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TURN: ESSAYS ON GROWING UP

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Drama and Communications
Creative Writing

by

Lauren R. Rice

B.A. University of Iowa, 2003

May 2006

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and dedication of Dr. Randy Bates. His unstinting support became the ground in which I grew as a writer, and his gentle, critical gaze makes me want to be ever better than I am.

Thanks as well to Dr. Carol Gelderman. What's the point? Indeed.

Thanks to Professor Kim McDonald, for reading this thesis and mentoring me as a teacher.

Thanks to Nicole McClelland, and to my parents and to my dear Iowans.

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Abstract

Turn is a collection of personal essays that loosely focus on what it means to become an adult. The topics of the essays range from crushes to dog walking, from weddings to working at a New Orleans snoball stand. The essays deal with how much more complicated the world turned out to be than as a child I expected.

Introduction

One afternoon, when I was nine or ten, my dad and I were alone in the car. We exited I-235 in Des Moines and turned onto SE 14th street, heading home. On the corner there was a billboard for the orange drink Crush. I noticed this billboard many times, and when we drove past it this afternoon I asked my dad if he had ever had a Crush.

“Actually,” he said. “I had a crush on Dorcey for the longest time....”

Dorcey was one of my parents’ friends. She was married to Monte. They played softball with my folks, had two blonde daughters, and threw wild barbeques all summer.

It took me a second to figure out that we weren’t talking about the same kind of crush, and while I was figuring it out, he was going on and on. Finally, I stopped him. “No, dad. You know, Crush, the pop.”

He got quiet, and then he told me he had tried it.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

Just like all the other orange pops, he told me.

We were silent the rest of the ride home, lost in our thoughts—my dad’s probably on his crush on Dorcey, and the secret he let slip to his child, and why he had been so eager to let it slip. Mine were mostly on trying new kinds of pop, but also, just a little, on the strange snag in the fabric my dad had revealed.

I had little crushes on boys in my school and on my swim team, but I never imagined that my father could have crushes too. He was old. He was married. He was a grown up.

The moment was inconsequential but the memory stuck. I caught a peek behind the grand façade of adulthood and there was nothing magical on the other side. It was the first time I

considered that maybe my parents were not so different from me, and it was the first time I noticed the power of language.



I had many misguided notions about what it meant to become an adult. I always assumed, for example, that there would be a moment when I would feel like a grown up. I thought when I reached this point I would understand how the world worked. I believed that the world was a place of order, and that once I became an adult I would be able to negotiate the system with ease. I had the sense that adults were, or were expected to be, infallible. Once a person reached adulthood, she made sound decisions, acted in her own best interest and in the best interest of others, and didn't make so many mistakes.

I don't know where these ideas came from. Why I held on to them for so long is also a mystery. If I had mentioned these ideas to the adults in my life, they would have steered me towards a more realistic vision, but I never thought to ask. That's a funny thing about the beliefs we form in the quiet of our minds. They take root and grow and become part of us. We don't know they're ill informed until we learn otherwise.

College felt like an extended adolescence to me. Even though I had an apartment, a job, a social life, even though I took care of much of my own finances, and dealt with the consequences of my own mistakes, I never felt like an adult. Everything I needed was provided for me, and I was allowed to make my own decisions and live pretty much the way I wanted. But my parents and the University of Iowa, I always felt, were ready to step in and take over if there was a crisis.

When I moved to New Orleans, I thought, then, I would be a grown up. I was working on my MFA, tutoring and teaching at the University of New Orleans. I was financially

independent, and I was living with my boyfriend. I was ready for the moment of transformation. I waited for it, but the moment never came. Instead, I watched as my beliefs about what it meant to be an adult dissolved and swirled away like sand in a stream. My concepts of adulthood vanished and revealed instead other truths.

I still don't feel like an adult. I feel like myself. Once I realized that this is how it would always feel for me, I realized the same must be true for many other people. "Turn" and "On Becoming My Mom" describe how I went from imagining that adults were models of maturity by virtue of being adults, to seeing that they were just people, muddling through the best they could. They make mistakes, as I do. Sometimes they are selfish or ridiculous, but then, so am I. I didn't learn to expect less from my elders. I expected something different. What they actually teach me about being an adult is more complicated than copying a model, but then, so is growing up.

As children, we can believe in infinite possibility for our lives. We can be both the president and an international party girl. It doesn't matter that one lifestyle might preclude another. As we age, it becomes clear that such a lack of limitation is no longer the case. Every decision we make opens one door and closes another. We have a path that moves in one direction, and there is no way to entirely circle back and start over. In the essay "Crush" I struggle with possibilities that I still imagine for my life but that will never take shape.

Rather than being given the key to universal order, I see now that the world is a place of chaos and mystery. I learned this in part while riding New Orleans public transportation. I wanted there to be some form of order. If there wasn't the order of schedules and routine, I wanted there to be another organizing force, even if it had to be a supernatural one. "The Curse of the Earl Turner Bus" describes the maddening search for order when, in the end, there is none.

“The Curse of the Earl Turner Bus” also begins to develop a theme that I complete in “My Pirate.” Adults don’t stop dreaming. The short “My Pirate” tries to carve out a place for childish wonder in my adult life.

When my friends started getting married, I felt anxious. While I loved the idea of planning a wedding, I didn’t feel ready for marriage. Was this a sign of my immaturity? “TV Weddings” describes helping my college roommate plan her wedding. We had a lot of fun choosing dresses and sampling cakes, but we rarely discussed the concept of marriage. Having a wedding isn’t a sign of maturity, but understanding the significance of marriage and knowing whether one are ready for it is.

Relationships, romantic or otherwise, are fascinating because they are so much more complicated than I imagined them when I was a child. My relationship with my friend Sarah forced me to reevaluate what I expected from a friendship. In “A Story for Sarah” I analyze what I learned from her. She is not the kind of person I would normally be friends with, but we are. I expected a relationship with a boyfriend would be constructed from love and security, but in “Sleeping Together” I describe how romantic relationships can be as terrifying as they are loving.

In the essay “Lost in Arkansas” I write about a backpacking trip. I expected the trip to be ordered and controlled, like a package tour. Instead we got lost, and I was disappointed. I came to realize, though, that a package tour, a perfect trip without mishaps, would have strangled adventure. Order is safe and cozy but not very fun. I am learning to appreciate the mess, the mucky, the wild.

There are possibilities, though, that I never imagined, that can present themselves if I am open to them. I learned this walking my dog, and I write about it in “Walking Mr. Bingley.”

Mr. Bingley doesn't know where his life will take him. He has been a stray, and he has also been a spoiled pet. He has lived in New Orleans; now he lives in Iowa. He always seems content, but he also seems ready for something new. As I grow older, I am trying to find a balance between hoping for possibility and accepting and embracing reality.

“From the Snoball Stand” is the concluding essay. I took a job at a snoball stand because I thought I didn't want to grow up. I was unhappy in the job though. The work was too easy for me. I craved responsibility. As frightening as it was, I was excited about the challenge of growing up. I thought this essay, which is about embracing my new role, would be an excellent conclusion to a thesis dealing with growing up.



I realize that these lessons may sound naïve. To the people who have already learned them, I am sure they are hardly worth stating. They seem obvious, but experiencing them is the only way to learn them.

This is a collection of essays that meditates on and illustrates the process of growing up through my personal attempts. They are essays about expectations and the lessons I learned when the world turned out differently from what I had expected. I hope these pieces will be but blazes on the trail. When I look back on them some day I hope they will show me how far I have come since I discovered these ideas and held these beliefs. I am not afraid to discover that I may have been wrong, or immature, or naïve, but I would be afraid to find that I hadn't tried to learn from my experiences along the way.

It seems silly to write about coming of age at such a young age. The experiences of our formative years take decades to distill into wisdom. And yet, since we never stop growing, I found it useful to sift through the experience from the front lines. Here I am, in the midst of this

process that everyone goes through, keeps going through, and here is what I am learning. I have long resisted the idea that the genre of nonfiction should be a genre written only from the perspective of the wisdom that comes with age. There also is a place for nonfiction writing by people who are still figuring things out because writing and learning are processes that can support and encourage one another beautifully. I believe they are life-long processes, like growing up, and this thesis, I hope, is only the beginning.

Turn

At age fourteen I had a keen awareness of the dangers of nuclear proliferation from rogue states. I could have told you that Pakistan would proliferate eight years ago. I could pronounce the word “hegemony.” I knew more about foreign and domestic policy than many political science majors: the ins-and-outs of the juvenile justice system, U.S. relations with the People’s Republic of China and Japan, the domestic energy crisis and renewable resources. My world revolved around high school policy debate.

I took to debate, to the long hours after school, to the competition, to the research. In my last two years of high school, my partner and I competed with some marginal success. With our coach, Mr. Miller, we traveled. We stayed in hotels, ate at nice restaurants, trucked around the school computer, spent our weekends arguing with strangers, and I loved it. I never wanted it to end. I wanted to be a lifer: study education in college, become a coach, and live out my days teaching youngsters how to debate.

Mr. Miller was just the kind of coach I wanted to be. He was the coolest. He was mean to his students. He tormented the jocks and cheerleaders, challenged and encouraged the nerds and outcasts. He strode up and down in front of the blackboard, scribbling wildly on the chalkboard, and torturing students who weren’t paying attention. He yelled. He was moody and secretive. He didn’t pretend to be nice, and I adored him for it. I knew that if he respected me, it meant something.

Miller was a bachelor. He was in his mid-thirties, but he looked younger. He had dark, almost black hair sprinkled with gray. He had pale white skin and Irish blue eyes. His lips stuck out like a duck. He wore slacks and button down shirts, and sometimes jeans on Fridays. He had a belly and led with it when he walked. When he wore his yellow shirt you could see the

faint outline of a blue sailor tattoo on his arm, a dancing lady. He had a derisive squeal of laughter, which he used to mock us.

Miller tricked his debaters. He thought it was funny. When I was a freshman he bet my classmate a Coke that she couldn't "refrain from verbal communication for the duration of the class." She quit talking but passed notes. At the end of the period Miller whipped out the dictionary and shoved the definition of verbal in her face: communicating with words, even written. He liked to make stupid bets with my partner Katie. As the three of us drove through some suburb of Chicago on our way to a tournament, the two of them argued in the front seat. Katie always bet Miller that he didn't know something about classic rock or politics. I kept telling Katie not to bet whether someone knew something or not, because only that person would know, and Miller always did. By the end of my junior year, Katie owed Miller something like fifteen hundred dollars worth of judging hours; which meant that while the rest of the team was getting paid ten dollars a round to adjudicate freshmen debates, Katie would be working off her debt.

Miller's methods seemed innovative and subversive. He was hands-on. If debaters said "um" too often or had some other annoying tick, Miller blasted them with a squirt gun while they practiced. When I was a freshman my speech was muddled. Debaters read and speak very quickly so clarity is essential. Miller made me read for hours after school with a pen stuck in my mouth like a bit. He never praised, only offered the occasional high five if we won a round.

Miller, Katie and I spent lots time together. The debate room was where we congregated in the morning. We had cubbies for keeping our projects in, but we used the whole room as a locker. The debate room was an eccentric disaster: papers on the floor, old trophies spilling out of a cabinet, dusty pieces of clothing left behind after a weekend trip, industrial size cans of

nacho cheese from tournaments past. We stayed in the debate room long after school let out, working and goofing off. We played stupid games. We tried to knock a plaque off the wall with a beanbag. We pretended the floor was lava and raced from the front of the room to the back climbing on furniture. If we got hungry, one of us ran out for Chinese or Big Daddy's Barbeque. Miller hung out with us, in the evenings, as long as we wanted to stay, cutting out pieces of evidence and building cases, and so he hovered somewhere between teacher, coach and friend.

The longer I debated for Miller, the more responsibility he gave me. At our tournament, the East High Classic, I ran the tabulation room, where the results of each round were tallied. I took on important research assignments and trained the novices. There were more talented debaters on the team, but Miller trusted that I wouldn't flake out, at least that's what I thought. I graduated from high school in May of 1999, and Miller hired me on as an assistant coach. Some debaters go on to compete at the college level, but I didn't think I could handle the pressure or the heavy drinking that college debate teams were known for. Because I was at the University of Iowa, which is an hour and a half drive from Des Moines, I couldn't coach after school, but I did research and traveled with the team.

When I look back on my debating years, I see a person substantially different from the one I am today. I was entrenched in a world that believed that in convincing people you were right, you were, regardless of the truth. Right and wrong were of no consequence. Debaters have to argue both sides of an issue, so I taught myself to not to care about anything. In debate, the person who argues the most ferociously is the winner; the consequences after the round are not consequences at all. Everything in debate leads to nuclear war. The most powerful technique a debater can use is a turn. She takes an opponent's affirmative argument for something and makes whatever her opponent is arguing for into a negative thing. For example,

if your opponent argues that her policy will feed starving people in Africa, a turn could argue that feeding a starving population is a bad idea because it will cause a catastrophic population boom. I developed a swaggering over confidence and became emotionally closed off. When I think about what happened with Miller and me, I see that my lack of reaction, my dulled acceptance developed in a universe devoid of morality, where everything was possible but without repercussion, was an attitude I learned from him.

Miller lied to me and I knew it. Once he asked me for a ride after school. He told me his Taurus had some work done and he needed to pick it up. I drove my mom's Dynasty. Miller pointed out the directions and talked the whole way. I suppose it shows how naïve I was at sixteen, but I didn't consider why he was picking up his car, ostensibly newly repaired, from the parking lot of a roadhouse. By the time I started coaching, I realized that half of the things he said were untrue. I would record the lies here but most of them were small and pointless. He told them out of habit, or for fun, or to keep people off balance. The countless little lies he told me kept me from figuring out the big one.

In December, right before Christmas, of my freshman year in college and my first year as assistant coach, Miller and I were supposed to take the team to a tournament in Minneapolis. At the same time my family was driving to Florida to spend Christmas with my grandma. They left on Thursday, but the tournament wouldn't be over until Saturday night. High school debate tournaments are weekend events. A small local tournament will start Friday after school and run all day Saturday. Larger, more prestigious tournaments often spill over into Sunday. Huge tournaments, such as Glenbrooks in Chicago or Harvard in Cambridge, stretch into Monday. The better the team does in competition, the longer it stays in the tournament. So my parents

bought me a plane ticket leaving Minneapolis early Sunday morning. They planned to pick me up in Orlando Sunday afternoon.

At the last minute Miller changed plans. There was no point, he said, in taking our sad little band of novices all the way to Minnesota just to have them go “O-fer,” or lose every round. Instead we’d to take them to a local tournament. Since we would be done early on Saturday, we could drive to Minnesota that night, stay in the hotel we had reservations for, and I could still catch my plane Sunday morning.

As predicted my team did poorly. It wasn’t their fault. They were just goofy teenagers from working class homes. Policy debate is a highly competitive academic activity, and successful debaters typically come out of prep schools and upwardly mobile public school districts. East High was a tough, no nonsense, blue-collar school. My kids came from homes where no one went to college, where success was finding a decent factory job after graduation and buying a quality used car. My kids didn’t have the sophistication of good debaters. They didn’t like to dress up. They wore cartoon ties. They had body odor. They screamed and hit at each other in the cafeteria and whined at the injustice of losing rounds they didn’t understand.

I finished judging Saturday afternoon at two. Miller told me he was going to run home and get his bags. He had to get the rental car, and then he would pick me up at my parents’ house around four. At home I packed my shorts and swimsuit for Florida. I laid out my coat and hat on the living room sofa, set my bag by the front door, and was ready to leave around three. I stretched out on the sofa and fell asleep.

I woke at five. The winter sky was starting to darken. Miller was late, as always. I turned on the television and soon it was the only light in the living room. Around six the phone rang. Miller. In the background was loud music, people laughing, glasses clattering. He

sounded tearful. He said something like, “Lauren, I’m really sorry. I am going to get you there. I know I am late, I’m sorry. I’ll get you there. I’m so sorry.” I told him it was all right, just come over so we could leave. Then he hung up.

I waited. It takes about four hours to get from Des Moines to Minneapolis going straight north on I-35. If we left around seven we could be there by eleven, I calculated. My flight would leave at seven-thirty in the morning, but I could sleep on the plane. I waited.

At nine I quietly panicked. It was one thing if he lied about where he had spent the last five hours but another if he never showed up. I didn’t know how to reach my parents in Florida. I couldn’t drive their Dynasty to Minneapolis because I’d have to leave it at the airport. I called neighbors and the parents of my friends, to see if anyone could get me to Minneapolis that night. No one could help. I sat on the love seat, and stared out the window and quietly prayed for Miller to arrive.

At ten a mini-van backed into the driveway and parked. A man got out of the driver’s side. I didn’t recognize him until I opened the door. It was Mr. Nelson, the coach for Valley High School. Valley always had a winning debate program, and I was scared of Mr. Nelson. I remembered him stalking around the crisp corporate halls of Valley, yelling at students to get their rounds started. Since I became an assistant coach, I’d learned Nelson was Miller’s friend, but until then he had never spoken to me. I didn’t realize he knew my name.

“Lauren, can you drive tonight?” he asked. I followed him to the van. There was a man was in the darkened front seat. I got in the side door. The head in the front seat lolled on the headrest in an awkward attempt to turn around. Then a hand rose over the seat back and gave a floppy, half-hearted wave.

Nelson drove through the streets of Des Moines and soon we were on an empty two-lane highway leaving the city heading north. He pulled his mini-van into the gravel parking lot of a seedy bar in the middle of nowhere. A respectable rental sedan sat priggishly among banged up pick-up trucks and second hand Mazda hatchbacks. I recognized the bar. I had driven Miller there the year before.

Nelson helped Miller out of the van. Leaning on his shoulder, Miller lurched towards the rental car and Nelson stuffed him in. I carried the bags and put them in the trunk. Nelson handed me the keys, smiled weakly, and got back into his mini-van. I was eighteen and only half aware that I was being abandoned. I took a second look at the bar. It was a sleazy strip club. The cars reflected the light of the garish legs painted on the plastic sign.

