

11-15-2012

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Recommended Citation

Haller, Jill (2002) "Exit to Muskerville," *Italics*: Vol. 2002: Iss. 1, Article 28.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/italics/vol2002/iss1/28>

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Exit to Muskerville

JILL HALLER

Jonie Fesman was a terrible artist. She went to a gallery once—a really classy place—just to see real art. But the guard's eyes said she had to leave, so she turned around without even seeing the featured pieces. She knew that real artists knew how to smooth a curve, line an edge, or balance a composition. She couldn't, and was ok with that. Her love of art was kinetic. She concentrated on the slimy wet clay spinning between her fingers, the gray grit piling up below her fingernails. The pot could grow and change and flow, as if she were a master pianist. Jonie hefted the weight of drippy paint blobs and swept thick smears across the low-grade paper, ignoring the product. Creating was worth it.

Day after day she returned home from the Buebark's Family Foods deli and poured her deepest groanings and boundless, unspeakable ecstasy in some medium, which technically failed to fulfill its definition, because Jonie could not, would never, communicate her message to an end recipient. It was like being prop girl in theatre class; just showing up was enough.

The blotchy canvasses and lopsided sculptures overran the best nooks in the house, seeking frame for each glaring success. Jonie often wondered why she didn't just throw them away when she was done, but it was all a tribute to the experience.

Mike never said anything out loud. In the first few evenings when he started coming by, he would bite his lip to find the Lazy Boy sagging below a newly scrawled portrait of the cat or a landscape of stick trees. But one day as he examined her sculpted interpretation of a horse, gallantly stepping across her thrift store coffee table, he cocked his head on his big neck and looked at it for a very long minute. The next day a catalogue from the community center lay on the table at the horse's chunky feet, the pages of the cheap newsprint paper creased open to the adult ed art classes.

He was good like that. Mike was a good guy.

Jonie had met him near Aisle Two by the fresh sandwich island. She had looked over the counter from where she was slicing cheddar, the fat yellow moons forgotten in the moment. He was filling the standing cooler at the end

of the aisle with 20-ounce coke products, his thick body bending in half to move boxes. Each time he shifted, his blue work shirt pulled tight across his shoulders, revealing each time a growing circle of June sweat in the middle of his back. He eventually saw her watching him, and asked her where he could find Mr. Schiller, the manager, and also if he could take her out for a beer that night.

Mike had visited her little green house nineteen straight nights by the day of the family barbeque. Jonie introduced him to her parents that Saturday in their yard. Her mother ducked her chin deep in her chest, like a little girl with a secret, and hissed "What a catch!" Dora Fesman was eating a hotdog, and Jonie tried not to focus on the mustard on her chin.

Her brother Alfred showed up. Jonie hadn't seen him for several days, since he had moved to second shift at Buebark's. Alfred stood in the grass wearing a black trench coat, perspiration greasing his forehead, and announced he would be riding along with the roadies he had met at the Muskerville Summer Days. The fairground crew annually crept into the center of town during a sticky June night, hoisted the rides and booths with greasy arms, and spent the week whistling past their cigarettes at Muskerville High's prettiest. Alfie would be leaving as soon as "the guys" finished breaking down the rides across town. Jonie's mother shook her head at the announcement and said to Alfred, "Did you tell Mr. Buebark? You did it this time! You did it this time! That's it for you!"

Jonie's dad didn't say anything to Alfred, but turned in his lawn chair to continue his conversation with Mike about Coca-Cola and his career in the beverage distribution industry. Mike and Mr. Fesman talked about Coca-Cola and the best highways between this and that city and, in the pauses, watched the five Slabodski children throw dirt and rocks at each other through the trees in the next yard. The Slabodski's farmhouse was up the road, but still close enough that Mr. Fesman kicked the fleas off their dogs when no one was looking.

Later Jonie's dad took Alfred into the house to get more Pabst's Blue Ribbon and lighter fluid. Jonie was alone on the porch swing against the house, slowly banging the swing against the siding as if to countdown the escape from the afternoon. In the next yard, four of the Slabodski kids were trying to bury the fifth one in a hole. She watched her mother pull her chair to face Mike, moving closer until her spotty knees nearly touched his. Dora leaned towards him, smiling large and laughing with her whole mouth. From her spot beneath the kitchen window, Jonie heard her father ask Alfie how far away the fair crew would travel and would Alfred ride in the big trucks with them. Mr. Fesman sounded more interested than polite.

