audience from an upstage table (the director should pick a spot where SON will not block the T.V.s/screens). The table should seat at least four, and all the surrounding place sets, except SON's, should look as if a large meal has been finished (think sitting down at a restaurant before a table has been bussed). SON sits facing the audience and eats his meal when not delivering O.S. lines. MRS. TZIMMERMAN spends the entirety of the play performing small actions: chasing a butterfly, washing clothes by hand, writing a letter, stirring soup, etc. These actions should not be limited to any one age, and they should have her travel all over the stage. Interspersed in her movements should be tiny flashes of fear. The rest of the play is displayed on three T.V.s/screens with each transition of location occurring on a different T.V./screen. All filmed scenes need to take their time as SON will deliver his O.S. lines over the quiet moments filmed. No O.S. line should ever be spoken over prerecorded (P.R.) lines. While primary attention should be paid to the live dramatic elements, the filmed portions should be treated as slivers of insights (and ought to be filmed as such through indirect observation). SON does not have access to knowledge of the scenes outside of the ones he's in.

ACT I

Lights up, slowly. SON eats his meal and keeps his gaze on his food. MRS. TZIMMERMAN buzzes around stage like an insect. Let this happen for a good minute. T.V./screen furthest from SON will go on first (hereon called T.V. 1). The following exchange should be filmed either from the back seat or dashboard.

HUSBAND (P.R.)

I'll pick some up on the way home from work tomorrow.

WIFE (P.R.)

Make sure it's the real one. It has to say Bitter Root on it.

HUSBAND (P.R.)
(LAUGHING)

O.K. Bitter Root.

WIFE (P.R.)

The store brand one just doesn't taste the same.

HUSBAND (P.R.)

Did you hear back from Martha if they're coming?

WIFE (P.R.)

I completely forgot about Martha and Daniel! I'll call her right now and find out.

As WIFE reaches for her purse, HUSBAND puts his right hand on her arm.

HUSBAND (P.R.)

It can wait.

HUSBAND turns on the radio and "It Never Rains in Southern California" is in the middle of airplay. He picks up at the chorus. WIFE enjoys the performance as she looks out of the passenger's side window.

HUSBAND (P.R.) (CONT'D)

It never rains in California, but girl don't they warn ya, it pours, man it pours....

WIFE (P.R.)

Stop, stop, stop!

A blurry figures runs from MRS. TZIMMERMAN's house on the T.V./screen furthest from T.V. 1 (hereon called T.V. 3). Leave the image of the front of the house on T.V. 3 while scene resumes on T.V. 1.

WIFE (P.R.) (CONT'D)

A man just ran out of Mrs. Tzimmerman's house!

HUSBAND takes off his seat belt and pops the trunk of the car. As soon as he exits the car, HUSBAND's actions will be captured on the middle T.V./screen (hereon T.V. 2) while WIFE remains on T.V. 1. HUSBAND retrieves a FLASHLIGHT and TIRE IRON from the trunk.

HUSBAND (P.R.)

(Speaking to WIFE through rolled down window)

Take the car around the block to the Henka's. Don't get out if their lights aren't on. Call the police from there.

WIFE (P.R.)

You can't go in there! You don't know who's in there!

HUSBAND (P.R.)

I'll be fine. If the guy ran out there's probably no one left in the house.

WIFE (P.R.)

Don't be crazy! What if there are more guys?

HUSBAND (P.R.)

I'll be fine.

HUSBAND walks up the porch, cautiously, with a FLASHLIGHT in one hand and a TIRE IRON in the other. He ignores WIFE's calls. On T.V. 1, audience watches WIFE move from the passenger seat to the driver's seat and then drive off. Her video stream continues to the neighbor's house and call to the police, but there is no sound. On T.V. 2, the audience sees the front door is open and the window next to it is smashed. This image freezes on T.V. 2. HUSBAND enters the house and explores it on T.V. 3.

HUSBAND (P.R.) (CONT'D)

Mrs. Tzimmerman? Mrs. Tzimmerman, are you all right?

SON (O.S.)

In the last months of my mother's life, she thought the Germans were coming to kill her.