Miller had talked about his stripper friend Heidi when I was in high school. He mentioned her every once in a while. I can't remember the context, but he told us things about her. She had a child. She wasn't his girlfriend. "Can't a man be friends with a woman" he'd ask. Katie and I didn't care. He probably invented Heidi, we joked. We never considered how inappropriate it was to be discussing strippers with seventeen-year-old girls. It occurred to me that Heidi was probably working the bar that night.

I got into the driver seat of the rental car. I can't see very well and I have always been an anxious driver. I adjusted the seat and mirrors, turned on the lights and backed out of the gravel parking lot. I can't remember how I found my way to the interstate. Miller was trying to talk to me, but all he could manage were watery smiles. He exuded alcohol.

The interstate was busy for a Saturday night. When a car passed, or when I passed a car, Miller hollered incoherent commands and pointed towards the red lights fading in the dark. He started erupting in huge, reeking belches that smelled of a hundred sticky floors of a hundred

filthy bars. His yelling made me even more nervous. I was a good girl from Iowa. I had been trained to always defer to the judgment of adults, but the adult in question was incapacitated. There was only me. I wished he would pass out and give me some peace. Eventually he did.

Alone on the highway I watched the miles whirl past. I hunched up over the steering wheel, staring desperately through windshield. The road was black and unchanging. The grit of snow swept across the lines, a desert of cruel, frozen sand. Northern Iowa was bleak and empty, hard and cold, as if all the people in the world had been blown away by the ferocious wind. It makes the soul cold. Nuclear fallout weather. Nothing exists except for the road and signs for towns unseen and the white lights of far off farms and the billboards that read, “There really is a Boondocks U.S.A. Exit Now.”

I approached Mason City, the last outpost of Iowa before the land of ten thousand lakes. The car was almost out of gas. I saw an oasis of fluorescent light on the side of the road and pulled off. Miller didn't stir. I can't remember if I paid for the gas myself, or if I searched his limp body for a wallet. At the pump, I watched the dollars and gallons tick off. I could have waited in the car as the tank filled, but it felt good to be in the sharp bracing cold, and away from him.

With a full tank of gas I pulled out of the station and continued north. Exhaustion set in. My eyes fogged with strain. An hour outside of Minneapolis the billboards moved like videos: the Cabela's elk ran and brightly dressed people skied down slopes.

I-35 dumped us right in the center of Minneapolis. I competed at this tournament two years before. We were staying in the same hotel. The three of us, Katie, Miller, and I, ate in a swanky steak house called Manny's. Miller kept telling us it was one of the best steakhouses in the country. The meal cost far more than I could afford with the forty dollars allowance my

mom gave me for tournament food, but Miller paid the difference. We gobbled steaks and shrimp and a caramel covered brownie the size of a human head until we could do nothing but roll groaning into crisp hotel sheets. Other teams were stuck ordering pizza at the Super Eight. Katie and I were lucky to have such a small team and such a cool coach.

Two years later, cruising around downtown, nothing looked familiar. I had to wake Miller. I reached over and punched him on the shoulder. “Miller, wake up. Wake the fuck up. How do we get to the fucking hotel?” He roused himself, grunted lefts and rights, and between the two of us we found the Hyatt. I am not sure how he managed to get us checked in. It took a long time. I can only imagine what the clerk thought of us, an eighteen-year-old girl sharing a room with a drunken older man.

The room was bleachy and neat. I was too tired to change clothes or to set the alarm. I took off my shoes and rang for a wake up call at six-thirty in the morning. I remember the woman’s grandmotherly voice, Gladys’ I think her name was, on the other end of the line, “Have wonderful, beautiful, restful sleep.”

In the bathroom Miller vomited universes. If I knew then what I know now, I might have taken him to a hospital. Under the bedspread I thought about all the other nights in hotels with Miller, in Chicago, in Omaha, in Cambridge. Katie and I stopped by his room one night to watch *Armageddon* on pay-per-view. I noticed bottles in the trashcan. There was the night in Cedar Rapids, when Katie said she smelled something on his breath, and I didn’t believe her. And of course, there were the coaches’ parties that tournaments held on Friday night. The coaches met in a room and drank and yelled at each other until the front desk called and broke it up. Katie and I met them leaving the party on the elevator, sloppy versions of the somber judges who had critiqued our arguments hours before. Miller went to those. Before I fell asleep I added these

experiences. The sun meant that my coach was an alcoholic, and that alcoholism was no longer a problem my youth protected me from. My ride with Miller that night was my first glimpse into the problems I would face as an adult, and I wasn't sure I was ready.

I bolted out of sleep. The sun filled the room with weak Northern light. I looked at the clock—seven thirty—my flight had already left for Florida. I phoned the front desk and yelled. My wake up call never came. Then I flipped through the fat yellow phone book to find the number of the airline. I got through to a real person, and when I explained my situation she said she would put me on stand by for the flight leaving at ten. I thanked her and hung up.

“Miller, wake the fuck up, it's seven thirty.” The still clothed lump on the other bed shifted to life. He never made it under the sheets. I dashed into the bathroom and threw my stuff together. Miller drove me to the airport. We were silent in the car. He parked and walked me to my gate. I checked in with the agent at the desk and he said he would call me when a seat opened up.

I walked back over to where Miller was waiting for me. His face was puffy; his eyes red and sagging. With his hands tucked into his faded, Friday jeans, he mentioned the work he wanted me to do when I got back to town, but he didn't make much eye contact. I listened attentively. Neither of us mentioned the night before. It wasn't a big deal, we acted out for each other. I still wanted to impress him, to be cool, to prove that I was dependable and unshakable. But I had seen through the veil of adult authority and realized that it divided only flawed people of different ages. We said goodbye, and Miller sauntered away, down the concourse towards the terminal.

After that night I stayed on as a coach for a year and a half, and all of that time, Miller and I never spoke about Minneapolis. The following December, when I came back to Des

Moines for winter break, Miller took me out to dinner at a tacky Cajun restaurant. Over blackened chicken and dirty rice, Miller told me the school had asked him to resign. He had received two D.W.I.s, was jailed briefly and had to attend bad drivers school. He explained this in the same brash, cocky way he said everything, and he seemed so confident that the seriousness of the conversation didn't register. He sounded as if he had planned it all this way, that everyone was better off. He alluded to no regret, revealed no weakness in his line of argument. That is what made him such a good debate coach. He was able to convince even himself he was right. He was planning on working as a bartender full time, he told me. He didn't know who the new coach would be, but he would give him my contact information.

I listened placidly, not really getting it. He was a teacher. My mother trusted him with me when I was a child. I trusted him with me when I was a young adult. His authority as a teacher, I believed, would supersede his weaknesses as a human being. But here he was, sitting across from me, imperfect and bewildering. I knew so much about world affairs, but so little about people. In debate it was easy to see issues as black and white, but now everything was gray. I turned. I slipped out of the shallows and into the deep and swirling world.

Crush

Mike Ose sat across from me in a bar called Martinis breaking my heart. He was just back from Spain, and in two days I was moving to New Orleans. I was drinking vodka and cranberry juice. Too many. Seven tiny black straws were lined up in front of me like logs waiting for the mill. I watched him, an arm's length away, across the notched wooden table, and as I did I was struck by the idea that my life would always be this way. Mike Ose was not just a crush; he was a symbol. In Mike Ose, my object of obsession, was folded all the unattainable men and all the possibilities for different lives I would not live. Not a man but a manifestation. He is part of a skein of other men that unravels tangential to my life, an imaginary wire of that elusive and addictive something else I catch sight of only when it briefly encircles the boys like Mike Ose and draws them close to me.

The bar was lively but not crowded. Iowa City, home of the University of Iowa, was emptied of students in the summer time, and everyone who wanted one had a booth in the bar. The music was great, lots of songs that Mike Ose liked to sing along to. Neil Diamond came on, *Kentucky Woman*, and I glanced across the table. He knew all the words. He mouthed to himself, lips catching each smoky syllable. I caught his eye. Unembarrassed, he stared back and kept on singing. It felt as if he really meant the lyrics. I wished he meant them for me.

During that bleary song, I saw the opening of a path I knew my life would not take, me and Mike Ose and a future. There had been other paths. In that song I saw Ricky Bruce, all smiling blue eyes and wavy hair, before the ravages of puberty, when he was the finest boy in the eighth grade, and he asked me to slow dance. I was slumped down on the floor of the sweat moist gym waiting out a couple's song. Never in my life would I have considered dancing with Ricky. He was a junior high god but out of the crowd he walked over to me, held out his hand

and led me onto the floor. For eight minutes we teetered back and forth, round and round, talking a little, and laughing. For the entirety of some terrible song, I inhabited a world of unimaginable possibility. I let myself get lost in an impossible vision of myself. And just for a second I got lost in Neil Diamond, in Mike Ose's breathtaking jaw, in the life that skimmed, but was never, mine.



Mike Ose was never a person I knew in my real life. I saw him only at parties or in bars. He lived with my friend Frank, and I met him at a barbeque at their apartment the summer before my junior year of college. He showed up late, after everyone was full and buzzed and the party was just hitting stride. He walked in, slipped into a polo shirt, and effortlessly wooed the room.

Mike Ose was the womanizing president of the University quiz bowl team, and everyone fell in love with him. It didn't hurt that he was gorgeous. His hair was dark, almost black, and framed his dark eyes. His jaw bullied the rest of his face. His cheeks were not gentle curves but stiff angles driving into the flat bottom of his chin. He had a knee-quaking wry smile. For as long as I knew him, I was staring at him while he looked in another direction.

Even though Iowa City was a small town, I never bumped into him on the street or had a class with him. We never shared a meal in a restaurant or a conversation that didn't involve alcohol. I only saw Mike Ose when I went out. He was for special occasions. I never saw him studying or cleaning the bathroom or passed out on the couch in front of bad television. He was never tainted with day-to-day living, and so my memories of him are swirled with dancing and drinking and fun.

Crushes can be sustained with slight and fleeting moments of contact, and mine was fueled by moments at parties. At Halloween I leaned on the wall in the hallway. The guys

decorated with portraits of Russian leaders from Lenin to Putin, and I was studying them as I caught my breath away from the disco music in the living room. Under a string of many colored Christmas lights, I stood between Frank and Mike Ose and we chose our favorite Russians.

When I asked him about it, Mike Ose put one arm slightly above my head and explained his costume: a sort of seventies period costume, slim jeans and black European ankle boots, a golden rod shirt with silver cowboy snaps open to his black chest hair. Over it all he wore a gold leather jacket with a pointy collar. He had mirrored aviator sunglasses, a painted on mustache, and he roughed up his black hair with product I could smell. I smiled. I said something funny. I tried to breathe him in.

In the living room people danced, bouncing off second hand couches and bumping into the stereo on cinder blocks making it skip. In my rhinestone cowboy costume I danced with my friends, the vampire victims, and tried to play it cool. Someone put a Shakira CD into the stereo. Tired dancers moved off the floor. Fresh ones got to their feet. In the commotion I turned and Mike Ose was dancing very close to me. He was lip-syncing the words in Spanish. In his sunglasses I saw my convex self, saw him step closer, gently remove my straw cowboy hat and put it on his head.

I felt myself pulled back through time to a quiet evening in Evanston, Illinois, to the debate camp I attended during high school. Our lab leaders gave our team the evening off. A group of us walked towards downtown looking for diversion from debate briefs and the stuffy stone dorms. In the two-story Barnes and Noble I sat on the stairs with my friend Lily and Conor. I was wearing my green camouflage boonie cap, the one I bought before leaving for camp at an Army Navy Surplus store.

Conor was from Manhattan, but his father was an Irish citizen. He was one of the two red haired boys in our class. The other was a volatile Scot whose parents had sent to debate camp by mistake. Conor had pale skin and autumnal red hair. He was taller than me, but walked with an unsure stoop. His eyes were the color of soil in spring. He talked about things I had only just heard of, like Heidegger and small towns in Ireland and that made me think he was brilliant. His voice was quiet but passionate. He chuckled softly, cautiously and nodded.

Conor perched above me on the bookstore stairs. He took the boonie cap and put it on. The brim flopped around his face, hiding his hair. He looked monastic. Everyone in my lab group wore that cap, but I relished the tiny intimacy of sharing it with Conor. Forcing nonchalance, I went to the bathroom. Later, over Kim-chi ramen, and cans of warm Mountain Dew, Lily told me what Conor had said. He took the hat off of his head and sniffed it deeply. “It smells like her,” he said.

He offered it to Lily, a pragmatic Korean immigrant, who argued, “No, it smells like everyone.”

“No,” he insisted, “it smells like her.”

I made Lily tell me the story over and over until curfew had passed and I had to sneak back to my room in the dark. In my dorm I watched the moonlight track across the room and thought “it smells like her” was the most romantic thing a boy could say. I imagined that sharing a goofy hat was indicative of a subtle yet profound connection.

The Halloween party roared on and my cowboy hat made the rounds. Mike Ose stole away and when he returned he produced a bottle of Absinthe, which he had smuggled through customs after a semester of studying abroad. He took it into the kitchen and, like lambs, the party followed. He made a ceremony of balancing the spoons and sugar cubes. When

everything was prepared he looked up from the counter and saw me hesitating in the doorway. In slow motion I watched as he motioned for me to come in, come in with his hand. I watched his mouth smile and say, “Come on,” but I was planted. He said it one more time. I shook my head and turned away. In a second I heard people gasping from the drink.

He called to me, gave me a chance, but I hung back. It would have been easy to convince myself that to follow him, to be next to him, to let him clap me on the shoulder and smile and pour me a drink would bring me closer to him. But maybe I knew that a step towards Mike Ose wouldn't take me anywhere. I would be flirting with a dream, a myth, but nothing tangible. Maybe part of me knew that my feelings for him were built of only shadows and cocktails and moments I had filled with meanings all my own.



While I was busy with my real life, Mike Ose took the scenic route to a degree. He graduated in the winter. Frank took me to the celebratory bender in a bar decorated with pictures of long dead Hawkeye wrestlers. Mike wore his graduation suit, and he wore it as if he had been born in it. That night I watched as Ose glad-handed the women who loved him like a politician closing in on a landslide, shaking hands, hugging and beaming. The bars closed and the graduation party moved to an apartment. I was tired, but I stayed. I knew that this might be my last opportunity for something to happen between the two of us. I couldn't go to bed. I wanted to stay close, just in case. By four in the morning Mike was passed out in a Lazy Boy with a cat kneading the leg of his gray suit.

After graduation Mike Ose was moving to Spain. I gathered that his family had made a sort of financial arrangement in which Mike worked on their farm during the summer, and in return his family paid for him to live abroad. He was built like a farmer, lean and muscular, and

if he hadn't gone to college, he might have been sitting in a plastic booth at Casey's Gas Station, drinking coffee and talking about crop and hail insurance. He might have inherited a large profitable farm. He might have been married with a family on the way. I liked to imagine him this way, in early spring, thick fingers on the wheel of a battered pick up truck, and me next to him, in dusty jeans and muddy boots, on our way to the north field to tag calves.

After Spain, Mike Ose planned to settle in Iowa and teach junior high. He would be the dashing social studies teacher in a small school, teaching ESL on the side, and making all the senioritas swoon. If that were also my life, I dreamed, I could get a job at the Hy-vee, read books and take walks in the countryside. We would live close to his family. We would have a lot of kids. It was intoxicating, indulgent even, to imagine myself in a life that would not be mine.

The day after his graduation bender, Frank brought Mike Ose along to a party for one of our friends also graduating that winter. It was nearly Christmas, but the apartment sweltered. Guests stepped outside to cool off. Out there I found myself alone with him. The twine of something else unfurled just within my grasp, and it seemed as if by doing or saying the right thing I might be able to pull myself out of this life and into a different, more magical, one.

I choked. "So, Spain huh?"

"Yup, Spain."

"I hear they have a tomato festival or something?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You gonna check that out?"

"Might."

He shrugged and went back inside. I stood out in the cold a little longer.

When he left for Spain that winter I didn't feel like I had lost my chance with him because I had never had one. Still, I moped around Frank's apartment. He left his furniture and I imagined I could smell him in the fabric. He called Frank's once, and left a message on the voice mail. I didn't hear it, but Frank told me that all he said was, "Greetings from Spain." And gradually my crush went into remission.



The following August I was a recent graduate with a delicately crafted future. I was moving to New Orleans for graduate school. I was spending my last weeks in Iowa City saying a glad goodbye. A week before the move, in the candle-lit basement of the Atlas Bar, my future was all I wanted.

Then Mike Ose walked in. He materialized at the end of the table, grinned, and wrecked everything. Mike Ose and all the ghosts of pretty things that were not mine were supposed to be in Spain until well after my departure. Instead, he was at the bar, holding up those other possibilities for comparison. Here was uncertainty. Here was regret. Here was a small sadness for the fantasies I would have to put aside. So I drank martinis with Mike Ose. I laughed at his jokes and indulged in his smile and pretended that we were friends and that this could be going somewhere. At two AM I went home alone. I crawled into bed with my future and wept a little because it did not seem as if it were the only one for me.



Mike Ose is all the boys that glide in and out of my life, who catch me off guard, soften up the ground, and loosen my footing. Folded up in him are glimpses of the others, of Jim, the first guy I considered leaving my boyfriend for. He reminded me of Joe, wildly funny and insecure, who was so attentive he made me adore him. There too is Miguel, a brooding Latino,

with an *Amadeus* squeal of laughter. There are pieces of Conor, of Ricky. And there will be others, such as the strange man in my graduate class who looked like my uncle, who kissed me on the forehead and offered to sing me a Christmas carol. Together they haunt me and tempt me. They leave me wondering. They show me myself as someone else. Their visions are tantalizing because they are fantasies and so free of hardship and responsibility and want.