When Jonie and Mike were at last walking down the long gravel driveway to his Escort, she asked him what he thought of her parents.

"Cool, I guess. Your mom's a little out there, but your dad seems real cool."

The mental photo album slammed open with a bang. Kodak Pictures of Mike and Daddy watching football together, hollering and laughing, or going to the auto show together to squint and speak guy language to each other, shoulder to shoulder under hoods. Each photo was framed with smiley faces. She decided to try and paint the image as soon as she got home and walked in the door.

Her green square house squatted in one level on a lot just inside the city limits. Her mom had tried to surprise Jonie once by repainting the peeling front door and window trim while she was at work. Dora Fesman stood in the sun for hours that afternoon, scraping at the flakes of white on soft gray wood, until Jonie's dad pulled up and asked her from the car window what crazy fool would waste her time and his money fixing up a rental home. From that moment, the green house bore naked gray window trim and door, only streaked and spotted with flecks of the old white paint.

Mike dropped her off at this door. Before she got out of the car, he said, "I'm going out. I'll be over later." He leaned over and kissed her with his tongue and drove away towards Boomer's Saloon.

She pushed her spotty front door open, being careful not to rattle the glass, and put her purse on the washing machine. Mr. Fulu slid from the kitchen around the corner and mewed hello. Jonie swept him up and squeezed him, but he panicked, flipped and scratched his way down her leg and back to the floor. He remained under the living room couch the whole time Jonie was attempting to capture her vision of the ideal male relationship with 24 Crayola colored pencils.

When she had finally satisfied her need, Jonie tore the paper from her sketchbook and taped it on the wall near her headboard. The men in the picture ended up looking too homosexual to be decent representations. When Mike came later to stay the night, she would surprise him with it. As she finished centering it between the window and the closet, the phone rang. It was Mr. Schiller calling to ask why Alfred hadn't come into work that evening.

"Well, Mr. Schiller . . . I guess I haven't seen Alfred this evening." Not since three o'clock, and that counted as afternoon. "If I hear from him, you'll be the first to know." As she was speaking, she watched the walls and floor slowly pull away from her. She hated that Mr. Schiller could do this to her. Every time. Her toes were now barely touching the ground. "Did you try his house?"

"Yeees, Joonie. That would have been the first place I called, wouldn't it?"

"Oh." The top of her head had nearly touched the ceiling. She struggled to swallow. Nothing else came to her head. "Okay."

"Look, if you see your brother, tell him he doesn't need to bother himself coming back if working here is too much of a hassle." The phone clicked.

Jonie hung up the phone and was relieved to see carpet again between her toes. Mr. Schiller hardly ever called workers at home. He was young, with a

long forehead and catfish lips, which seemed even more ugly after Jonie had learned of his dirty reputation. He had been the assistant manager for as long as Jonie had been employed at the deli, but it was six months before one of the stock boys had shared the rumor with her. Apparently, before his career in management, he had run over a pregnant girlfriend with his car and she lost their baby. The girlfriend almost died, too, but Mr. Schiller had gotten away with it because the girl insisted she never saw who hit her.

Soon after the stock boy had shared this with her, Alfred had asked Jonie to get him his job back once again. That was the time he had been fired for his habit of taking two-hour lunch breaks. Jonie had gone to Mr. Schiller's office for her brother's sake, but the episode was too much. She had stuttered so much she had to come back a second time after she calmed down. Mr. Schiller had sat and glared at her with his bottom-feeder eyes while she explained how her brother needed help, because life had been hard on him, and he deserved another chance, because, after all, don't we all deserve another shot.

Mike came over later that night the day of the barbeque, after Mr. Schiller's call. He had gone to dinner and for drinks with a buddy in town for the weekend, and now he sat on the living room floor on his hands and knees, poking with the remote control at Mr. Fulu, again under the couch. Drew Carey and the improv comedians on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* were babbling and cackling at each other on the TV. The show always made her feel like she was eavesdropping on a group of really funny friends who didn't know her and wouldn't tell her the joke. Finally Mike rolled over and sat with his back against the couch. His knees and shoulders seemed to almost fill up the small room.