HUSBAND finds the cellar door ajar. The light switch is turned on, but it is still dark. A shining flashlight fixes on a trembling MRS. TZIMMERMAN. She cries out in Polish and buries herself beneath the glare of the light as if she's a wounded animal. Let this scene build and play naturally. HUSBAND will try to comfort MRS. TZIMMERMAN and fail. T.V. 3 and 1 cut out simultaneously. T.V. 2 shows an ambulance carrying a spastic MRS. TZIMMERMAN away.

SON (O.S.)

Recounting how they flushed Poland in that nightmare doldrums of trains.

T.V. 2 goes out while T.V. 1 comes on featuring SON working in an office. Then a knock at the door on T.V. 2.

SON (P.R.)

Come in.

T.V. 1 goes out. Continue action on T.V. 2 filmed from behind SECRETARY.

SECRETARY (P.R.)

Mr. Tzimmerman, you have a call from the police in (looks at note) San Bernardino.

SECRETARY leaves frame for a slightly out of focus view of SON picking up the phone in his office.

SON (O.S.)

I brought her three states over to live with me.

T.V 2 flashes over to an outdoor shot of the neighborhood SON lives in. T.V. 1 comes on and shows SON slowly leading his mother through the living room to a bedroom. She is catatonic.

SON (P.R.)

And this is your room where you'll be sleeping.

T.V. 3 comes on. SCOTT looks up from his work when he hears SON's voice, then returns to his work.

SON (O.S.)

But still convinced that the Germans would snatch her the way they murdered her brother with a shower of Prussian blue residue, she opened all the windows to our house that let the winter ghost of snow filter into the warm lodging, which upset Scott because it was his home we were all living in. And he hated to walk around in his college sweater.

T.V.s 1 and 3 go dark while T.V. 2 flips to a doctor's office. Scene should be filmed from a distance and not be concerned with capturing facial expressions but the entirety of the room and the smallness of the people in it.

SON (P.R.)

So this is it?

DOCTOR (P.R.)

Unfortunately Mr. Tzimmerman, if this is indeed a case of Creuztfeldt's, and I believe it is, there's nothing that can be done.

SON (P.R.)

How long does she have?

DOCTOR (P.R.)

It's difficult to say because we don't know when she started manifesting symptoms. If we assume this is the beginning, we're looking at four months. Maybe five.

T.V. 2 loses sound. DOCTOR leaves and SCOTT wanders in. They share a tender moment with SCOTT offering genuine comfort. SON breaks down into hard tears, eventually.

SON (O.S.)

But fresh air calmed her, and she slept without screaming on the futon we moved into my office— knowing that it would then become Scott's office because I'd never step foot in there again after her death.

T.V. 2 goes off while T.V. 1 reveals SON and MRS. TZIMMERMAN sitting outside on a back porch and drinking tea. Snow is around them.

SON (P.R.)

How's your tea? Is it too hot?

MRS. TZIMMERMAN (P.R.)

Wróble s ˛a gotowe do ich pie.

SON (O.S.)

Every night before bed I'd bring her the newspaper and pretend to read from the calendar or food section but made up stories intended to alleviate her concerns. Construction of the world's largest corndog in Nebraska. Tap dancers performing on a sheet of thick glass roofing an aquarium of sharks. She always found this news so interesting.

T.V. 1 shuts off, and T.V. 3 comes on with SON and SCOTT asleep in bed. Hold for a minute. T.V. 1 turns on with MRS. TZIMMERMAN screaming in her room. T.V. 2 comes on to follow SON race from bed to his mother's room. T.V. 3 reveals SCOTT sighing, still in bed, and rolling over.

SON (O.S.)

On good nights when she wasn't visiting Europe, she'd thank me for taking her into Scott's home, then embrace me.

T.V.s 1 and 3 go dark. T.V. 2 flips to SON leading his mother through the city and pointing out stores. MRS. TZIMMERMAN is aloof. Briefly on T.V. 1, a car passes. On T.V. 2, MRS. TZIMMERMAN clearly sees the car but SON does not. T.V. 3 flashes on to reveal, from the backseat, SCOTT driving with YOUNG MAN in the passenger seat.

SON (O.S.)