In New Orleans, I imagine I see him, on street corners or in cars. Lean, dark haired men, who walk like they know they're sexy, catch my eye. They will always be there, lurking on the outskirts, nudging close, then dancing away. They are brief encounters with a line of something else. Maybe someday, at Frank's wedding, I'll see Mike Ose across the aisle of the church, with his dark eyed wife, his row of gleaming children. He will sweep around the reception hall, charming all the old ladies, and maybe he will remember me, and maybe, I dream, we will have a slow dance. Then, he will slip out the back door, and go back to that other life.

The Curse of the Earl Turner Bus

I was sweating on a plank bench under the sorry shade of a bus stop shelter, twenty pounds of Idaho potatoes gathered at my feet. The potatoes cost me only three dollars and I was pretty happy about my luck. A price like that made it worth dragging them home on the bus.

When I lugged the potatoes into the shelter, a teenager offered me his seat. He was being polite, and I appreciated the respectful gesture, but it made me pissy anyway. Did I look *that* old? I coughed up a feeble thank you and settled into a bad mood. I was glad to sit down, though, no matter what it implied. The heat was getting to me, swamping my tee shirt with a righteous sweat.

I drained the last swallow of water from the bottle in my backpack and watched it evaporate off my body. The Elysian Fields bus was supposed to come along every fifteen minutes, but no bus came. No one bothered with bus schedules in New Orleans because the bus system doesn't bother. When I moved to New Orleans, I thought that the fabled *laissez-faire* lifestyle only applied to eating and drinking. I figured banks and city offices and universities would run as efficiently as they did back home. Instead, I found the laid-back attitude that seemed so charming on Bourbon street was all pervasive and thwarting my every move.

I had gotten used to waiting for buses that were considered missing in action, but this was ridiculous. The minutes ticked by and no bus came. There was no breeze and the sun glared at our backs. I felt like a sailor in a lifeboat, under the hot Pacific sun, waiting for a rescue ship that might never come. I watched the boy who gave up his bench seat for me. I felt bad for him. Considering the wait, now he was probably pissed too.

Then there was a quiet stirring in the bus shelter. Everyone leaned forward and peered down the street. "The bus is coming," people whispered and pointed it out to their bench

neighbors. In the sun-shimmering street: a mirage. As it got closer, the bus became more real, and I could make out the three delayed buses sheepishly following the first. I scooped up the potatoes in one hand. The bus came to a stop with a heavy gasp of airbrakes, and I found myself face to face with the giant, disembodied head of Mr. Earl Turner.



The first time I saw the Earl Turner bus I was on the Broad/NASA line heading towards Gentilly Boulevard. It was a hot spring morning, and I was sitting next to another commuter, both of us trying to ignore the long touch of our thighs on the plastic seat. I watched the optimistic street names go by: Hope, Agriculture, Treasure.

My bus stopped under the I-610 overpass to pick up another passenger. I stared at the cars approaching in the opposite direction. Then suddenly an enormous tow truck pulled into view. Riding piggyback was a long, Velveeta shaped bus. I'd never seen a bus being towed before. This bus was different. Most of the New Orleans buses wear thick stripes of Mardi gras colors: purple, green and gold, but the broken bus was all black. Gold letters on its side read: "Earl Turner Live, New Multimillion Dollar Theater, Five Nights a Week, 9PM, Harrah's Casino." Next to the text was a larger than life publicity shot of Earl Turner himself—all smooth brown skin and gleaming white teeth. He wore a bright red jacket, which matched the red highlights on the bus. His shoulders cocked at a jaunty lounge singer angle.

Seeing the Earl Turner bus made me feel lucky. A bus advertising a casino: it had to be a little lucky. I wanted to believe that it was special, and as the tow truck pulled out of sight, I thought, "How sad. A cool bus like that being towed like a jalopy." I hoped that whatever was wrong with the Earl Turner bus wasn't too serious. If I could ride the Earl Turner bus, some of

its luck might rub off. I didn't consider that the fact that the Earl Turner bus was broken down the first time I saw it might have been a bad omen.



That summer I got to ride the Earl Turner bus plenty. I still thought of it as lucky, but the actual experience was much more dubious. For starters, the inside of the Earl Turner bus was just like all the other buses: shabby wood paneling, cushy blue seats covered in illegible scribbles, grime cemented into every cranny. The advertisement that covered the windows in plastic sheeting was honeycombed with millions of pin-sized holes. Riders could see out, but all those holes made Elysian Fields look like a nineteenth century impressionist painting. If I stared out the window for long, I felt woozy.

Worse, I found myself spending more and more time on Elysian Fields waiting for late buses. More often than not, the Earl Turner was to blame. If the buses were off schedule and twenty people were piled up at the bus stop, I knew the Earl Turner bus was holding up the line. Inevitably, after I waited an hour in the sun, the Earl would rumble into view, airbrakes hissing like an aging dragon, while three regular buses straggled in behind.

Earl tried to pass off excuses. Something had gotten in the way. Cars broke down, people got into accidents in the claustrophobic French Quarter; maybe a girl went wild. He had some engine trouble. There was a funeral procession, a voodoo ritual, or chickens in the street. He said he was sorry, but his slick grin remained smug.

I reconsidered my hypothesis. Maybe the Earl Turner bus wasn't lucky at all. Maybe it was cursed, always to be late. Maybe the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority covered this albatross of the fleet in black sheets in accordance with some sinister design. Instead of dropping lucky gamblers off at the foot of Canal Street at Harrah's Casino, maybe the Earl

Turner bus was mischievous, purposefully making people late for appointments and leaving a thin layer of curse dust on them when they hopped out of its forsaken doors.



The only way to find out whether the Earl Turner bus was truly lucky or damned was to catch it and ride it until something happened. I wanted to pin it down. The Earl Turner bus probably attracted trouble like a magnet, and I had to see it for myself.

On a Friday afternoon in November, I sat on the grass near the bus shelter on the University of New Orleans campus. I had seen Earl Turner that morning on my way to work, so I knew he was out there, lurking.

Every fifteen minutes, like clockwork, a regular bus arrived, belched riders and took more in. The sun started to sink below the library and I began to worry that the Earl Turner bus had retired for the day. Then I saw its looming black form skulk onto campus.

Earl Turner smiled innocently from the side of the bus. I flashed the driver my five-dollar all day pass and settled into a seat right behind the back exit. Immediately, I could tell I chose the wrong seat. The setting sun was beating in on me, and the dry air from the heater made me feel sleepy. I couldn't see out the window because of the glare.

It was a Friday afternoon in New Orleans, so I expected the bus to be a rolling party. Instead, everyone was quiet and dozing, dreaming bus dreams. None of the riders looked cursed. I didn't see any vampire fangs or bloody bandages masking stigmata. The plastic sheeting of the ad didn't reflect anyone's image—mortal or otherwise. Everyone looked pretty regular. There were men dressed in restaurant black aprons and striped pants. Business casual women who worked at UNO chatted amicably in the front seats. A tall man carried a tiny baby and a Winnie-the-Pooh diaper bag in his long arms. In the back, I could hear someone singing, "Oh, love to

love you baby,” and then a gospel song. A man sat next to me. His black apron wrapped around something rectangular and book shaped. He held it the way a preacher holds a Bible. Was it the book of the dead, or a Tom Clancy novel?

The Earl Turner bus rumbled through the streets of New Orleans, from the wide flat lawns of UNO, through Gentilly’s middle class neighborhoods, past the shotgun houses that got more and more run-down the closer we got to the interstate. Iron fences and decorated yards turned to droopy porches and forsaken po’ boy stands.

Since the people on the bus didn’t seem nefarious, I watched for evil outdoors. The setting sun filtered through the pinhead dots and blinded me to the scenery. The houses were shadows glazed in sunlight. I hoped to see something, anything, that would prove my theory—a demonic child glaring at the bus, a voodoo crone cackling at her handiwork, but there was nothing. Staring through the dots made me feel dizzy. The Earl Turner bus bucked when it stopped, jerking my head back and forth. Somewhere on the bus a girl put on a sick smelling cherry lip-gloss. I cursed myself for forgetting my Dramamine. I had planned to ride the Earl Turner bus all night, but at this rate the motion sickness would drive me off.

I breathed deeply as the bus continued towards the river. We went under and then over the tangled loops of the interstate. People got on and off. A dilapidated antique store spilled furniture out open doors near a sunny, empty park. In the French Quarter, ancient shops lined the street like canyon walls. Bikes whizzed by, tourists ambled, signs shouted, “Lost Our Lease.” Happy tourists from Houston stood around Café du Monde and the mules sleepwalk-shuffled in front of Jackson Square. I knew those people were happy only because they couldn’t comprehend the evil that rumbled amongst them.

The Earl Turner bus heaved through the U-turns on Canal Street, the mighty casino at its foot. Harrah's rose out of the street like a giant mushroom blossoming after a flood—smooth, enormous, and otherworldly. I thought of getting off the bus, creeping through the halls of the smoky, clanging casino, until I found the dressing room of Earl Turner himself. I could wait outside, listening at the keyhole or peering through the crack. Maybe Earl Turner wasn't a lounge singer after all. Maybe he was an alien plotting to take over New Orleans, one comped steak dinner at a time. I imagined his horrible green tentacles wiggling and dancing before he slipped on his life-like rubber mask, his lighted make-up mirror actually a communication terminal with the mother ship. The aliens would be chuckling about the amazing brainwashing capabilities of the Earl Turner bus.



I'm a coward though. I didn't get off the bus. I kept my seat and waited for other manifestations of the Earl Turner's evil. But there was nothing. I did two laps. The driver eyeballed me through his review mirror. I was the creepiest thing on the bus that day, riding around and around, jotting furiously on a scrap of paper. Day turned to night, and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. No plague of locusts, no second-line parades of the damned, nothing that proved my hypothesis.

When the Earl Turner bus stopped at my transfer, I stepped off. As I waited to cross the street, I heard the words of a woman getting on the bus. "Earl Turner," she said. "I've been waiting for you, Earl." Everyone else liked the Earl Turner bus. Could it be that it was just a dressed up city bus without magical or mysterious properties? Was it all in my head? Maybe riding the bus gave my imagination too much free time.

I was the one who was cursed. Cursed to be an uptight person in an easygoing city; cursed because I craved order and organization when there was none to be had. I wanted to impose a system of order, even if it had to be a supernatural order. The Earl Turner bus wasn't lucky or unlucky. It was just a bus. Depending on public transportation in a city like New Orleans, however, can drive a sane person a little crazy.

TV Wedding

Of all the countless, trashy reality shows on television, reality wedding shows are my favorite. I watch them at every opportunity because they are outlandish and dramatic and silly. My daily life is average and sensible, so you can imagine how shocked I was when a reality show brushed dangerously close to the way I actually live. One December, my friend Martha called me from her home in Baltimore to tell me she was engaged. The engagement story was fantastic, everything she could have hoped for. Her boyfriend tricked her into taking the train into D.C., and at sunset, when they were alone at the Einstein memorial, Matt asked for Martha's hand in marriage. Then, not two weeks later, I watched an episode of "A Perfect Proposal" in which a young man takes his girlfriend on a scavenger hunt around D.C., including a stop at the Einstein Memorial, before proposing at the Watergate Hotel. Either an oversized statue of a cuddly scientific genius is romantic or reality television can actually imitate real life.

But what came first? Do reality show producers make television out of weddings because we, the viewing public, are already obsessed with nuptials and can be counted on to tune in? Or are we obsessed with weddings because we always see them on TV? Somewhere down the line weddings and television have gotten all tangled up, and the media has become a powerful tool in building our "wedding culture." TV weddings are fun to watch, but they also make it easy for viewers to get wrapped up in the fantasy of big, white weddings and forget reality.

I know this because all my personal wedding fantasies have been fashioned from the shows on The Learning Channel. I was in college when TLC shed its lifeless, educational programming and began dabbling in reality television, most successfully with "Trading Spaces." No more does TLC lecture on exotic, faraway topics, such as the enchanted Galapagos Islands or

the mating habits of the Least Weasel. TLC now instructs viewers, more basically, on how to live. The Learning Channel has made itself over as The Life Channel, and I can't tear myself away from the domestic drama.

If you watch enough TLC it becomes clear that an entire American life could be edited into its daytime line up. Since the life of my friend Martha already mirrors television, I will use her life as an example. Obviously, Martha will need a makeover. Martha likes to wear boring gray slacks, red or black button down shirts, and typically, terrible clunky black shoes. She has beautiful skin that doesn't need make-up, but I would like to see her try something a little more daring with her long blonde hair. She let me highlight it once, but overall she is pretty cautious when it comes to her appearance. All of these issues can be addressed when we get Martha on either "A Make-over Story" or "What Not to Wear." Cameras will follow her around, the producers will ask me about her style. Then she will get lots of new clothes, a hip new hairstyle, possibly even layers, and highlights and a nice party with all her friends.

TLC has a lot of dating shows such as "A Dating Story" and "Date Patrol," but Martha already has a guy. "Second Chance" is a show for people who have loved and lost and want to love that person again. I suppose I could always try to fix Martha up with the really sweet red-headed guy who had a crush on her in high school, but I have a feeling that things are going to work out fine with Martha's new fiancé, Matt.

Martha and Matt could have been on "Perfect Proposal" but that television couple stole their engagement story. So now they will need a televised wedding on either "A Wedding Story," or "For Better or For Worse." "A Wedding Story" is the longest running "A...Story" on TLC, and it has a theme song so sappy-sweet it virtually contains carbs. When the song rises over images of my friends dancing, smashing cake into each other's faces, and looking lovingly,

hopefully, into each other's eyes, I know I will weep: *And when the spark of youth may someday surrender I will have your hand to see me though. Years may come and go, but there's one thing I know. Love is all there is when I'm with you.*

Perfect.

Once wedded bliss is hers, I know Martha will want to start cranking out the babies. She can make an appearance on "A Baby Story," and when the kids are grown Martha and Matt can have their empty nest de-cluttered on "Clean Sweep." All that remains for Martha's TV life is a poignant and elegant elegy on "A Funeral Story."

I know Martha's televised life will be a success because weddings and marriages make popular television. In the 90's sit-coms and soap operas (you remember sit-coms, the fictitious equivalent of reality TV) boosted their ratings with a wedding episode. Everyone on TV gets married, from "Will & Grace" to "Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman." Oprah, never a bride but always engaged, sponsors a weeklong wedding fiesta on her daytime talk show. And in the world of reality television wedding shows are network darlings. Everyone from the "Bachelorettes in Alaska" to "My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé" is looking for love and matrimony. A wedding season finale is the secret hope of viewers when they tune in to "The Bachelor," "The Bachelorette," "Average Joe," "Joe Millionaire," "Bridezilla," "Whose Wedding is it Anyway," "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire" and "Who Wants to Marry my Dad?"

Aside from planning Martha's televised life, I also campaigned to be elected her maid of honor. The role of bridesmaid was as close as I could get to indulging my wedding fantasies without the burden of a life long commitment. My major competition was our mutual friend, the perfectly perfect, Heather. Heather is all of six lanky feet, with shiny chestnut hair and a 1,000 watt Julia Roberts smile. I may not be stunning, thrifty or sweet, but I do watch TV wedding

shows. All of that cultural knowledge prepared me for the rigors of a modern day wedding. My other asset was the fact that I purchased and perused, for Martha, of course, wedding magazines. I read the magazines, dog-eared the corners of pages advertising short wedding gowns, and mailed them off to the bride-to-be in Baltimore.

The chore may sound helpful, but honestly, I was dying for one of my friends to get married so I could read wedding magazines without scaring my boyfriend. Every man knows if a woman starts reading wedding magazines before she is engaged, she's crazy. And while that might be the case, wedding magazines are a necessary informational supplement for a little activity my friends call "The Wedding Fantasy Game." The game allows us to create and discuss the elaborate wedding celebrations of our imagination. To this day, if I find myself bored or lonely I consider the merits of a simple cocktail hour with appetizers versus a full-blown five-course reception feast.

I realize it sounds creepy and obsessive. I'm not sure I even want to get married, but the Wedding Fantasy Game clearly falls in line with the message our culture sends to young women from girlhood. Girls dress up like little brides when they are flower girls and at their first communions. They play with Wedding Barbie, and wear white pillowcases and their mother's pearls. Little girls watch Disney movies and all of their favorite characters get married, from Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* to Orlando Bloom, the blacksmith turned privateer, in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Bridal magazines are like Disney princess movies in print.

I went to visit Martha the spring following her engagement. In the airport I bought a *Martha Stewart's Weddings* and an *Elegant Bride*. I set them on the counter with a packet of gum. The cashier, roused herself from her boredom and asked, "When's the wedding?"

"Oh. It's not for me. It's my friend's wedding."

The cashier gave a disappointed sigh and handed me my change.

On the plane I flipped through the glossy, slightly perfumed pages. Whenever I flip through *Brides*, *Bride*, *Elegant Wedding*, and *Martha Stewart's Wedding*, a pink tide of romance washes over me. For a second I see my own wedding day, the happiest day of my life. I will look perfect. I will be the center of attention. My family will look on, teary eyed, with pride and joy. I will finally be able to relax because I hooked the man of my dreams. Who couldn't use one perfect, Disney World, magical, princess day?

"Would you like something to drink?" the flight attendant asked. I shook myself out the dream and tried to remember that I was helping Martha. Bridal magazines are 97% ads and 3% articles. Because the readership turnover for bridal magazines is so quick, the magazines just recycle their articles every nine months or so, but I wasn't reading for the articles. Every time I found a dress I liked, I folded the corner of the page and looked up the salon listing in Baltimore. The Betsy Robinson Salon each perfect dress whispered to me, and that is where I would make Martha go.