This was the first either had spoken in an hour.

"Jonie?"

"Yeah?" She looked up from the pan of frying hamburger on the stove.

"Jonie, I've been thinking . . . About today with your family. I think . . . maybe your dad has it all figured out. I mean, we were talking today, him and me, and he told me that you have to do what makes you happy. You have to. Like there is no other option. Like . . . the only way . . ."

"Right." Jonie nodded and hoped that Mr. Fesman had shared some philosophical insight with Mike and it had surged inside of him, opening him up to greater planes of thought and communication. Jonie wondered if maybe they could all go to a play at the college or something together.

"Right. Well he told me that living to please others is a waste of a life. And your brother, too—your brother told them all to shove it, that he didn't need a nine-to-five." Jonie almost told him that Alfred had not told them all anything, that he had simply disappeared on the highway a few hours before his shift started. The thought of going to Mr. Schiller's office yet again tightened her stomach.

Mike continued, "And then tonight, tonight when me and Rick was out, he told me almost the same thing. He said that he was thinking about quitting

his job to go back to school. What do you think about that, Jonie?"

Pause. "Good for him . . . so . . . you want to take classes?"

"No! I mean, I hadn't thought about that. I don't know what I want, but maybe I should try to contact my daughter."

Jonie's heels eased away from the carpet. She pressed her palms against the cupboard in front of her face and tried to push herself lower, nonchalantly, so Mike would not notice her aptitude for situational flight. "What daughter?"

Mike rolled back over onto his stomach and turned his head towards the peeping cat eyes an inch above the floor. "Hey, Cat, did you know that I'm a daddy?" He returned to Jonie in the kitchen. "I know I told you. I know I told that I had a three-month-old."

"Oh, maybe you did." She didn't think so, and that was something she would remember. She thought quickly and decided to second-guess herself.

Mike continued. "The thing is, her mom and I don't get along. At all. But what about my life? What about my life with my daughter? I mean, don't they say dads have rights? So, it's time they all just shove it, and I do what makes me happy."

Mike didn't talk at all the rest of the night, but that was ok, because Jonie had never heard him say that much at once anyway. She really wasn't certain if she cared to know more right then. She ate her sloppy joe, and they had sex after Letterman, under the picture of Mr. Fesman and Mike with their arms around each other. Mike didn't seem to notice the picture, but went to sleep right away, snoring on her pink floral sheets as only men who drink beer will do. Jonie watched him sleep, noticed that his hair was receding too much for a twenty-four-year old, and wondered what he had named his baby, if he had even had a say.

Her mom called two days later with news of Alfred. It was Jonie's day off on Mondays. This afternoon, she was reading the directions of a cross-stitch kit, a giant sunflower. But then Dora called to say Alfred had called her late the night before.

"Jonie, Sweetie! He sounded so good! He was in Pennsylvania, I forget where exactly, but he said the guys were great and they were treating him well. Oh, honey! I almost forgot to tell you! He met a woman! I could hear her laughing in the background. There were a lot of people there, I think."

"Oh. That's great, Mom."

"Jonie, how nice is it that first you both have met decent people? You never know, I might be a grandma soon!"

"Maybe, Ma. But I don't know... I don't know if either me or Alfie are ready." Jonie again thought about Mike's baby's name, and wondered how she would feel in her arms. The only baby she knew well was Brandy's, another girl at the deli. And Brandy's skinny baby cried a lot. "Mom, I didn't tell you that Mike has a daughter . . . Yeah, I guess she's three months, but I don't think he sees her a whole lot . . . No, I haven't seen her . . . An ex-girlfriend, I guess, but

I don't know . . ." Jonie finally promised her mother to tell her everything as soon as she found out more. And, yes, she would bring the baby over to Dora's house if Mike had visitation rights.

Four hours later, Alfred called Jonie himself. He said the roadies had been bringing some dirty nasty stripper around. She hung around, even though he told her to get lost, and she eventually stole money from his wallet. He said he was fed up with the whole road thing. He had gotten a ride as far as Saginaw, and would she come out and pick him up.