But one time when I reached the door to leave, she called me over, quickly, as if she didn't want Scott to hear because she didn't trust him. Inside her pillow buried amidst duck feathers held by Egyptian cotton were her jewelry and watch and passport. She instructed me to hide them from the German she thought Scott was by her last days.

T.V. 2 goes blank and T.V. 1 switches over to everyone watching T.V. in the living room. SON lies across the couch with his head in SCOTT's lap. SCOTT strokes SON's hair. MRS. TZIMMERMAN sits in a chair yelling back at Jeopardy in angry Polish. SON and SCOTT laugh. By the end of this vignette, the car on T.V. 3 will pull up to the house. All T.V.s go dark.

SON (O.S.)

And this routine continued until there was nothing of value for her to secure, but still the Germans were coming for her and me.

T.V. 2 turns on and tracks YOUNG MAN looking at various curios that have been gathered in a pile on a bureau. They include an ORANGE, SLIPPERS, BOOKS, as well as a PASSPORT, JEWELRY, and a WATCH.

SON (O.S.)

And so she turned to the orange pilfered from the fruit bowl in the kitchen. A slipper I bought for five dollars at a convenience store-- stuffed the goose of that pillow with whatever she could squeeze in. Even possessions of the room: Scott's stapler or my signed copy of East of Eden became her belongings that she sneaked back into my hands at night.

A hand closes the bedroom door to a crack. YOUNG MAN takes off his shirt followed by SCOTT. These people encounter each other on the bed and proceed to have sex. While this is happening, T.V. 1 comes on and shows SON brushing his mother's hair while she sings a Polish folksong. He joins in, and it delights her. She turns around and takes him by the hands and they dance.

SON (O.S.)

A week before she died, she extolled the virtue of hoarding, that the Germans take people because they cannot take their possessions separately, and if one must die, one must not let go of the one thing they want from you. She wanted nothing to end up in the Germans' hands.

T.V. 3 flashes on to SON working in his office. There's a knock at the door. From behind SON, the camera films SECRETARY at a distance.

SECRETARY (P.R.)

Mr. Tzimmerman, Scott is on the line for you.

T.V.s 1 and 3 flip (T.V. 2 still displays SCOTT and YOUNG MAN in bed). On T.V. 3, SCOTT stands outside of MRS. ZIMMERMAN's room. On T.V. 1, SON sees his mother, dead, lying in bed. He crumbles over her. T.V.s 1 and 3 go off while T.V. 2 switches to SON exiting the room and meeting SCOTT at the door. SCOTT looks disheveled from sex.

SCOTT (P.R.)

I got off work early today and came home….

SON collapses into SCOTT's chest, and SCOTT consoles him.

SON (O.S.)

Years later when Scott and I separated, I burned all the treasures from the house she made me swear to hold onto.

Lights out on stage while T.V. 2 remains lit with the image of the lovers embracing, devastated.

45th Annual Writers' Festival Finalists

Morgan Bilicki
Morgan Bilicki is a Creative Writing student at Young Harris College. While her attention is on fiction, she enjoys writing each genre; likewise, she loves reading a wide variety of literature, from Shakespeare to cereal boxes. In her free time, she can be found obsessing over cosplay, smashing the patriarchy, and discovering that friendship is magic.

Sydney Bollinger
Sydney is a sophomore at the University of West Georgia. She is majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. After completing her undergraduate degree, she plans to attend graduate school.

Sarah Boudreau
Sarah Boudreau is a junior at Young Harris College, where she studies creative writing. This is her second time as a finalist in the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival contest. She has work published in Equestrian Culture Magazine and The Corn Creek Review, her campus literary magazine. After graduation, she wishes to pursue an MFA in creative writing and go on to write the sort of novels that get banned in conservative school districts for cool things like "promoting witchcraft."

Jenée Hardy
My name is Jenée Hardy, I am queer, woman, and Black, and I write heavy material on behalf of my heavy intersectionalities. Graduating from Agnes Scott College in December 2015, I spent those 4 years honing my craft of creative and poetic writing. That time and effort sharpened my sense of direction and purpose within my work. With these submissions, and others like it, I have crafted my creative voice to shed light on issues that affect so many people in a range of different ways: sexuality, gender/identity, race. I strive to address those hard subjects, with creative ideas, and through innovative lenses. Thank you for reading, and thank you even more for caring.