Though magazines don't state the idea outright, the more time you spend in wedding land the clearer it becomes that what makes a wedding day special is money, copious, disgusting amounts of money. The woman, her fiancé, and their families spend more money on the wedding celebration than on any other single day in their adult lives, unless, of course, the couple decides to divorce and marry again. Weddings are marketed as the great white hope, the finale. Women can justify spending so much on their weddings because they believe it will be the happiest day of their lives. Why not mortgage the farm? But if that is the case, why bother with all the other days afterwards? After the big white dress is packed away and all the personalized cocktail napkins are used, is every day to follow a disappointment?

My first day in Baltimore, at 3:30 PM, Martha and I found our way to the softly lit cove of The Betsy Robinson Wedding Salon. My mission in Baltimore was to eat lots of crab cakes, drink lots of beer, and make Martha try on lots of wedding gowns. Martha decided that she wanted a short wedding dress, tea length as she described it. But Martha's mother wasn't about to let her only daughter get away with a casual wedding if she could help it. I was given specific instructions to make Martha try on lots of different styles of wedding gowns.

The Betsy Robinson Salon was all cream colors, tasteful and butter smooth, like the inside of a seashell. Rows of dresses under plastic bags sparkled and gleamed. Pretty blonde girls disappeared into the back wearing jeans, and returned, to the delight of their mothers, as beautiful fairy princesses. Girls in gowns were perched on platforms, while their friends and the salesladies cooed and admired and plucked at them. Martha looked nervous.

The saleslady assigned to us was Maryanne, a middle aged, Baltimore gal with frosted tips. She took to us like a pushy auntie. After we put our coats in the dressing room, Maryanne sat Martha down to discuss her vision for the wedding. Poor Martha. She's a shy, quiet girl, who is not so much lazy as decidedly nonplussed about the major events of her life. There we were, the apathetic bride and her over zealous maid of honor. Martha said she wasn't really sure about her vision, but she was thinking about something casual and maybe a short dress.

Maryanne furrowed her brow very seriously for a moment and then said, "Honey, this is going to sound bossy, but I know what I am talking about because I listen to my brides. A lot of brides come in here saying they want a casual wedding and then end up regretting it. We don't have any formal events left in the United States." She looked to me for back up and I nodded. With the demise of coming out parties and formal nights at the opera, American women have been virtually stripped of the opportunity to wear satin and elbow length gloves. She told

Martha that her wedding would be the only day in her life that she would be able to wear a ball gown and make a big to-do over herself. Maryanne implied, not so subtly, that if Martha decided to have a small wedding with a short dress she would never be able to forgive herself for skimping.

“Now, what is your price range for dresses?” Maryanne asked.

I knew the J. Crew dress Martha was eyeing was priced at \$158 plus shipping. Even if she changed her mind and decided to go for the big dress, both of us knew Betsy Robinson was out of her price range. So Martha made a shrewd move that I love her for. She hesitated.

Maryanne popped in with, “Let me tell you about the range of dress we have here. They start at around fifteen hundred and go up to around six thousand.”

Martha lied, “I think I was planning to spend around two thousand.” Maryanne didn’t seem bothered by this low number and she showed us into a nook with the gowns. “You just tell me if you see anything you like,” she told us. We pointed to simple dresses. I loved a champagne colored dress and insisted we try it on, even though it was above the price range. “You have good taste,” Maryanne flattered. I glowed. When Maryanne was an abominable snowwoman of satin, taffeta and beads, she shooed us to the dressing room.

As it became clear to me at Betsy’s, getting married is no longer get a man, get a blood test, get a priest. Now the motto of any newly engaged couple must be get a wedding consultant, get a Platinum card and get a second job. Weddings are averaging around \$20,000. *Dollar Sense* magazine claims that a wedding is one of the largest expenses a person will face.* * The magazine recommends parents and couples set aside ten to twenty percent of every paycheck towards wedding expenses once the engagement is announced.

* * Overby, Stephanie. “The Parents of the Bride.” *Dollar Sense*, Spring 2000, p. 8.

Earlier in the year, Martha was already worried about the money she would spend on her wedding. “It is all about consumerism,” she told me over the phone. “I was looking on the Internet the other day and I saw personalized altar candles. Altar candles? Who ever thought about buying an altar candle?” Planning the average wedding, it seems, requires that every detail be accounted for and personalized. But the way women personalize is simply monogramming their initials on an event that is pretty much the same for everyone. A bride picks the color and style of her bridesmaids’ dresses, but she will probably never question the purpose of bridesmaids. The couple chooses chicken or fish, band or DJ, afternoon or evening ceremony, open bar or closed, but when it comes down to the big day, all weddings are pretty much the same event different color scheme.

I was excited for Martha’s wedding because I saw it as a chance for her to finally turn her version of the Wedding Fantasy Game into wedding fantasy reality. But once the ring was on her finger (and it wasn’t the ring we discussed all those years) the way Martha saw her wedding changed. Before Matt, Martha created a fabulous destination wedding to England, marrying preferably Prince William, but any handsome, wealthy Englishman would do. She would be married in a formal garden. She would fly all her friends and relatives over. She would also pay to have her favorite restaurant in Des Moines come to England to prepare and cater the rehearsal dinner.

But when I asked her if it was fun actually planning her wedding and spending all that money on herself she replied, “I liked it before when I could plan the perfect wedding, but now everything has a cost.” Instead of a ceremony in an English garden, Martha is to be married on the Iowa State University campus. The student union has a catering service. No fountain of champagne in crystal glasses, only a keg of Miller Lite and inexpensive Australian wines. Yet,

the diminishment doesn't seem to bother Martha. Clearly, she's happy to be marrying Matt and she will settle for less than the ultimate dream wedding. I think this is a typical situation for brides-to-be. Their weddings don't have to be perfect. They have a budget, they make sacrifices, but they still have a wedding.

And they still have a wedding dress. Chrys Ingraham author of *White Weddings*, argues that a bride's gown is the most important part of her wedding: "Industry analysts have noted that most brides would do without many things to plan a wedding and stay within budget, but they would not scrimp when it comes to the purchase of the wedding gown. With the national average expenditure at \$823 for the gown and \$199 for the veil, the bride's appearance becomes the centerpiece of the white wedding." For many women, the wedding gown is the most expensive piece of clothing they will ever own, and it will reign over their closet in a mothproof plastic bag, dreaming of being worn again. The gown and the way the gown makes the bride look remind everyone involved that this wedding is a small fairy tale.

Back at Betsy Robinson, I found myself in the dressing room with Martha and Maryanne. The dressing room was about twelve foot square, with two Louis the 14th chairs, a mirrored wall, and a large carpeted platform in the center.

"Do you have a strapless bra?" Maryanne asked. Martha produced one she had purchased that morning, a simple bandeau.

To this Maryanne replied, "I hate that bra, let me tell you why, it makes you look like a nun, like you have none. Ha!" She nudged me and winked. "What size are you?" She ran out the door. When she returned she had a lacy, corset type bra with padding and a low back. Maryanne helped Martha into it. Martha didn't realize she was going to be literally dressed. She

was nervous being in her panties with this strange, forward lady, so every time she took a dress off, my job was to help her into the shielding robe.

Maryanne unsheathed a dress, found the hollow part in the middle and held it up for Martha. “Hands together over your head, like you are diving into a pool,” she ordered, and for a moment, Martha disappeared under a wave of meringue. Some dresses looked better than others. The Carolyn Basset dress didn’t work, neither did the mini-dress with flowers, but Martha did look lovely in the giant, cupcake dresses. White is a difficult color to wear, but it made Martha’s silky, pale complexion radiant.

Finally, Martha tried on an “it’s the one dress.” It was the champagne colored gown I had insisted on. It was strapless, with five or six layers of petticoats underneath, with a taupe colored sash around the middle. A hush fell over the dressing room. Even Maryanne was speechless. The dress was perfect. Maryanne fetched a veil, and the three of us marched down the aisle of dressing rooms into the main area so Martha could see herself from every angle—front long, front short, side, back etc. Other women, not in dresses, stared at Martha, whispered to each other about how beautiful she looked, about how they would look even more beautiful, but they knew it wasn’t true. Martha was the most beautiful bride in the room. Maryanne beamed. With a gleam in her eye, she told Martha, “Brides ask me, how do I choose a dress? I love them all. And I tell them, well, honey, you picked a groom didn’t you? Honey, this is the one.”

I watched Martha in the mirror, as she swished back and forth as if she were a bell. I got misty. She was so beautiful, transformed from my jeans and cardigan roommate to an angel, swathed in heavenly light. The vision was complete. And for a second we weren’t just playing around at Betsy Robinson Salon anymore.

The demand for the perfect sequin-encrusted wedding dress and other essentials makes the wedding industry “recession proof.” Even as the economy falters and unemployment rises, couples and their families are still willing to shell out thousands of dollars for a wedding. I see it all the time. My favorite Sunday morning activity is to flip through the newspaper, past the headlines about casualties in Iraq and lay offs to the wedding announcements. The most telling part of the announcement is the honeymoon. If the couple is going to Mexico, Hawaii or the Caribbean, they have money. If they are taking a wedding trip to Houston or a National Park they probably don’t, and the worst possible scenario is a delayed honeymoon. What baffles me, though, is that with thousands of people out of work and a cloudy economic forecast, most couples manage to have an expensive get-away and an expensive wedding. Nothing can stop or even slow the pace at which Americans get married. We believe that weddings can bring hope and joy, and because of that they are worth the financial burden, no matter the cultural or economic situation.

Martha and I waited for Matt to pick us up in the parking lot. While we were busy at Betsy’s, he was test-driving family sedans. In the chilly Baltimore wind, Martha started wondering aloud about her wedding. “Maybe I should have a big wedding,” she mused. “Maybe I should get the big dress.” The charm of her sweet little wedding was fading fast. For the past hour and a half, Maryanne had been pouring honey into our ears. Swaddled in a fourteen thousand dollar Vera Wang gown, marching down an aisle strewn with pink lilies and roses, toward the man who gave her an apple size sparkling diamond is an image even the most cynical girl could get lost in. The perfect wedding, and all its trappings, can psychologically house a woman for months after it’s over. June brides find themselves giving framed wedding photos as Christmas gifts.

I remember discussing marriage with my mom. I told her that I didn't really see the point of getting married, that if you love someone you shouldn't need a legal contract to stay with him. My mother, whose personal philosophy towards marriage is the third time's a charm, replied, "Get married at least for the gifts."

As much as I wanted to live vicariously through Martha and see her doused in big wedding hoopla, I knew I had to shake us both out of the dream. I told her, "Martha, they tell you that you have to have a big wedding because that is how they make money. Their business is built making people want big weddings. That doesn't mean you have to." I knew a big wedding would mean a sacrifice in many things that Martha finds important. Matt is in a Master's program right now, Martha wants to start a Ph.D. program in Psychology. Expensive gowns and five course receptions would make it harder for them to have children right away. They are just a young couple starting out, and a wedding is just one day in their long life together. Martha agreed.

The problem with weddings in the media is that they are all about the bling, but not so much about marriage. Take for example, another reality show, "The Newlyweds." Pop stars Jessica Simpson and Nick Leshay televised their fairy tale wedding. They spent gobs of money. Simpson even wrote a book on wedding planning, but if you watch "The Newlyweds," you see that no matter how good the bride looked in her dress, marriage is not the same as getting married. The media doesn't show us that no matter how much a wedding costs, it is only one day in a life-long love story.

I can't deny that I love to watch couples through every step of the wedding process. Part of me longs for the big wedding, longs for the comforting obsession of planning a wedding. But on television no one has to do the taxes or walk the dog in the rain. The toilet never breaks and

the ceiling never leaks. Part of me wants to snuggle into the idea of a reality TV wedding because it ignores the realities of marriage. People who plan to spend the rest of their lives together have to care about more than taffeta versus lace, fondant versus butter-cream. As beguiling as it is to devote one's life to planning a wedding, it can't be a retreat from the kind of serious consideration couples must give to the rest of their lives. And, unfortunately, that doesn't make for good television.

Sleeping Together

The morning after, my roommate told me she thought no one in the house was going to wake up alive. She was being a little dramatic, but I will say that I have never been so afraid of a person I loved as I was that night.

My boyfriend and I were having our nightly sleep over in my rickety old house on South Governor Street in Iowa City. Officially, and as far as our parents knew, I shared the house with three other girls, but unofficially I also shared it with their boyfriends and mine. Mike preferred to sleep at his apartment, but I had had enough of his smelly bachelor pad. My place was clean and quiet, and I had a bigger bed.

We fell asleep as we normally did. I rested my head on the pillows, but then Mike gently bounced his elbow on the top of my head signaling that he wanted to put his arm under my neck. I rolled over onto his chest and dozed off, drooling ever so slightly. As usual, Mike's arm went numb after a couple hours. He quietly removed it and we both rolled on to our sides in opposite directions.

A few years after this happened Mike told me that before he went to sleep that night he was thinking about our relationship. He was graduating that winter and he was considering whether or not I was the right girl for him. Maybe the two of us should go our separate ways, he wondered. I didn't know about any of this when I turned over, half asleep, and gently touched his arm. At the very same moment, Mike was having a dream that an evil female spirit was coming towards him, attacking him, seeking to suck out his soul. When I touched him, his dream interacted with reality.

A muffled yell woke me up. Mike, silhouetted in the light, stood by the open door in only his white underwear. He was yelling, "No! No!" He was running out of the room, but he

stopped at the bedroom door to reassess the situation. The monster he thought I was sat up in bed, still dazed and asked, “Mike?”

At the sound of his name, Mike, terrified, took off. He tumbled around the corner in the staircase. When I got to the doorway, he was skidding down the bottom half of the steps on his backside. I panicked and yelled his name, “Mike! Mike!” Then it was quiet. It might have been my yelling, or the fall, but Mike woke up.

“Lauren?” From the darkness on the first floor I heard a frightened whisper, “Lauren?”

“Mike? Mike, it’s okay.” I tried to make my voice sound soothing, but I was shivering and crying. As my brain woke it started asking questions: Why is he running out of the house in the middle of the night? Where is he going? What did I do?

Then I saw Mike slowly climbed the stairs back towards my room. “Lauren?”

On the landing we looked each other over. Usually, when something scary happened, I ran to Mike and buried my head in his chest. His smell enveloped me, made me calm. Tonight, though, familiar old Mike was what I was afraid of. As much as I wanted to go to him, I was scared he might ring my neck, or punch me in the face, or push me down. Maybe he had gone crazy, or he was still dreaming. For a second, he was both himself and someone else. I could sense he felt the same way about me. Suddenly, the person we each sought comfort in was the one who frightened us in the first place.

Finally, in an act of mutual bravery, we came together and hugged. We had to. There was no one else. All we had was a half familiar stranger to hang on to in the lonely hours. We cried a little, then crawled back into bed and waited until the next day for explanations.

Mike left early in the morning for work. When I went downstairs Merideth, my roommate, told me that she found the front door half open. In his panic Mike got the old-

fashioned lock open. If he hadn't awakened from his nightmare, he might have dashed out into the night, crystallized snow crackling under his warm bare feet, brutal December middle-of-the-night cold punishing his delicate skin. How far would he have gotten? No one would have stopped him. The citizens of Iowa City, accustomed to the antics of college students, wouldn't have been surprised to see an almost naked man running down the street.

When I saw Mike that evening, we giggled nervously about what happened. I explained to him my take on the situation, and he asked me not to tell my roommates about it. He was embarrassed. When he got undressed for bed that night we found scabs and carpet burn all over his hands, his back, and his legs. He had bruises from where he fell against the wall. He didn't remember getting them.

Since that night, I have been cautious sleeping with Mike. I'm sensitive to his every toss and turn, his mumbles and breathing. I study his sleep patterns like a textbook.

I already knew, before his sleepwalk, that sleeping in the same bed with Mike was dangerous. Once he rolled over and pushed me off the side of his tiny little twin. I woke up in piles of books and clothes. One night he hit me so hard I started to cry. He woke up enough to ask what happened. I told him then he mumbled, "Shut up," and rolled over. The next morning he didn't remember anything. Worse, he once dreamed that his brother was making him fight a bear. Enraged, he tried to slug his brother and hit me instead. I got a black eye.

I teased Mike about beating me up in his sleep, because he was so gentle when he was conscious. I joked that this was the only way he could take out his anger towards me without getting in trouble with the law. He had found an alibi for wife beaters.

In addition to the occasional violence, Mike talks in his sleep. When he is awake he is quiet and polite. He hardly says anything, let alone anything vulgar or mean, but at night,

occasionally, I will wake up and hear him letting out a torrent of curse words. The sounds come out fast and low, under his breath: “motherfuckerasswhorebitchslut...” When he starts cursing, I slink as far as I can to my side of the bed, and then gingerly poke him in the arm. “Mike,” I whisper hesitantly. “Mike, you’re having a dream.” He mumbles and rolls over. In the morning I tell him he was cursing the night before. He laughs, but he doesn’t ever remember having anything to curse about. He blames the swearing to pent up frustration from the beatings his brother used to give him when they were kids.

I know I scare Mike too. One night, for no reason, I was convinced the dog was dead. I reached down and shook his furry body. I couldn’t feel him breathing and he didn’t stir. “Mike,” I cried, “there is something wrong with the dog.” Mike bolted out of sleep and picked up the surprised animal from the foot of the bed and found him very much alive.

Sometimes, at a party or a bar, I have a little too much fun. When I stumble in at all hours of the morning, I bring the bathroom trashcan to the bedside “just in case.” Mike’s scared I drink too much.

I never call, no matter how late I am going to be. I am too busy having fun to stop and find a pay phone, and poor Mike has to go to bed with his worries. He hates going to sleep by himself and he complains bitterly that I go out too much and that I stay out too late. “You have already gone out four nights this week,” he harps, and this only makes me want to go out again the next night. His worries make me want to give him cause to worry, make me want to rebel, make me want to steal into the night in search of more adventures beyond the sedentary comforts of bed.