Jonie arrived at the agreed-upon McDonalds to find Alfred sitting in the corner, sunlight raining down on his unwashed hair. A cutout of Ronald McDonald laughed over his shoulder at her. For a moment her brother was a stranger. He was only a profile she may have once read, a police outline of someone somewhere that didn't matter much. The clown, the familiar orange-brown tiles and smell of French fries seemed too sweet and innocent for the deliberate scowl of a twenty-eight-year-old unemployed road crew wannabe.

She realized these were thoughts of her own flesh and blood brother, and immediately, Jonie was sick with herself. Somewhere under the nausea, though, she was glad to think these things.

Without speaking, Alfred hunched a backpack over his shoulder and followed her outside to her Mazda. Jonie opened the car door and noticed he wasn't wearing his own pants, and the feeling that her brother was a stranger washed over her again. On the expressway, he first spoke as she neared the Midland exit.

"Jonie . . . hey, why don't you just drop me off here?" It was a light-hearted suggestion but Jonie doubted his spontaneity. She felt too far behind him to understand.

At the exit, he directed her to a gas station. She left him there with quarters for the payphone and the understanding that Someone Else would get him back to Muskerville. She watched him walk away and wondered when that might be. From the moment she had seen him in the sunny window frame, invading the child's play area with his greasy presence, she knew the deep part of her had stopped caring who he was.

It was dark when she returned home, and Mike was sitting on the stoop waiting for her. He stood and wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his work shirt, inhaling the crisp smells of a dozen vending machines and grocery store coolers. As she followed him inside and settled next to him before the 11 o'clock news, she delivered a brief relay of the episode with Alfred.

She was anxious to forget the feeling Alfred always left in her skin. Mike was there. He watched the news quietly, thoughtfully. Jonie wanted him to consume her, to wash away the dirt. Finally, his hey-baby.

"Hey, baby? You know the other day? The other day when we talked about my daughter? Well, I called her mom, and she isn't ready to let me come by. Our break-up really messed her up. But we are going to keep talking about it.

She was mad, but that was old stuff; she'll get over it." Mike put his big hand on her knee. "I mean, we'll talk again and that will all blow over. I just have to let her know that I'm serious, really serious, about my baby girl. She'll see that my baby deserves to know her daddy. It's only fair."

He was looking out behind the couch through the picture window, where the factory lights illuminated the treetops along the street. The weight of the matter seemed to push him right into the floor as if he had roots. Mike was determined, strong, the kind of man that makes a mother whisper whatacatch! Jonie knew he was the timeless husband-father pillar, and concrete like that lasts a lifetime. She asked him out loud if he wanted to move in with her.

He did.

The move was quick and complete. He didn't bring much with him—just his clothes and his small book collection, since he had been renting his cousin's furnished basement for the last six months. Jonie felt safer than she had for a long, long time. She used more yellow paint in her art, and cleaned out the pantry for the first time in months. Even Mr. Fulu agreed to accept him as a permanent part of the household, and shifted from his usual spot under the couch to the windowsill, where he napped and watched Jonie and Mike flourish in their new together-life.

This newness brought Jonie into a surprising closer intimacy with the details of Mike's life. She discovered that he looked at dirty pictures, but most men she knew did that. It was really his telephone call that surprised her most of all.

She had only ever heard him on the phone twice, and that was to order pizza, but when she came home from the deli on the third day of his move-in, she heard him in the kitchen speaking earnestly, loudly. Jonie pressed the side of her cheek against the doorframe to watch. Mike's wide square back was to her, his finger jabbing into the air at an unseen opponent. It made a spiky shadow across the charcoal picture on the opposite wall. Someone else's voice smoked up the kitchen.

"Listen, you listen to me . . . No! I don't care what your parents think! This is between you and me—I'm her father . . . Oh, give it up already! Gaa, you are so . . ."

Jonie backed away and returned to the bedroom to the pink sheets and the smiling gay Mike on the wall. She picked up the sunflower cross-stitch to look extra busy. Up over down. Up over down. Concentrate, concentrate. It worked so well that she was honestly unaware of him when she looked up sometime later. He was standing before her at the foot of the bed.