Christopher Alexander Hayter
Christopher Alexander Hayter is a PhD Candidate in Creative Writing at Georgia State University. He received an MFA from at San Francisco State University. His writing has been published in *Talking River, Jelly Bucket, The Binnacle, Transfer,* and *Underground Voices*. He is currently editing his first novel and drafting his second.

Nils Erik Hallin
Nils Erik Hallin was born on May 21th 1993 in Gustavsfors, Sweden. He's the son of Annabeth and Ulf Hallin, two Swedish entrepreneurs. After attending Älvstrandsgymnasiet and DeGeer-gymnasiet, one of Sweden's top three High School soccer programs, Erik moved to Young Harris College to continue his soccer career. Erik is an honor student majoring in Business and Public Policy, and he has been on the President's List during each of his 5 semesters. While at the school, Erik has been taking creative writing classes with Professor Chelsea Rathburn as a supplement to his business studies. Erik is currently a third-year senior that will be graduating in May 2016.

Zoe Howard
Zoe Howard hails from Asheville, North Carolina, and is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College. She is double majoring in creative writing and history, but has many other academic interests. She likes to write flash fiction, plays, and the occasional half-finished novel. Outside of her studies, she spends her time imagining herself exploring Europe, obsessing over Broadway, and wishing she could play the piano.

Charlee Keating
Charlee is an undergraduate student working on his B.S. in astrophysics. He loves science fiction, horror, and especially combinations of the two. When not writing, he enjoys talking about gender theory on the internet. He firmly believes that Deep Space Nine is the best Star Trek series.

Rebecca Kumar
Rebecca Kumar holds a Ph.D in English literature from Emory University. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in Fiction at Georgia State University. She writes stories about immigrant communities in the American South, particularly before and after Hurricane Katrina. Currently she is an adjunct professor of English at Morehouse College and Spelman College.

Molly McDaniel
In 2013, Molly won the Virginia B. Ball Creative Writing Award and attended Interlochen Arts Academy as a creative writing major. She is the recipient of three Gold Keys in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. In 2014, she received an Honorable Mention from the National YoungArts Organization. Currently, she is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College, where she can be found procrastinating and watching old made-for-TV movies.

Shante Mowry
Shante Mowry is an undergraduate English major on the cusp of graduation. She ventured to Clayton State University on a presidential scholarship from a small town in Pennsylvania. She writes mostly Young Adult fiction and hopes that she will one day be able to support herself on her creative writing alone. Some of her favorite authors are John Green, J. K. Rowling, and Rainbow Rowell, all of whom she admires and hopes to emulate. (She likes to dream big.)

Jami Padgett
Jami Padgett writes from the mountains of North Georgia, going between her hometown of Ellijay and the college town of Young Harris for her undergrad degree in Religious Studies. As an "honorary English major" at Young Harris, Jami studies Literature and Creative Writing as well as World Religions. Due to this, she plans to one day attend graduate school for an MFA in poetry.

Caroline M. Schmidt
Caroline M. Schmidt is a junior at Emory University, where she studies Creative Writing and plans to pursue a career in fiction. An Emory Stipe Scholar, she serves as a fiction and poetry editor for the nationally-renowned *Lullwater Review* and hosts an arts broadcast on Emory's radio station. Her work has appeared in *Spires Magazine* and *the pulse*, and in 2015, she won the Artiste Mann Award in Poetry for Best Poetry Written by an Emory Undergraduate. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with her family.

Cheryl Stiles
Cheryl Stiles is a doctoral student at Georgia State University. She also works as a librarian at Kennesaw State University where she helps graduate students with their research endeavors. Her poems have been published in journals such as *Atlanta Review, POEM, Poet Lore, Slant, Pilgrimage*, and others.

Simona Chitescu Weik
Simona Chitescu Weik is a poet, originally from Romania, now residing in Atlanta, Georgia, and working towards a PhD in Creative Writing at Georgia State University where she is also a teaching fellow. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in several print and online publications including The *Adirondack Review, Smartish Pace, Stone, River, Sky: An Anthology of Georgia Poets, Terminus Magazine*, and *Cimarron Review* among others.