There was once a time when we never went to bed without resolving fights, but now, five years in, all the safety valves are off. I scream and hurl insults, he sulks and jabs with his words,

and just as soon as we are both exhausted from arguing, I go a step too far, deal the deathblow. When I storm out of the house, or when he storms out of the house, we are both aware that the other might never come back, that this fight, over Swedish meatballs or whatever, might be the last conversation we ever have. I can always tell when I have gone too far because I wake up cold and alone in the bed. Mike takes all the blankets with him to the love seat. I lie awake in the dark, because I find it hard to sleep without his body next to mine, knowing that he is catching on. He is figuring out what a horrible, nasty person I am, and soon he will come to his senses and leave.

Mike always says that he is going to get on a “sleep schedule.” He means that he will get up at a decent hour even on his days off, and go to sleep at a decent hour, no matter what. But the night before his day off he will always stay up too late watching kung fu, and when it is time to get up in the morning, he stays in bed, two, three hours longer than he intended. He is always setting up little goals and then letting them fall apart. I am afraid that Mike will never become the person that he wants to be. I am afraid that he will never be able to love me if he can’t ever be happy with himself.

Before Mike and I started sharing a bed I used to sleep through the whole night. I woke up eight hours later from a thick, rich blanket of sleep. Sleep was simply unplugging and recharging my body. Now I sleep lightly. Mike’s movements wake me and then I fall asleep again. He can be so rowdy when he gets up in the night to use the bathroom, tossing off the covers, stumbling to his feet, flipping on lights, flushing toilets, and then flopping back into bed. It takes him forever to settle in, like a dog he circles and fluffs the pillows and shuffles side to side before finally hunkering down. There is no point to going to bed before him. Even though he knows I’m trying to sleep, he asks me banal questions while he is getting ready for bed. He

rouses me if my snoring bothers him. The process of waking and trying to get back to sleep, of resting then subtracting hours off my alarm clock until the time I have to wake up means that I do not sleep as I once did.

But sleeping together signifies that we are comfortable enough with each other that we can be restful and vulnerable. There is something almost hypnotic about falling asleep with one person night after night. Every evening Mike is the last thing my senses are aware of before they are tugged into the ebb and flow of R.E.M. Even if I cannot fall asleep, if my mind is still too busy sorting through the inbox of the day, I feel as if I can draw some thread of rest out of my sleeping partner.

I find that sleeping with Mike is just like every other part of my relationship with Mike. Sleeping with him can be scary. Just as he has the capacity to love me more deeply than any other person, he also has the capability to terrorize me more than any other. Intimacy means letting another person inside far enough to love, but once he's in there he can frighten and wound me. Relationships are tentative dances between loving and fearing a person, needing him and the vulnerability that comes with needing, a sleepwalk between comfort and anxiety. Loving Mike is no dream come true. I sleep with one eye open, but I sleep.

On Becoming My Mom

I first noticed I was becoming my mom one day when I found myself sincerely pissed off about the dishwasher. My boyfriend, once again, had put the little plates where the bowls should go, backwards. The dinner plates were toppled all over each other, and the cups were jammed in too tightly between the white, rubberized tines to get clean. One of my good redwood spoons was lying next to the plastic ones, when it should have been hand washed, and I could just tell that the measuring cups would get flipped cup-side up during the cycle and become filled with disgusting dishwasher sediment.

I have a friend who accuses me of making up arbitrary rules where none exist, and I'll admit, I do so with the dishwasher. But I just know that if the dishes are put in the wrong way they won't get really clean. And if I put them away, I'll have to hand wash the crust left on plates that didn't get fully exposed to the suds, and if Mike puts them away, he'll just put them away dirty. Incorrect dish placement only leads to more work for me.

Of course, I've explained all of this to Mike. I explained calmly. I explained with humor. I considered drawing a diagram, but the impassive Mike will not be bullied into doing the dishes my way. And I realized, one day, as I was shouting and he was quietly reading his book and ignoring me, that not too long ago, I was the one doing the ignoring while my mom shouted.

My mother, to this day, gets furious about housework, but her favorite subject to holler about is the dishes. The dishwasher needs to be unloaded. There are dirty dishes on the counter. Someone put the dishes away in the wrong places. The hand-wash-only pans were put in the dishwasher, and, of course, the dishwasher was loaded incorrectly.

I remember once, when I was about eight or nine, my mom calling me into the kitchen.

She was sitting on the linoleum floor with pots and pans spread all around her. Her entire head was inside a dark, empty cabinet, excavating. “Do you remember,” she asked, “when you were in kindergarten and you learned about stacking?”

“Yeah,” I answered. As a child, I had very particular imaginary fantasy visions of myself, based largely on the sit-coms. I imagined this moment would be just like *Full House* and we were about to reminisce together about how bright and precocious I was as a small child.

She pulled her head out of the cabinet, looked me dead in the eye and snarled, “Then why the hell can’t you put the dishes away right?” I went back to my room to ignore her.

The evolution of my feelings towards the dishes has been geologically slow. When I lived at home, I did the dishes in a hasty, half-ass way because my mom was barking at me. In college my roommates and I stacked heaps of dirty dishes on the counter, on the stove and the table, even on the kitchen floor. It wasn’t until my senior year that I made an effort to wash the dishes and keep my apartment tidy, but even then my chores were an issue I only thought of when I wasn’t too busy with studying or boozing or watching re-runs of *Sex and the City*.

My position changed when I moved to New Orleans with my boyfriend. I feared the dreaded cockroach. Pests, kept at bay in colder climates, were rallying around the perimeter of my kitchen, waiting for one Easy Mac smeared bowl to be left unguarded. Mike, my boyfriend and new roommate, did not have a reputation for being an excellent housekeeper. The kitchen of his old apartment looked as if it belonged to a serial killer. I nicknamed it the “gateway to hell.” In New Orleans, I worried that if I wasn’t vigilant with bleach and broom my little apartment would be overrun with vermin. Those worries turned into a minor obsession. Now, five years since I moved out of my mother’s house, I am filled with the same irrational, seething rage she

once had in the kitchen. In my form, I see her pacing furiously back and forth, slamming cabinet doors and cracking plates, spitting and screaming at the unmoved person in the other room.

Besides the dishes, there are other, less noticeable, characteristics I have taken from my mother. For example, my mother never calls anyone. She loves her family, her brother and sister, but she never calls them. They live in Illinois. Mom lives in Iowa. It's about a five-hour drive, but she only sees them once or twice a year. She knows their birthdays. She mentions them at the dinner table: "Oh, it's Barb's birthday. I should call her." I know she wants to talk to them on Christmas and Easter, but she never calls. Last year my aunt had surgery and my uncle had a minor heart attack; still my mother didn't call. She doesn't call me either. I learn family news through emails from my nineteen-year-old cousin who lives in Peoria.

I hate that I always have to call my mom, so I tried to be different. I worked hard to keep up with my family and friends. I made phone calls and wrote letters. In my day planner I kept track of who I called and when so I would know when to call them again, no more than two weeks later. But now I find myself beginning most of my phone calls with, "Hey, I've been meaning to call you."

Not only does my mother not telephone her family, she actually prefers, most of the time, not to be called. Her attitude is, I know you'll call if something is wrong, otherwise don't bother. Once, in high school, I called home around midnight to let her know I was running late for curfew. Many mothers are wracked with worry when their teenagers are running late. I could have wrapped my car around a telephone poll or been drugged at a party and kidnapped into white slavery, but in the face of teenage tragedy, my mother remained unconcerned. When I called, she had been asleep for hours. I explained the situation, she mumbled, "Fine," and then hung up on me. The next morning she asked me not to call anymore.

Without realizing it, I appropriated her need-to-know attitude. In college I went to North Carolina for spring break with some friends. I was having a great time and I didn't get a chance to call my boyfriend. When I got home, he was angry and asked, "Why didn't you call? I've been worried about you." It wasn't until I saw how angry he was that I realized what I hadn't been doing. My mother's habits, even though they annoy me, are sneaking in without my noticing.

My boyfriend, like all significant others, bore the brunt of my maternal evolution. Mike suffered under the tyranny of my mother's *de facto* housekeeping rules. And it's his problem that, just like my mom, I never have any cash. She never kept cash so she always had a good excuse never to give me any. "Sorry, babe," I say to Mike when we are in line at the movies. "I'd like to pay, but I don't have any cash." Mike just sighs and digs out his wallet. My mother is also a freak about cookie batter. She scraped the beaters down to the molecular level before passing them off for me to lick clean. The first time I made cookies with Mike I did the same thing. That's how it's done. He was so mad about that cookie batter he didn't speak me for the rest of the night.

I notice my mother not only in my habits, but also in small gestures. I strike up conversations with unsuspecting strangers on airplanes or waiting in lines. Recently, I saw myself crinkling my lips and tipping my chin down to my collarbone, an exact replica of my mom's disbelieving look. I peer at people sardonically over the rims of my glasses. Out of my mouth comes mom's single, almost cartoonish, "ha," that serves as a laugh. When my mom wants to seem insightful, she says just one word that pertains to the conversation and then nods knowingly. Recently, I was at a bar, talking with some high school friends, when something like, "Romania," came out of my mouth and my mother's nod rocked my head sagaciously.

I always hated that one word-nod thing. I felt my mom wasn't explaining herself, that she confused people. It seemed as if she only gave the nod when she was on the edge of a conversation and didn't completely understand, as if the nod made her seem more knowledgeable. When she gave a nod like that I felt she was embarrassing herself, but probably no one noticed but me. And no one notices mom's gestures that come out of me. Still, whenever they happen, I feel a hard pit drop in my stomach. "Oh my God," I think, "I'm turning into my mother."

I'm not sure why this transformation surprises me. I noticed my mom turning into her own mother long before I ever saw any changes in myself. There were little things. They made strawberry shortcake the same way, with Bisquik and homemade whipped cream. My grandmother taught high school home economics and my mom is a dedicated quilter. My grandfather hated leftovers. He wouldn't eat them. My grandmother had a knack for making exactly enough food for everyone to leave the table full. Mom always complained that her children never ate leftovers while she cleaned out moldy Tupperware. Without noticing, I think, my mother's response was to be like her mother, but instead of making just enough, she began making too little. When I was growing up there was hardly a night when my stepfather and brothers didn't eat two or three bowls of cereal after dinner. Sometimes when I look in my own refrigerator, without thinking about the lineage of cooks before me, I begin to grumble about all the leftovers Mike refuses to eat.

Once, when my family was visiting my grandparents in Florida, I saw my mom and stepfather get scolded like children. I was about fourteen. My parents took all the kids on a day trip to the beach. After a day on the coast, my parents decided that instead of driving straight home they would swing by a special ice cream parlor in Orlando. My parents are never

spontaneous, and it was exciting to see them busting loose and having fun. The whole family laughed and joked over ice cream in the old-timey parlor and everyone felt happy.

Back at my grandparents' retirement community, when my brothers and sisters were tucked into sleeping bags in the spare bedroom, my grandparents sat my mom and stepfather down on the sofa. I watched from the darkened hallway. My grandfather was furious. "Why didn't you call," he yelled. "We thought you had an accident." Every time my parents tried to reply, they were shouted down for interrupting. My grandparents lectured them about responsibility and respect. My mom just sat there quietly, head down, staring at the floor. Was she thinking her parents were crazy? Was she trying to ignore them? In that moment age and generation didn't matter anymore, it could have been me sitting there being yelled at by my mom, or my grandmother being lectured by her mother seventy years before. Somehow it felt as if we weren't our own people anymore, just revisions of our parents, improving and changing in little ways, but remaining the same in essentials.

Everyone worries about becoming her mother. Mike and I, during our nastiest fights, sometimes threw a "you're just like your mother" into the ring. We meant it in the worst possible way. It's hard on people to turn into their parents. Our parents are often the people who make us the angriest and drive us the craziest. They know how to get under our skins, and it seems, that while they are down there, they deposit a bit of themselves, which grows and thrives no matter how hard we try to smother it. I am able to parrot my mother's most annoying ticks because they are the ones I studied the closest so I could avoid them when I grew up.

I wish the parts of my mother that I admire came as easily to me as the ones that infuriate me. When I compare myself to my mother's good qualities, it is easy to see how much I am lacking. I know I don't have her determination or her strength. I want her quirky sense of

humor and the way she can giggle so hard her eyes tear up. I want her quiet, comfortable life. Every day she lives closer to the way she wants. My mother acknowledges that she has made mistakes in life, but she doesn't allow past regrets to keep her from being a good person in the present, and I wish I could inherit that.

As a teenager, I vowed to rebel against my mother's looks and habits and opinions. Instead, I've turned out more like her than I ever anticipated, both in appearance and in gesture. The things about her that I hated the most are so much a part of me now that there is no way I can split myself from them without doing damage to both my mother and my self.

As my mother grows older, she looks more and more like my grandmother. More than her mother's gray hair, mom has the same delicate, crumpled skin around sad eyes. She has the same laugh lines around the same impish smile. My mother's body now emits the same earthy-mothball scent I used to love in my grandmother. Maybe I am confusing the two, blending their faces in my mind. But I know that buried in my mom is my beloved grandmother. In myself, I keep my own mother close even when we are not together. I may not have imbibed her most charming characteristics, but without her odd and annoying quirks, I wouldn't be in possession of my mother's essential self.

I can't ever see myself losing my irrational anger about the dishwasher. Sloppy loading simply fills me with wrath. As I stand over the racks, rearranging plates and spoons, hollering into the next room, I realize that I don't just want things done my way, I want them done my mom's way. I will always have her righteous anger, and I find that fact strangely comforting.

A Story for Sarah

Last March my friend Sarah came to visit me in New Orleans. Except for my parents, Sarah was the first visitor to my new apartment, and I was going to practice my skills as the very best New Orleans tour guide and hostess on her. I trotted her around the cemeteries. I personally narrated her walking tour of the Garden District. I made her ride the tourist-infested streetcar twice. But the fun of New Orleans was lost on Sarah. The city wasn't her style. Sarah liked to go to bed early. Alcohol made her grumpy, and the only restaurant she wanted to eat at was Copeland's Cheesecake Bistro on St. Charles Avenue. She really loved cheesecake. She saw the restaurant sign when we were on the streetcar. As for the rest of the Big Easy Sarah was unimpressed.

On the second to last day of her visit I was taking Sarah on a forced march through the French Quarter. Usually when I rat around the Quarter, I pop into shops and make wise cracks about the tacky crap and then stop in at some dive for a beer. I have always toured with my friends this way, so I thought that was what Sarah would like. Sarah wasn't going for it. She looked bored. When I finally asked what she wanted to do with the afternoon, and she replied, "Would it be bad of me if I just wanted to go back to the apartment and watch *Sex and the City*?"

Some tourists might consider it a waste to wile away their vacations with Sarah Jessica Parker on DVD, but my Sarah had just slugged her way through her first year and a half of medical school, so while I was trying to make her vacation exciting and entertaining, she was more interested in rest and relaxation. I guess our opposite idea of what makes a well-spent vacation was just one of the many differences between us.

In my apartment, I closed the mini-blinds against glare of the afternoon sun. Sarah and I made a nest of pillows on the sofa. She munched on Cheez-Nips and drank cans of Diet

Mountain Dew. As Sarah shot-gunned her way through the first season of *Sex and the City*, I distractedly flipped through essays for my graduate writing workshop that night. In the subterranean dim of the living room I watched my friend watching television. The flashing of the television bounced around in her zoned-out eyes, her blonde hair was tinted purple by the light of the screen, and I thought about how strange that the two of us, who have always been so different, were sitting there, together, a thousand miles from where we met.

I don't really remember meeting Sarah, but I remember the circumstances that surrounded our acquaintance. Freshmen year at the University of Iowa, Sarah lived across from the elevators and in between my room and the hall bathroom. All the gals on the hall left their doors open when they were home, and since Sarah lived right across from the two most important places on the floor I saw her a lot. Usually she was at her desk studying or reading on her bed. Her room was bleak and empty like a boy's dorm room, and she never invited me in.

Sarah had average, small town good looks, but she wasn't striking. She was short: at five-one, even shorter than me. She complained about the size of her ass, but in reality she was petite. She had white-blond hair that looked as if it came out of a bottle and bright blue eyes in a pretty face.

Sarah lived with a skanked-up psychology major from Louisiana. The roommate had mousy brown hair and pale blotchy skin that she liked to accentuate with black vinyl clothes. Roomie was really short, less than five feet, but she insisted on wearing come-fuck-me boots in the daylight. I guess she was trying to cultivate a persona—we all were—and hers was of the “whorish over achiever from exotic and wild New Orleans.” I found out later she was actually from a town outside of New Orleans, someplace significantly less intriguing, like Sliddell or Boutte.

At first I thought the roommate was kind of cool. When her dad Fed-Exed her a mess of seafood, she spread newspapers on her dorm room floor and let all the Iowa girls tear into crabs and shrimp and crawfish. The seafood was amazing, and the event of ripping into red-hot little marine creatures might have been the first in a chain of experiences that moved me to New Orleans. But after we demolished every tasty morsel, and threw all the heads and shells into the garbage closet, the smell remained. Every time I had to use the can or take a shower, I walked through an invisible cloud of smell reminiscent of a dumpster at Long John Silver's. I associated that smell with Sarah's roommate. If it hadn't been for the stench, I might be friends with the roommate now and not Sarah.

Of course, I thought Sarah was a little skanky too, not because of what she wore, but because of something she said. At one point we were sitting around gabbing, and Sarah related a minor interaction between herself and her roommate. The skanked-up roommate was sort of dating this waif-looking dude from the sixth floor and the roommate had been agonizing about how to keep the guy interested. Sarah told her point blank: "Why don't you just sleep with him?" as if just sleeping with a guy was not such a big deal. From then on Sarah was suspect. Only a hoe could be so blasé about S. E. X.; I mean, this was the state of Iowa and we lived in the Honors dorm. Sex, and when to first have it, seemed like a big deal. It was not a decision to toss aside lightly; it was meant to be analyzed and critiqued and reviewed in the same stringent way we analyzed Shakespeare and Freud and limestone in our courses. But Sarah, the girl down the hall, had been *there*. She had stepped over the line that divided eighteen-year old girls, and that fact and her flippancy about the whole situation made her a creature of mystery.