"Guess what? My daughter is coming to stay with us for a little while. Everything is going to be fine. I called her mom and we finally worked it out . . . I'm going to Lansing tomorrow to pick her up . . . Do you have any baby stuff? . . . No? Ok, I'm going to Meijer to get some diapers."

He turned without waiting for her answer, probably not needing an answer. Hours later he returned and crawled beside her. She had been dreaming of high

school, happy days in the pep band and redhead who played first chair was about to put down his clarinet and ask her to prom, when she awoke frightened and surprised at Mike's naked body. A cloud of cigarette smoke and beer stung her nose, and she turned her head away as he squeezed her belly and kissed her ear. "What is it, Jonie? Are we an old married couple after three days?"

It was bad sex, the square edged protest lodged in her chest. Jonie kept her eyes closed and her face smashed in the pillow. She spent the rest of the night trying not to touch his big reeking body beside her, and trying to picture the face of his daughter's mother.

He was asleep when she rose to get ready for work. In the living room, she found Pampers, powder, lotion, three baby sleepers, a bottle with formula and a car seat still in the box. They looked like Christmas presents waiting to be wrapped, and she had the desire to hide them in the closet, receipts carefully attached.

That day at Buebark's, Jonie's mind circled the impending visitation, so much so that her stomach turned at seeing oily sludge in the filter below the fry vat, which she normally didn't notice after years of daily cleaning. The anxiety startled her; she had thought she was more maternal than this. When she told Brandy about it at a.m. set-up, she laughed, tossing her thin ponytail. The deli girl grinned, squishing her fat, acne-dotted cheeks.

"This ain't gonna be nothin'. Mike's a good dad to wanna be part of his kid's life. Now take my ol'man—sure he's around, but only to yell at me to shut that effin' kid up. Besides, you ain't the ma. You ain' got to change the real nasty diapers, just long as you tell Mike what's what from the start . . . When is the kid coming? Tonight? Ha!"

Chuckling through her playdough neck, Brandy returned to stacking stale donuts onto clearance shelves. Mr. Schiller, walking past, stopped to comment on the inadequate cleanliness of the floor, the thickness of the chicken salad sandwiches ("How about we just give them away, Fesman?!"), and Alfred.

"Mr. Schiller, Alfred is trying hard, but . . ."—this is a difficult time for him. Jonie caught the words with her teeth before they fell out. She tried quickly to remember if she had said them before. All she could remember was that Alfred didn't wear his own clothes anymore and that she didn't care. The fish faced manager creased his heavy brows and moved on to harass the Produce Department. Jonie suddenly wanted very badly to go home to Mike and his baby.

No one was there to welcome her when she opened the door and put her purse on the laundry machine. The lights were on. Mr. Fulu was asleep on the clean laundry. Jonie looked in the closet for the baby items, only to remember that she had never put them there. The answering machine had two messages:

"Hey, Jonie, this is Bob . . . Mike's cousin. I know you and I never met, but, eehhhh . . . Mike's ex called here looking for him. If he is with you, his ass had

better be calling her as soon as possible . . . Thanks.”

And then number two.

“Hey, Jonie, it’s me . . . Looks like—I’m going to be down here just a little longer than I thought. . .” Mike’s breath paused, and Jonie’s mind immediately filled the gap for him—Life’s been hard on me. Instead, he just hung up. She was left alone, Mike’s silent, empty breath in her ears.

She sat down hard on the couch and tried hard to figure out why Mike wasn’t able to bring the baby home and why Bob and the ex couldn’t find him. She went to the bedroom to find Bob’s number, if it might be in Mike’s things. The problem was his things weren’t there. Nothing.

Jonie’s feet were dangling above the carpet. Her eyes had to look down resolutely just to focus on the empty open drawers far, far below her. The hot square edges that she had suffered the night before were in her throat again. She tried to calm down so she could think, but the ceiling was squeezing in on her. Jonie wanted more than anything to be able to figure it out, but she didn’t know where he was.

Minutes ticked. When she opened up the front door to find the police, she was almost relieved. Almost. She had opened the front door to police once before, when Alfred had been caught driving drunk in high school. Policemen always had the same eyes, just like those of security guards. Fat and scary, the two balloon faces of the officers seemed to fill up every space of the doorway. Jonie let herself lift two inches from the floor and float backwards, back into the safe heart of her home.