Sophomore year a small collective of girls from the Honors floor banded together in order to get a bid for good housing. Sarah was not among us. Had she not been in a couple of

classes with my neighbor, and had they not studied biology and organic chemistry together, and had she not tagged along to the cafeteria sometimes, I might have forgotten her. As it was, she remained attached to the outer edge of my little circle of friends, a distant molecule bonded to more important ones.

Sarah had an amazing dorm room that year. Her building was constructed before dorms became standardized, and it was filled with oddly shaped rooms. Some rooms were expansive, some closets. Sarah had the best room: the top floor corner room with a balcony. Made out of thick stone blocks and a high railing, Sarah's balcony made her room feel like a premier loft in some old city like Prague. Once a film major friend of mine shot a video from the balcony. She cued a young man down below to stumble drunkenly towards a slender girl waiting for a bus, grab her arm, and waltz with her under the buggy yellow streetlight. The drunken man and the slender girl were my friends. The girl shooting the video was my friend, but in my memories Sarah was off camera.

During my third year, Sarah got an apartment with my friend Heather. The pair thought they would make great roommates. Both were in the sciences and both were dedicated students. Heather was intelligent, supermodel gorgeous, and generous. Everyone loved her, and Sarah's association with Heather brought her closer to the center of my group. On my walk home from school I often stopped in at their apartment to gossip or procrastinate or avoid my own domestic disputes. Heather gave me freshly baked cookies and Sarah took study breaks. Their apartment was always cozy and relaxed—covered in postcards and Heather's colorful homemade lampshades. When my visits were over, Sarah walked me down the narrow stairs and had her bedtime cigarette while I rode my old red Schwinn up the steep hill towards home.

As much as I liked hanging out with Sarah, she never really seemed to fit in with the rest of my friends. My friends were all one demographic: sarcastic, ironic, heavy drinkers, but deep down we were really goody-two-shoes. Sarah seemed like another. While it was never possible to put a finger on just where we diverged, there were symptomatic signs.

First, Sarah smoked, openly. None of the rest of my friends smoked, or if they did they never let on. Sarah was a smoker from way back. She told us with almost a glimmer of pride that she had started smoking when she was twelve or fourteen. I like to think we modeled good behavior for her. We tried to help her quit. One year we gave a prize for every month she went without smoking. When she reached her one-year anniversary we threw her a 1980's theme party. Everyone came in costume and danced to "Livin' on a Prayer," even though no one but Sarah was really into hair bands. But by the time we met Sarah, her addiction was almost a decade old. I found out later that, even with all the cakes and movies and encouragement, Sarah had cheated during her year. She relapsed into steady smoking not long after her Bon Jovi party.

Second, Sarah was a bad girl. I was the opposite. While Sarah was out scooping the town loop in her boyfriend's souped-up El Camino, I was researching for the debate team at the local law library. Sarah smoked, stayed out all night, made out in cornfields, got drunk with Amish kids, and generally raised hell. I had a chaste relationship with the high school valedictorian, and most of the people I knew were too busy studying for Advanced Placement tests to get freaky. In college I was ready to get a little wild. Sarah, on the other hand, was ready to settle down.

Studying was always very important to Sarah. She knew she wanted to be a doctor, and so she made college her own pre-medical school boot camp. I studied as much as I needed to and at the last minute. I don't know if Sarah needed to study as much as she did to be academically

successful, but she studied all the time. Anytime I was with Sarah, I knew she was on a study break and casting longing glances at her daunting textbooks.

Sarah, as much as she tried, was just not very social. She came to our parties and tried to mingle and have fun, but more often than not, we would find her snuggled up happily asleep in some random bed by eleven o'clock. One year she got all decked out for the annual Prom Party, but ten minutes in, she claimed some guy grabbed her ass so she took off her high heels and marched herself home. Sarah was fine with one or two people, but crowds and college parties wore her out.

More than anyone I knew, Sarah was a grown up. She lived like one. She bought herself a brand-new couch when most undergrads were finding their furniture on the curb July 31st, the day all leases expired and all the students played musical apartments in Iowa City. I suppose the troubled and sometimes frightening experiences of her crazy youth had left Sarah wiser than all the goodie-goodies I knew. Sarah was a private person, but from what she told me of her past, I know that Sarah's parents did not take care of her as they ought to have. Despite her rebellious days I am not sure she ever had a childhood. In many ways, she had been taking care of herself her whole life. Sarah has gravity under her ditzy blonde act that sets her apart. Through her eyes all our silly collegiate mayhem must have looked like child's play, and she could not afford that for herself.

Sarah was one of my friends, but she was not of my friends. Something in Sarah kept her from getting our jokes and understanding our dynamic, and in return we chose not to or could not completely understand her. She was earnest to our sarcasm, sweet to our grouchiness. She was Bob Dylan to our Michael Jackson, and because she just didn't quite fit, I kept Sarah as sort of a second-tier friend. I B-listed her; let her into the lobby of my heart, but never the V.I.P. room.

For almost as long as I have been writing, Sarah has been begging me to write a “story” about her. Every time we talk she asks about her story. We’d be chatting on the phone and I would mention that I was working on an essay for class and she’d inevitably ask, “Why don’t you write a story about me?”

I have taken a number of approaches to answering this question. I’ve tried to be honest with her: “No, this time I am writing about my grandmother,” or “I am writing about this guy I’m in love with that I hardly know,” or “I am working on a piece about my emotionally withholding father.” The truth was I never knew what to write about Sarah.

Another tactic I tried was telling Sarah that, technically, I don’t write stories. I tried to explain the difference to Sarah. A story is a work of fiction; an essay is nonfiction and it must have a point. She didn’t care. Every time I talked about genres she switched to “Then, why don’t you write an *essay* about me?”

I have appealed to Sarah’s sense of logic: “Sarah, I can’t write an essay about you unless it has a point.”

Sarah said, “The point can be that I’m cool or about how I love Jon.” I must have explained to her a million times that neither of those ideas are points, but she never listened. She could not grasp the difference between a fact and a point. No matter how many times I articulated the distinction, she kept on suggesting I write about her undying love and devotion for the immortal Jon Bon Jovi.

Sarah is my friend, and I wanted to make her happy. I’ve tried including her in my creative work in little ways. When I was an undergraduate at Iowa I did a radio essay about long distance relationships. At the time Sarah was involved with an archeologist who was living in

New Orleans. She had a lot of insights into the problems and opportunities created by a long distance love affair, so I made hers one of the main voices of the piece.

Along with the rest of my friends, Sarah has been mentioned in my writing in many lists. I have also used her character to sum up the strangeness of my friends by describing her as “the unironic Bon Jovi fan.” But these abbreviated appearances were not enough for Sarah.

My last strategy for dealing with Sarah’s pleas was to lie. When we hadn’t talked on the phone in a while Sarah asked, “Have you written my story yet?”

“Yup, working on it right now; the words are shooting out of my fingers like lightning bolts. A draft should be in the mail to you by next week.”

Fortunately for me, Sarah was being worked to the bone in medical school and didn’t have time to keep tabs on my writing. She also found herself a new boyfriend. Between fresh love and Gross anatomy, I was allowed to not write about her in peace. She gave up on expecting me to actually write anything about her. Just to be cute, she still asked if I was writing a story about her.

People tell me, “The older you get, the harder it is to make friends,” but until I moved to New Orleans, away from all the people I knew, I never worried about that. In a distant city I can see just how important it is to keep and to hold the people who really care about me.

The dusty, television light of Sarah’s visit made me see my friend in a new way. Sarah is a wonderful person. She is loyal and caring and easy to get along with. For as long as I have known her, she has been a better friend to me than I was to her. I am embarrassed to think of the night when I stone-cold refused to drive her across town to pick up her car, when she had driven me to life-guarding class at 7 AM, not a month before, in the pouring rain. Sarah, I think, always

knew she did not quite fit my notion of what I really wanted in a friend, and yet, she shepherded me through difficult times, laughing at herself the whole way.

Sarah wasn't obsessed with becoming the subject of an essay for her own gratification. She was much too modest. Really, she always enjoyed my writing and always encouraged me in it. She read everything I wrote and laughed at all the dumb jokes. She asked me about my writing courses and really listened when I answered. I think Sarah understood how important writing was to me, and she wanted to be a part of it. That is how real friends are.

Sarah's visit was not what I imagined my first hosting experience to be. At first I was disappointed that Sarah did not have the authentic New Orleans vacation. But I'm beginning to realize that I have to appreciate things for what they are, not what I expect them to be. The same goes for my friends. Good friends, no matter how awkwardly they fit my preconceived notions of a friend, should never be left to languish on the B-list. That kind of thinking will only leave me lonely. Finally, I am starting to comprehend the importance of a story for Sarah.

Lost in Arkansas

My friend Lexi looks helpless. Her eyes are watery and far away. They make her look confused. Her voice is high and wavering. People guess she has been crying when she calls on the phone. She sneezes like a bunny, coughs like she's weeping. She's slender and delicate. Her shoulders are stooped, and she's blonde. Strangers are always offering her help, asking if she's lost. In reality, she is one of the most self-sufficient women I know. She can build stuff, and fix stuff, and sew. She spent a semester in Ecuador, and when her host family refused to feed her, she supported herself, waiting tables at a bar called Boca del Lobo.

So when she asked me to go backpacking with her, I figured she was teasing. "You want me to go? I wouldn't want to go into the woods alone with me."

As delicately as I could I warned her. "I don't know if you know this about me, but I'm not in the best shape."

"Neither am I," she lied. "Don't worry, I'm a slow walker, and we won't carry much. Other people carry 80 pounds, but we'll only take like 40."

I met Lexi in high school. We grew up in Des Moines and both, separately, relocated to New Orleans. In Iowa, Lexi's family owned an independent adventure travel store, and she was an avid backpacker. She had done enough camping to know to choose her companions wisely. She has lots of fit, strong, charming friends, many of whom are attractive, young men. Me? I'm grumpy. I'm chubby. I have no survival skills.

"You should know I snore," I threatened.

"That's okay," she replied, "I sleep with my eyes open."

I wanted to go backpacking with Lexi, but over the years I had become, by default, a city person. When I was a kid, four or five times a summer, my parents packed up the big green

canvas tent, the flashlights, and the flannel lined sleeping bags and we headed to a state park for a weekend. Camping in Iowa wasn't thrilling, but I could swim in glorified farm ponds, ride my bike and roast my marshmallows exactly as I like them.

At night, my mom put me to bed with stories of her rustic camping days on Lake Michigan. She and all of her friends boated out to an uninhabited island for a weekend, but they forgot to bring ice. It was my mom's idea to sink the beer in the lake and in the evening she was the one who volunteered to dive into the icy water to fetch the six packs. I imagined her, trim and sleek, a gymnast in her youth, slipping into the frigid lake, shuddering as it enveloped her. Swimming deeper and deeper in the clear greenish water until she came to the stone that kept the red and white six-packs submerged. The story gave me happy shivers.

Once, as my mom was tucking me into my sleeping bag, the headlights of a recreational vehicle, just arriving at the campground, pierced the tent and dashed across the walls. As the big rig rumbled by, my mom said, "I wouldn't be caught dead in an R.V." Campers were not real camping, she said.

But as mom got older she started eyeing recreational vehicles. Soon after she married my stepfather they bought their first, a small pop-up. Mom claimed she was too old to be sleeping on the ground. In protest, I slept in a pup tent outside. But the pop-up couldn't satisfy my mother. She developed R.V. addiction. Every other year, the camper in our driveway grew bigger and bigger. As the R.V.s grew in size, convenience and luxury, so did the hassle of actually moving them anywhere. My parents became members of the R.V. resort in Des Moines. Every summer they hooked up their land yacht to the V10 pick-up, hauled it all the way across town, and parked it. Camping became sitting in lawn chairs until the bugs got too bad, walking up to the on-site convenience store for ice cream and microwaved hot dogs, and then watching

movies on cable. Camping became tame and boring. I stopped enjoying it, and I stopped doing it.

My lack of experience made me anxious about our trip. What if I couldn't keep up? What if I hated it? What if I got lost and starved to death, or worse? Lexi and I were leaving for our weekend in early October; just when the black bears, I read on the Internet, were looking for winter dens. With my worries fresh in my mind, I met Lexi at her office in downtown New Orleans. She climbed into the driver's seat of her roommate's car and pointed us towards the Ouachita National Forest in northwest Arkansas, ten hours away.

The Ozarks was not a place I ever considered going on purpose. All I knew about the area was based on a few tearful readings of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. I had heard of people who went boating on the Lake of the Ozarks, and that some elderly midwestern ladies found the delights of Branson, the Christian Las Vegas, tempting, but the region wasn't a must-see place for me.

Lexi chose Arkansas, and I trusted that she wouldn't lead me astray. She knew everything about the outdoors. In high school, she worked at her parents' store selling technical clothes, special socks, backpacks and delicious sleeping bags in brilliant candy colors hanging from the ceiling like sides of beef. I used to stand between their downy silk skins and watch Lexi help the real customers: wealthy soccer moms and rugged climbers. When I could afford it, Lexi sold me small things: a book, a water bottle, a pair of Smart Wool socks, but my gear remained thoroughly domesticated. I used my waterproof headlamp for reading in bed.

As we drove to Arkansas, I thought about the weekend ahead. I imagined two possible situations for my first backpacking trip. In the first, I saw myself as a real backpacker in breathable shorts, a bright yellow jacket, and a heavy pack that I could heft without a whimper. I

hiked all morning and I had miles to go before curling up on my self-inflating sleeping pad in a bed of pungent pine needles. My skin was slightly toasted by the high elevation sun and there was a chill in the air. I was perched on a granite cliff overhanging a mighty valley. Across from me an impressive peak soared to sublime heights, a powerful torrent sliced the mountain through the forest and poured into the valley below. I reveled in the view and in the solitude. I was strong, independent, resourceful, and I reached a place I couldn't get to in an R.V.

In the opposite image, I was lost, a hundred miles from help. My Nalgene bottle was three inches out of my desperate fingers' grasp because I was trapped under a boulder, which, until that day, hadn't moved for a hundred thousand years. Geologists in the future would discover a small smear of carbon and calcium amongst the layers of sandstone. They would hypothesize and write dissertations on its origin. I liked to vary the details of my demise—bear mauling, camp stove explosion, broken ankles, hypothermia—but the outcome was always a horrific death outside.

At the Arkansas border the road began to bobble up and down through the hills we couldn't see in the dark. The moon peaked between denser groves of trees. Around one in the morning we arrived in the town of Mena. The first campground we pulled into had a sign for the Arkansas Christian Biker Association, which sounded a little frightening. We decided to drive down the road and spend the night at a place called Shadow Mountain.

The Shadow Mountain R.V. Campground was proudly owned and operated by Tim and Tammy. In their finest western wear and big buckteeth grins, Tim and Tammy loomed over the lobby from an oil portrait behind the desk. In the morning, while Lexi paid the fee, I knelt down to pet a bug-eyed white Chihuahua that was hanging around the living room/office. It smelled like dirty socks. When it offered me its belly to rub I could see a colony of fleas scurrying

towards denser fur. My parents had a similar dog, a toy, small and sniveling, indoors dog, an R.V. dog. As anxious as I was about my trip into the wilderness, I knew I wanted to get away from that office, from the R.V.s idling on the hill, and away from that smelly little dog.

We drove into the town of Mena and stopped in at the fake log cabin that housed the Forest Service office. The woman at the counter didn't know much about the trails, and she didn't look as if she got into the woods very often. But what the Forest Service office lacked in information, it made up for in taxidermy. The room was populated with delightful array of creatures frozen in death: a squirrel, a turtle, an eagle snatching a hissing snake in its claws, a bobcat with realistic eyes.

Lexi and I left the Forest Service headed in the wrong direction. When we found the National Forest, we drove two laps around the park before we found the trailhead. The maps we bought were painfully useless. There was the detailed green map we bought from the Forest service, but the scale was so small it was impossible to tell where each section was located in relation to the state of Arkansas, and none of the trails were listed. There was a book of trails, but they were all hand drawn, and the scale was all wonky. A ten-inch line was listed as three miles, while a two-inch line said five miles. It didn't feel as if we were lost, but we just kept circling. The landscape was scenic but the road kept dead-ending in goat farms. We saw a vaguely promising sign for a first aid station, where we thought we might ask for directions. We followed the arrows down the rock-paved road until it bottomed out in a wide creek. We waded across but on the other side there was nothing but empty forest. It would have been a cruel joke if we really needed first aid. We were frustrated and hungry.

Around two in the afternoon we ascended an unfamiliar mountain. At the top was a Forest Service truck and a ranger hanging out the driver's side door. We pulled the car over to

ask for help. While Lexi and the ranger puzzled over the map, I gazed around the clearing. At the edge of the woods I saw a sign for Buckeye Trailhead.

“Hey!” I pointed. “There it is!”

The ranger looked at the sign as if he had never seen it before and said, “Well, this isn’t exactly my area of patrol. I handle the pheasant hunting.” He tossed his chicken bone on the ground, gave us a skeptical look, and drove off.

“That ranger was sketchy,” Lexi said. She crouched over the cook stove to make lunch. As she rested on her haunches, fretted and stirred with a short spoon, a string of guys on all terrain vehicles came up the mountain road. They were almost all old men, in flannel and hunting camouflage, and flat billed ball caps. As they roared past, the last one hollered, “Dinner ready yet?”

“Not for you, sir,” Lexi snarled. Lexi gets cranky when she hasn’t eaten, so I left her alone and fiddled around with my backpack until lunch was ready.

The sign said, “Buckeye Trail is not blazed. You will need a good map and a compass. Keep rock cairns on your right. Leave No Trace.” In Mena, the ranger assured us that the trail was blazed, clearly marked with paint on the trees, when she sold us the six-dollar map.

At the sign there was a little box stocked with paper and pencils, and backpackers were supposed to leave their itineraries. It gives the search and rescue teams a place to start looking for remains. Lexi noted our plans: we were going to hike in on the Buckeye Trail, hike back out when we met up with the Caney Creek Trail. In the space for comments she wrote, “Your sign said we need a good map. Where can we find a good map? The maps we bought at the Forest Service Office don’t even have this trail listed. There are no good maps to be found. If you made a good map we would pay for it; we would pay twelve dollars for a good map.”

Despite the directional shortcomings, the trail leading into the forest looked cheerful and well used. The day was still in the warm of the afternoon, and the sun dappled the early changing foliage.

The first part of Buckeye Mountain was steep and rocky. When I leaned forward to keep my balance, my pack weighed me down until I was walking completely bent over at the waist. I didn't look like a hiker. I was trucking up the mountain in gray capri-length workout pants and an olive green tee shirt. I had on sneakers and my wool socks were studded with long spiny needles gathered along the trailside. I looked like I was on my way to Jazzercise. Lexi graciously pulled ahead of me, where she didn't have to hear me panting like a wildebeest.

At the top of the mountain we stopped for a break. The entire ridge of Buckeye Mountain was lined with sparse trees and rock outcroppings. I set my pack down on a stone and watched as a pebble bounced down the steep cliff, tick-tick-tick. We looked out across the valley. It was that time in autumn when the leaves are just starting to change; most still green, but punctuated with red and gold. We munched on peanuts and gazed. It was a pleasant feeling standing in a place I couldn't drive to, or at most stroll to from an R.V. It didn't matter that I wasn't the first person to climb Buckeye Mountain. It mattered that only people, not machines, could climb Buckeye Mountain.

Along the ridgeline the trail remained horizontal, but we had to scuttle over boulders. Ahead, I watched Lexi's form ducking around corners and between trees. She looked just like a real backpacker ought to look, in khaki shorts and a sweat wicking pink tee; a water bottle swinging from side to side from the ice axe holsters on her pack. She ambled up the mountain and across the rocky ridge as if it were merely a busted up New Orleans sidewalk. Lexi was the

real thing. Ahead was the kind of person I wanted to be: physically fit, resilient, resourceful, with lots of fancy gear.

In Arkansas there were no breathtaking peaks or Alpine tundras. The Ozarks are hardly mountains at all, once grand, now whittled down to their stony core. The cliffs were not so sheer that we needed to rappel, nor were the trees too thick to wander through. The ridgeline was strewn with boulders and exposed rock, but there was no need for crampons or carabineers. Buckeye Mountain at its highest elevation is only 2,200 feet. But Arkansas wasn't beautiful because it was extreme. It was beautiful because it was just wild enough. The rich, voluptuous landscape was like a wilderness playground. It wasn't a place that we had to conquer, just meander through and enjoy.

Occasionally the trail disappeared. It would cross a boulder or skip down the mountain and vanish. Lexi got pretty far ahead, but she waited for me at the tricky parts. Later she confessed that once or twice she thought we were lost. She said she had to guess about the right direction. Trails are so linear. Hikers only get one chance to get it right. If the trail went one way and we went another, we might never find it again. I never questioned Lexi. Experienced hikers, I thought, never got lost.

Around four in the afternoon we came down from the ridgeline between Katy Mountain and East Hanna Mountain. The trail turned towards the juncture of Katy Creek and Caney Creek. Down hill my pack pounded my legs. My feet crashed into the front of my shoes. I had blisters on my baby toes. There were limbs down across the trail. I ducked under one, but I forgot about the extra height of my pack. The pack hit the log and I tumbled to the ground. I shimmed on my belly under the log, rolled over onto my backpack and wiggled around like a

June bug at the bottom of a sink. Thankfully, I was alone. In the woods, I learned, people can do really embarrassing things and no one is the wiser.

When I hadn't seen Lexi for an hour I got nervous. I was worried I had stepped onto some deer-watering trail. I wanted to yell for her, but then I didn't. I saw a pile of white rocks on my left with a stick coming out the top and another trail leading in the opposite direction, but I was sure it wasn't where we were supposed to turn. Buckeye Trail was supposed to be 5.4 miles long and we had only been hiking for three hours with liberal breaks. Then I saw Lexi's pack on the trail ahead.

She showed me the campsite she scoped out. It was a flood plain near the creek. We sat on mossy boulders to clean our faces in the icy water and ate Velveeta shells and cheese and candy bars. We draped our damp clothes over nimble little trees and carried our backpacks a hundred yards away from the tent and wrapped them in garbage bags to discourage bears. The creek, the rocks, the mulchy ground were so comfortable. It was peaceful and exciting to be in a place that was neither brutal nor completely tame.

After our camp was tidied up and the sun went down, Lexi and I snuggled up in our sleeping bags. Then we realized it was only 7:30PM. Lexi, struggling with a cold, fell quickly asleep. I couldn't. My mind, left to its own devices and against all logic, raced with thoughts of serial killers and wild animals. Then, over the steep hills cut out by the creek, I thought I saw a house light or a flashlight, but it turned out to be the full moon. We were completely alone, I realized, and it wasn't scary at all. From the tent, I watched the moon cross from one edge of the sky to the other until I drifted off. In the morning it sounded as if sprinkles of rain were hitting the leaves, but the sky was clear and I could feel no drops. The trees were splashing dew on each other in the breeze.

Lexi and I slept until eleven. I woke when she crawled over me to get to the door. We made a breakfast of gluey instant oatmeal and candy bars. The creek we camped next to was darling, filled with boulders and making gurgling noises and wrapping around a quaint bank and disappearing. I took an extra long time washing dishes and filtering water.

We packed up the camp and reconsulted the maps. If they were to be trusted, Lexi and I hiked more than five miles in three hours, up a mountain, with full packs and lots of breaks. It wasn't possible. A decent hiker makes ten or twelve miles a day, tops. So we gave up on the maps and continued hiking west, expecting to meet with the Caney Creek Trail around noon. Then we could camp early and hike out in the morning. At two we were still heading west.

Lexi stopped, studied the maps, and shook her head. "What do you think?" It was obvious we were heading in the wrong direction. The map was totally bogus. It was like some jerk at the Forest Service drew the map from memory on an 8½ by 11 inch sheet of paper, then figured the miles based on the doodle. We realized the rock cairn we had seen the afternoon before and mistrusted was where we were supposed to turn around. It was miles behind us.

At this point, panic set in. We were smart girls. We weren't supposed to be lost. If we turned around we'd have to backtrack and we would be behind schedule. If we went forward we would be walking farther away from the car. Our plan disintegrated, but there were no good solutions.

"What the hell," I finally said. "Let's keep going." The trail heading west looked nice. It followed the creek and was lined with little bamboo forests. We decided to see where it led and figure the rest out later.

The trail crossed Caney Creek sixteen times. Each time I arrived at the creek bank, I diligently planned my route across. I stepped carefully from rock to rock, balanced with spread

eagle arms, and every single time I slipped off a rock and fell into ankle deep water. Already wet, I sloshed to the other side in the water. Sometimes I stood in the rushing water and let Lexi balance on my shoulders as she skipped from rock to rock. She never slipped. At one crossing there were huge gray boulders that had slipped off the cliff face eons ago and formed a dam. I saw two tiny purple crawfish skittering around inside a small pool eroded into the rocks.

Around five we left the creek bottom and started climbing back into the forest. For the first time in thirty hours we saw people: a churchy group looking fresh and tidy and hiking in the opposite direction. We smiled and waved, “This is the Caney Creek trail, right?” Lexi asked.

Their leader consulted his map. We must have looked pretty disheveled because a guy at the back of the line got really excited. “Are you lost? Were you lost for a week? How long have you been lost out here? What’s it like being lost?” Our misfortune made him giddy. I told him we weren’t lost. We were just misdirected.

Lexi and the troop leader confirmed that we were heading in the wrong direction, but we were almost to the trailhead on the other side of the forest. By six-thirty in the evening we crossed the Cassatot River and came out of the wilderness fourteen miles by road from where we parked the car on the opposite side of the Caney Creek Wilderness. It probably would have made good sense, seeing how fast we hiked, to turn around, walk until dark, camp and then get up early and hike to the car. But backtracking would have been to admit defeat. The road ahead held at least the possibility of something new. So we decided to walk down county road 81 and see if some nice family in a mini-van would drive us around to our car.

We hiked out of the woods. The road was only a quarter of a mile from the trailhead, but the Forest Service sign we passed read: “Caney Creek Trailhead, 3 Miles.” I became irrationally angry. I vowed never again to trust the Forest Service. Their log cabin office building, their

Smoky the Bear uniforms, and their extensive collection of taxidermy would never impress me again. Clearly, I decided, none of the staff had ever hiked, or looked at a map, ever.

We started down the road, and it didn't take long before we heard the roar of engines. Around the bend came two older men, in flannel and ball caps, on ATVs. We flagged them down, explained our situation and asked if they would take us around the forest to the car. They agreed, in a disapproving way, because they couldn't leave two women alone in the woods. I could sense that they thought we should be at home, baking or knitting, not fooling around in the forest. Lexi climbed on the back of the green ATV. I straddled the red. Her driver was small and jolly. Mine was tall and stoic. He drove so close to the steep edges of the mountain roads I could almost feel them crumbling beneath the wheels.

All around us the mountains, in early autumn, rose and fell. It was dusk and chilly. The speed was thrilling. We had only been walking a day and a half, but I felt as if I had never gone thirty-five miles an hour before. In the valleys there were clear streams, people camping with RVs, and ATVs, and horses. We passed small farms, with goats and horses in the fields and crosshatched hewn wooden fences. Near one farm, my driver turned back and yelled, "Have you ever seen the movie *Deliverance*?" Then he pointed to the farmhouse with pigs in the front yard and laughed to himself.

Unfortunately, the ATV guys got lost in exactly the same places Lexi and I had the day before. We passed the same goat farms and hit the same dead ends. I worried that if we drove around for too long the ATVs would run out of gas and then we would be stuck walking again.

When we finally found the car the men dropped us off and waited until we got it started. They said goodbye and roared off into the night. Lexi and I car-camped that evening and appreciated the luxuries of pit latrines and a picnic table. I was hurting. It was all I could do to

hobble over to a quiet pool of the creek and filter water. As I sat on the little stone dam, I looked into the water with my headlamp and saw hundreds of fish gathering to see the plastic bobble disturbing the surface. They seemed so innocent, as if they had never seen a hook and line before.

That night I was so sore I had a hard time staying asleep. I thought about our trip. In some respects my first backpacking trip had been a bust. We only spent one night in the woods. We had gone the wrong way almost the whole way. We got lost with some strangers on ATVs. We spent so much time being lost it seemed like we had hardly been camping at all. And I was right back where I started, sleeping in a tent in a campground full of R.V.s.

But then I thought, if everything had gone according to plan I might never have had so much fun falling into Caney Creek, or seen the moon all alone in the sky, or hugged some old guy from the back of an ATV. I wouldn't have munched trail mix and looked on as Lexi climbed the outcroppings above Caney Creek. And Lexi, the real backpacker, wasn't mad that our trip didn't go according to plan. She didn't feel bad that we had gone in the wrong direction or spent the night car-camping. From the way she was acting I would have thought that this was how it was done. It wasn't like a trip to the grocery store. An adventure, even a small one, is supposed to get out of hand. Being lost was kind of fun, maybe more fun than following the itinerary.

The next morning we drove all the way to Texarkana before we stopped for breakfast. From the highway I saw a place called the T-Town Diner that advertised breakfast all day and a trucker's chapel. Lexi brought her road atlas in so we could plan a route home over pancakes. As we walked through the entrance, a trucker in flannel stopped Lexi and asked, "Are you gals lost?"

“Nope,” she replied, and she gave me a look that said it didn’t matter.

My Pirate

The first time I saw my pirate was at the coffee shop. I was sitting in my favorite spot—the four-person table, near the Dutch doors—and I was facing my favorite direction—towards the counter but with a view out the windows, up Esplanade Avenue in the Bayou St. John neighborhood in New Orleans. I liked to watch people coming and going. Nicole, my very best New Orleans friend and classmate, was sitting opposite me, so she had to crane her slender body around whenever I pointed out someone especially ugly ordering coffee.

When the pirate came in, I could hardly believe my eyes. Could this vision of a man be real? Short and barrel-chested, his body was made for heaving anchors and burying treasure. His arms were strong and thick, but not chiseled in an enthusiastic bodybuilding way. He was wearing gently faded blue jeans and a tight black tee shirt. A finely rendered blue tattoo winked at me from under his sleeve. Instead of knee-high boots, he wore elegant black leather shoes. His thick black hair was combed forward, and his face was planted and serious, but his most salient feature was an honest-to-God, black eye patch slung across his left eye in complete, swashbuckling glory.

“Nicole, Nicole,” I hissed. “Look, look, there’s a pirate in here.” She swung her tank-topped torso above her Indian crossed legs. She whipped back around and blinded me her flashbulb grin. She agreed that a pirate in the coffee shop was the best thing that could happen, ever, but I could see that, mostly, she was smiling because she knew the pirate made me very, very happy.

My pirate had obviously given up some of the less glamorous pirate mannerisms in order to fit in with regular people. For example, it was obvious he bathed. He was clean, and I imagined he smelled of something other than barnacles and rum. He looked well fed, with no

signs of scurvy or hardtack crumbs on his clothing. His hair was short and styled and possibly contained hair product, and his clothing looked more like it came from the Banana Republic, rather than from the nimble fingers of a wench. But despite what he was lacking in sea-faring characteristics, his aura was of deadly menace, pirate confidence and cool.

He purchased his cup of coffee, fiddled with milk and sugar, turned and stalked outside. I tracked him from my seat as he walked around the shop, past my window, then opened the door of an anonymous foreign car, which I could only assume was booty from a raid on a freighter with a Tokyo port of call. I was disappointed that he was leaving. I worried I might never see him again, but he settled at one of the patio tables, stoic and alone. He looked out on the shaded street as if he were looking out to sea, assessing the roaring cars as waves and winds.

He left before I did, slipped away into the city, maybe to a safe house apartment in the Quarter where he could barter his stolen goods, or back to his pirate ship anchored brazenly at the port of the Mississippi, amongst barges and cruise ships.



The next time I saw my pirate, I was standing in line at the Italian ice cream parlor. I was there with Nicole and a visitor from out of town. The pirate was ahead of us, standing in line with two normal-looking, well-groomed young men. When I saw him, I felt a well of excitement rising up in my chest, like plankton on my insides. My face flushed, and I grabbed Nicole's slender wrist, "ter pirate is herr!" As we dallied with scoops of mint chocolate chip and Italian kiss, and the pirate and his mates settled into a delicate iron parlor table across the pink room.

I tried to study my pirate out of the corner of my eye. I didn't want him to think I was staring at his eye patch. Even with his bristling manliness, he seemed natural, at home even, in a family friendly establishment. He sipped espresso, spooned his gelato, and talked with the fine-

featured young men. It was quite possible, I supposed, that he was interviewing them for his crew, even though, ignoring the eye patch, they looked quite the metro sexual trio. Maybe once they put in their hoop earrings and tied their bandanas the mates would take on the swarthy ferocity required of the pirate life.

As they were leaving the little band paused outside the picture windows. From my vantage I could study the delicate tattoo on his left arm. It was delicate and artistic, blue lines creating what appeared to be a fantastic buildingscape. Could it be possible that just as I yearned for his life at sea, my pirate yearned in turn for the solidity of a life shore side? With a final word to his willowy companions, my pirate vanished once more.



Just when I let my pirate tack out of my thoughts, he appeared again at the coffee shop. He was sitting outside, staring out at the street, alone again. This day he was wearing the perfect pirate pants: dark blue, with contrasting light blue vertical stripes, and they were cut off rather raggedly just below the knee. He was wearing a snug tee shirt and he had a little belly that gave him an appearance of vulnerability I hadn't noticed before.

Nicole walked in, all baggy shorts and smiles. "The pirate's here," I whispered.

"I saw him. Are you excited?" She humored me. We relaxed into our coffee shop routine. We talked a little about the hurricane brewing outside the Gulf. As we talked, I noticed other pirate-like customers buying coffee and toasting bagels: an under-fed youth with a red bandana wrapped pirate style around his head, accompanied by a disheveled pirate maid wearing a tank top and boots. I imagined the storm drove them ashore, off their trusty, sea worn sloop, for fear of being flushed down to Davey Jones's locker. The pirate, obviously their king, came inside and started a serious discussion with a man wearing a nice shirt and tie.

I imagined that he was frustrated about being ashore so long. He was no land-lover. All of these pirates, drinking coffee and having conversations among the regular citizens of New Orleans, should have been at sea. As much as he tried to fit in, tried to copy the day-to-day activities of the people around him, my pirate did not belong in that coffee shop. And as excited as it made me to have him be a part of my routine, I needed him more to be out *there*, fighting duels, ravaging and pillaging, drinking rum, following the map to the X marks the spot. I know the pirate life is not for me, but the world needs pirates, and I hope my pirate will sail on.

Walking Mr. Bingley

Daylight slips through the tall windows, turns the humidity-damp stone walls from gray to pearl. The dog rustles at the foot of the bed. He empties the space at my left calf, the one he tucks in next to, anchoring both of us through the night. His absence, his quiet fidgeting, his longing gazes toward my face, rouse me.

Begrudgingly, I unfurl the sheets and dress myself. In New Orleans, a city of late sleepers, I dress in a bizarre combination of clothes from the floor of the closet. Dog walking clothes: basketball shorts, a holey red sweater, and sandals. No one is on the streets, except other dog walkers, and they will forgive me.