Yes, Mike had been staying with her. No, she had not spoken to him today. His whereabouts? No, not really, but he had planned to pick up his daughter today. Was he hurt? Was he in an accident or something? Listen to the message he left. Yes, short, but that was all. No, no, she didn’t have any idea. Only three days he had been here. Met? Three weeks—yes, exactly twenty-four days ago. She didn’t know. No, she wasn’t aware. No, she never really had spoken with his friends or family, now that she thought about it. Of course, of course she would call them if he contacted her again.

The night dripped by. Jonie waited by the phone, hanging up on Dora (“I’ve got diarrhea, Mom, something I ate. I’ll call you tomorrow.”) just in case Mike called back. Bob called to check again, but wouldn’t tell her anything more than the officers had. Telephone in one hand, Mr. Fulu’s wide sleeping head in the other, she kept waiting until 4:12 a.m.

That was when the police called to say that the Ohio State Police had picked up Mike at a public rest stop near the southern state border. Officers had discovered the child unharmed and sleeping in the car seat on the floor of the Escort.

Jonie called into work that morning, but refused to explain. She wondered if Buebark management were sneering and saying things like laziness must run in the family. Instead of getting dressed, she stayed in bed, eyes on the dusty

light fixture that slowly zoomed in and out. Her mother called again worried, but Jonie only said she was feeling under the weather and not in the mood to chat. Then a white van pulled up and the Channel Eight Action News Team brought their equipment right into her yard. The beautiful reporter looked so concerned and just so beautiful, Jonie answered her questions even though she really wanted them all to leave. She was uncomfortably aware of what her uncombed hair and her frog green house would look like on T.V.

The crew had been gone only a minute when her father made a surprise visit. Jonie couldn't remember if Mr. Fesman had ever been to her home without her mother. She hoped he hadn't seen the news this morning.

Mr. Fesman stood uncomfortably in the living room. From the couch, Jonie watched his discomfort with indifference.

He finally said, "I wanted you to know something. I came by to tell you I believe that you can only try to make yourself happy. To live for the desires of others is a waste of a life." He sat on the edge of the chair opposite her, looking down at his big hands. Jonie had always admired his working man's hands, with countless tiny marks and slashes, each blemish the memento of some forgotten story.

"That is why I want you to know something. I haven't told your mother. Your mother can lose her mind sometimes because she doesn't take the time to listen. To take a moment to understand where people are coming from. And you have a good head on your shoulders, Jonie. I know I can trust you." Mr. Fesman looked at his daughter expectantly, hoping for some sign of pleasure or appreciation at this rare compliment. Jonie picked the lint from her bathrobe.

He cleared his throat and continued addressing his hands. "Jonie, I want to be buried at home."

Jonie lifted her chin quickly to see if she was about to bump her head on the ceiling. But she was still sitting. In fact, her flesh was feeling the couch below her. The velvety upholstery was sagging under her bottom, pressing against her calves, and flattened her thighs as if the couch wanted to proclaim how very much beneath her it would stay.

"Now, don't worry! I'm fine, I just have been thinking a lot about funerals. That isn't for me. A lot of people crying, people who I don't haven't seen in years and years. The whole industry is a big scam. I want you and your mother and brother to be there. I've also been looking at plans on how to build my own coffin. A simple pine box that Alfred can put on the truck and haul to the back woods behind the house." He waited.

"Oh." Jonie wondered if she should be relieved or concerned with this news. Fifteen acres, a farmhouse and a body in the backyard—what is the market value for that sort of real estate? "Dad, if that is what makes you happy, how can I stand in your way?"

Mr. Fesman left soon after, satisfied. He had gotten approval, and he had given himself permission to feel good. Jonie sat under the picture window for

a long, long time after, watching the people at the bus stop spit in her yard and scratch themselves because they didn't know she was there. The phone rang, but she let it go. Jonie lifted the community center catalogue, which had lain untouched for weeks under the shadow the boxy coffee table horse. The catalogue listed four art classes that started in the month of July.

She decided that someday she might try to stand in somebody's way.