I find my keys, a plastic grocery sack. Mr. Bingley, my Pomeranian, jumps on the couch and tries to wait patiently while I attach his leash. He squirms. I'm groggy, but eventually we get connected. I unlock the iron door, and we step out into the morning.

The fresh sun washes the black asphalt of Orchid Street, warms the bright pink bricks of my apartment. We turn right, walk past the three prettiest gardens in the neighborhood. The vegetation, bougainvillea, arrowroot, ferns, reach over the sidewalk, brush my sleeves and shiver off their dew. I'm damp as if it's been raining, and rhinestones of water cling to Mr. Bingley's long, red hair. On Ursulines street, the live oaks knit their branches overhead and make the street a dappled green cathedral. It is not quiet. Birds compete in song, cars rattle by on the pockmarked roads, and all around there is the hum of a tightly woven city beginning a new day. It feels quiet, though, both soothing and invigorating, and it is beginning to feel like home.



Before Bingley, I hated mornings. Sleeping in was the best part of my life as a graduate student in my twenties. I could stay out until three. I could drink and snooze until the hangover

dissipated. I wasn't a working-stiff. Sleeping in meant I wasn't a grown up yet. I hadn't settled down.

Mr. Bingley came to me through Pooches' Palace, "Where Every Dog is a King," Doggie Daycare. My boyfriend Mike worked there as a dog sitter. Pooches' was marketed towards privileged dogs, but the boss took in strays and found them homes. Mr. Bingley arrived at Pooches' in October. Someone saw two Pomeranians roaming Magazine Street. Pomeranians are fluffy little lap dogs, more at home in a lady's crocodile purse than on the busy streets of New Orleans, so someone went out to grab them. One of the two dogs bolted, but the other was friendly, glad to see a kind face, and was more than happy to go inside. The staff of Pooches' put up signs and called the SPCA. When no one claimed him, Mike brought Mr. Bingley home for an audition. I liked him right away. He went to work with Mike during the day, and then spent the night at our house until, eventually, he became part of our routine.

That fall Mr. Bingley was new to us, just as Mike and I were new to New Orleans. We moved from Iowa in August so I could work on a Master's degree. We didn't realize how sheltered we had been until our new neighbor came outside while we were unpacking the car and started telling us that our street was a virtual freeway for drug dealers, crack-whores, and other unsavories. The neighborhood seemed pleasantly gentrified, but, she told us, it was a cesspool of vice and salacious going-ons. She told us it was clear that we weren't from around here (we still had Iowa plates), so we better watch our backs. I spent the first nights in my apartment wide-awake, listening for marauding criminals, wishing I were back home in Iowa.

Mike and I had the dog for almost a month before we picked a name. We decided on Mr. Bingley after a character in *Pride and Prejudice*. In Jane Austen's novel, Mr. Charles Bingley is a sweet young gentleman in love with the heroine's older sister. He is a man of consequence

looking for an estate, but he is so good-natured he allows his friends to sway his decisions.

Throughout the novel Bingley is a rootless character, moving about, always unsure of how long he will be staying in London or the country, and never knowing whether he will keep his newest residence.

When we moved to New Orleans, Mike and I spent the month of August homesick and scared. We drove Mike to job interviews in the steamy heat with little success. Shy Mike was passed over for position after position. Money was running low. All we could afford to eat was spaghetti and peanut butter sandwiches, but we were learning. All the driving around, from New Orleans East to Metairie, oriented us in our new city and taught us how to get home from all corners. We learned how to watch our money and about humility. We learned about each other and about living together. When Mike got the job at Pooches' we felt buoyed. The pay was terrible, but he was so happy to have a job, especially one in which he could work with animals.

Our lease required that dogs be walked twice a day, but Mr. Bingley went out much more frequently. His euphoria at the jingle of keys and the sight of his extendable red leash was contagious. Three or four times a day Bingley and I took rambling walks around the neighborhood. He clamored up and down the root-busted sidewalks. He peed on everything vertical. We walked along Ursulines and said hello to his friend Tipper Gorgeous, the Border collie, at the end of the block. On Ursulines the houses were stately mansions where young men of consequence might live. Bingley and I strayed down the side streets. We wandered up to Bayou St. John where neighbors walk their dogs, past the corner coffee shop, and around the little triangle parks.

In New Orleans the houses are greedy. They gobble up their lots. Hardly anyone has a real yard. Long pastel shotguns line the streets, shouldering up to the sidewalks. Some houses

have long, heavy steps, starting at the sidewalk and reaching up to the front door on the second level. There are plenty of porches and patios where residents must have sat and fanned themselves during the summer before the invention of air conditioning.

Mr. Bingley was fascinated with strangers' houses. He walked right up the steps to the front door. If the resident were to open up, I am sure he would have walked inside and hopped on the couch. I had to call him back down to the street. I was uncomfortable with how quickly he was ready to move into a new house. It reminded me how easy it could have been for him to be taken in by another family. When I explained to people that Mr. Bingley was a stray, they looked at me as if I were crazy. "*That dog was a stray?*" He was so delicate, so warm hearted, so easy to scoop up and take home and love forever.

Mr. Bingley trotted along, eager to meet other dogs. One afternoon on our way to the coffee shop we met Bruno, a Jack Russell Terrier, who liked to bark down threateningly from his balcony. He was in the front garden with his owner. Bruno, who was only a little larger than Bingley, smelled blood. He pounced, went straight for the jugular, and pinned Mr. Bingley to the ground before I could drop the mail I was carrying. Mike, the dog professional, jumped in and separated the two. Mr. Bingley cried as if it were the apocalypse, hollering like a fire alarm in Mike's arms all the way down the block. We walked home a different way, but even after his thrashing, Mr. Bingley was still eager to greet every dog he saw.

When Bingley met a friendly dog, he barked and whined until they were nose to nose. He tugged and pulled at his leash as if he were being reunited with his long lost littermate. He exchanged hindquarter smells; the dog tango, as I called it. Then, after about thirty seconds, Mr. Bingley was finished with his new acquaintance and ready to move on. He did the same thing with people.

Mr. Bingley made it easy for me to get to know my neighborhood. Every new person was an opportunity to make friends. When we passed people Mr. Bingley, all fluff and tongue, looked up and gave strangers a big grin. Women cooed and little kids told me I had a cute dog. Pomeranians must be popular in New Orleans, because I always heard, “I gotta dog just like that!” or “Is that a Pomeranian? I got one at home, except he’s black.” One person I met asked if he was a Fox Terrier. I told him no, a Pomeranian, and the guy said, “That’s funny, because he looks just like a little fox.” People remembered Mr. Bingley, and they started to recognize me.

Wandering around the neighborhood made me more aware of the subtle changes: half a shotgun double up for rent, a bendy new palm tree at the house with the retrievers, for sale signs, new flowers, a fresh coat of paint. Before Mr. Bingley lived with us, I spent most of my days indoors studying or working on the computer and staring out the window. I inhabited my apartment, but it wasn’t until I started walking Mr. Bingley that I really started living there.

When we were walking I used to wonder about Mr. Bingley’s life before me. He couldn’t have been out on the streets for long. He’s too wimpy, too fluffy and small to survive in a city that hosts packs of feral dogs. But he probably wasn’t adored either. He was skinny, ribs touchable through his cream colored undercoat. He’s missing teeth in the front right side of his mouth. Two molars are totally gone, the canines just stumps. Mr. Bingley didn’t know how to play. Mike teased him, tried to get him to lighten up and roll around the floor, but Mr. Bingley just looked at Mike with serious, confused eyes. Maybe no one taught him how to play; maybe he was mistreated. Taking in a stray dog left unanswered questions. Maybe a loving family lost him and gave up hope of finding him again. How many families has he lived with before us? I

thought about the name we gave him, the one he adopted so easily, and I wondered what he was called before. In another situation, did another name fit better?

At the end of *Pride and Prejudice* Mr. Charles Bingley proposes to the woman he loves and settles down in the country estate he leased at the beginning of the book. Though it took him a while, Charles Bingley chooses the home he thought he wanted all along.

For now, and forever I hope, Mr. Bingley is a part of my life. He was with us as Mike and I pieced together our life in New Orleans. It's funny. As a stray, Mr. Bingley's future was as open as my own. Like his namesake, he did not seem ready to set roots. Though Mr. Bingley appeared content living with us, the way he trotted up to strangers and on to other porches made me think that he still might be looking for the perfect place to settle down.

Last spring Mike and I took Mr. Bingley to the dog park. We let him stay off his leash as we walked down the trail back to the car. It was a sunny evening in April. Mike and I followed him down the gravel path and talked about what we should make for dinner. Bingley trotted ahead, happy to be free from his leash. He got a little far and I was afraid he'd reach the busy street that before we did. I called to him. He stopped and turned to look at me, mouth open, panting. He's usually good about sticking close, but that evening I saw him give a quick longing look farther down the path. For a second, I could tell, he considered bolting. For just a second I thought he might toss aside his reservations, join the pack of feral dogs that lives in the park, or sidle up to someone new on the softball field and try to start a new life.



Early in August of 2005 Mike moved back to Iowa. He and I had learned that, though we loved each other, love was not enough to make us compatible, and that we were too young to be settling for uninspiring relationships. Mr. Bingley moved with him as part of our joint custody

agreement. Neither one of us wanted to give him up, but because Mike would be living near his family, he would have more resources than I would living alone in New Orleans. We agreed that I could take Mr. Bingley when I visited my parents for the holidays, and that I could have him back whenever I wished.

Then Hurricane Katrina flooded the apartment on Orchid Street. Humidity and mold took most of my belongings, and the neighborhood that Mr. Bingley and I had grown to feel safe in, had walked in and loved, was emptied of its residents, was wind burned and soiled. Mr. Bingley was waiting for me in Iowa, where I retreated from the storm and the flooding. He slept tucked in to my left calf, and we walked in the early mornings, in the chilly autumn wind of my parents' neighborhood.

Just when I believed I was settled, life turned in a different direction. In Austen's novel Mr. Charles Bingley ended up with the eldest Miss Bennett and the country estate, and as much as I crave that kind of stability, my story isn't ready for a conclusion just yet. When the plot took an unforeseen turn, I was glad to have my Mr. Bingley. His constant enthusiasm, regardless of circumstance or situation, reminds me of how possible, how exhilarating it can be to get up and walk into a new life.

From the Snoball Stand

I found an ad in the New Orleans' *Gambit Weekly* advertising for: "Energetic hard workers needed for busy snoball stand in City Park." As an Iowan, I have always considered myself an energetic hard worker. I needed a summer job, just something to get me through until I started my last year of graduate school. I spoke with one Judith Graffeo, and we exchanged information, she of the stand, and me of me. I mentioned that my first job was at an amusement park in Des Moines. I think part of my job was to make snocones, but the memory is a little fuzzy. That job was a decade ago. I didn't tell Judith that.



What to wear to my snoball interview? Business? Business casual? Casual? I needed an outfit between desperate for summer work and over qualified. A red sweater and jeans seemed to strike the right balance. It was the first time I dressed down for an interview.

On the address Judith gave me there was a large, new house. Inside, it echoed with the squeals of little boys, children's programming, and the quiet shushing of a Latina nanny. Judith is a pretty blonde in her thirties. She wore a full face of make up and sweat pants, which was puzzling until she mentioned that she was pregnant, due in July. She left me in the dining nook with a homemade application. I filled it out in my best handwriting.

Name, Address, Phone Number, Are you in school? Yes. Where? University of New Orleans. Are you currently employed? Yes. Where? University of New Orleans, teaching assistant. List the days and hours you are available to work.

Judith returned to the table, eyeballed my information and started talking at me like I was hired. She asked what hours I could work and how much money I wanted. I tossed out a

lowball, well below the wages of my friends, peers, and younger siblings. When she shrugged, said it was fine, I felt the first tug of humiliation.

She told me about the stand. Her husband Pete has run it for ten years. They sell snoballs and nachos and hotdogs. Usually there are two or three people working, sometimes up to eight. A woman named Debra has worked there for ten years, and Judith told me she is “great.”

“Is it a fun place to work?” I asked. It was a silly summer job. I knew if I tried harder I might be able to find better pay, but if it was fun, then I could justify my underachievement.

Fun was important to me that summer because in my future I saw the lives of my parents and friends who had joined the work force. Summers were no longer a season for frolicking. Summer meant Hawaiian shirts and khaki shorts on Fridays. For the rest of my life I would be working somewhere with air-conditioning and with responsibilities. I wanted to ride out my youth as long as possible.

The snoball stand could be just like my high school jobs. The hours were flexible. The work would be easy. I wouldn’t be burdened with more than showing up. It would be fun hanging out with teenagers, goofing off, going out after work and sleeping in late. I was twenty-three. It was my last summer as a student, my last young summer. It could be fun.

“Uh, well,” Judith replied, puzzled. “Well, my husband says it’s his ‘therapy,’ so I guess it’s fun.” She scheduled me to start on Wednesday.



The first and most important thing to know about snoballs is that they are not snocones. Many people are confused about the difference. Some even use the terms interchangeably. For the people who grew up in places other than New Orleans a dessert prefixed with the meta word

“sno” means a rounded lump of chopped ice crammed into a flimsy paper cone drizzled with red, blue, or yellow. Often found at county fairs or Catholic school fundraisers, and extremely popular with the less sophisticated palates of children, the snocone typically melts into one tasteless chunk of ice minutes after it is purchased. Though cheap and marginally refreshing, a snocone is no delicacy.

In snoballs, however, the blending of ice and sugar and color attain perfection. Shaved ice packed into a Styrofoam cup, shaped above the lip to a point, then drenched in tooth dissolving flavors, served with a straw and a spoon. Like proud men who make paella in Spain or osh in Central Asia, the people who own snoball stands in New Orleans take great pride in creating the city’s finest sugar water. The competition is fierce. Ice is put through secret regimes of freezing and rinsing and bagging. Blades on the Snowizard brand snoball machine are changed so frequently that the ice they spit out is fine as ash. Hundreds of exotic flavors are mixed; thousands of pounds of sugar are super saturated in swimming pools worth of near boiling water. Secret recipes are concocted, new and exciting toppings are developed, and from March until October, the hot and thirsty line up.

In this world, in sweltering New Orleans, I spent my days, not laughing it up in line with my friends, not gleaning change enough for a treat from the floor of my car, not sipping and spooning nectar and wedding cake flavored snoballs in the whispering shade of the live oaks. No, I was on the other side, across the counter, grinding ice, pouring and wiping, making change and making nachos, and mopping the abject stickiness off the floor when the day was done.



Lexicographical note: *to waste*, verb, colloquial, to spill.

“Put that snoball in a bigger size cup or it is going to waste it all over the truck.”

“Can I have some napkins? My snoball is wasting.”

I had not heard this usage before, but it seems appropriate. Snoballs generate huge amounts of waste: wasted cups, wasted ice, wasted napkins, and wasted time on my part.



I have two guides to the world of snoballs.

The first, my boss Pete is a hunky, middle-aged plumber. He is thinning a little on top, but it's hardly noticeable because his hair is fair and he's tan. On weekdays he wears loose fitting jeans and a tee shirt that advertises his plumbing company. He has a nice body, for a middle-aged plumber, and on Sundays, when he wears khaki shorts, I admire his legs.

Everything Pete says to me in my first few days is stern and business like. He talks to me as if I'm a naughty child. “The cup is the most expensive part of the snoball. If you flood a snoball come back here.” He leads me to the industrial sink. “Rinse out the cup and start again. Do not throw away the cups.” He mimes every step for me as if I'm incapable of abstract thought. His instructions are so refined they could be printed on training posters. He gestures cautiously with his palms turned inward, holding the importance of his words out for further investigation.

I take in these lessons wide-eyed and humble. I assume I have a lot to learn. I ask a lot questions. These questions throw Pete. He knows the answers, but he isn't sure I can handle the intricacies of the business and make snoballs at the same time. When questioned, he retreats to his training phrases. “The cup is the most expensive part of the snoball. Never throw away the cup...”

The second instructor is Debra, a middle-aged black woman, who dismisses much of what Pete told me as soon as he leaves. It is clear that there are significant differences between

the polices of management and the day-to-day practices in the stand. Debra doesn't rinse out the cups and start again. She drops the whole cup of Technicolor slush into a larger cup. Smalls become larges; larges slip into jumbos. Two cups go out the window instead of one. "Baby," she draws out the word until it means something more. "Bay-be." She looks at me hard with her chin tilted down. "If you do it Pete's way, you'll be back there all day. I don't got time for all that," she tells me, and then proceeds to spend much of the day sitting on the freezer, talking on her cell phone.

Debra tells me that she's been working for Pete ten years. I can't imagine working in a concession stand smaller than my apartment for a decade, but Debra has adapted. Her physical body is perfectly evolved to the task of the snoball. Her legs are ropy from standing all day. Her shoulders are wide and she has the lats of a Big Ten gymnast, taut and powerful from heaving and grinding a glacier's worth of ice.



In the evening, on my bike, I cross three bridges in the park. They span the green muck of the bayou water, sludged with fertilizer fed algae. The frogs sing a song that sounds like birds and crickets. The frogs, which belong to real bayous and swamps, found their way to this artificial, constructed land, and sing as if they don't know that it's all pretend. Without the landscaping and bridges, without constant upkeep, the park would be a huge and wild marsh stretching to Lake Pontchartrain. The frogs would still be here, chirping and singing in the twilight, but all the pretty paths, the baseball fields and the golf courses, and the snoball stand would not.

New Orleans, no matter how old and grotty it appears, is a land of constant upkeep. Every house, every auto body shop, every Mardi Gras bead store, and every snoball stand is

there by the sheer force of human will and engineering. Otherwise, it would slip underwater. Like most things that are kept alive artificially, I get the feeling that this too cannot continue to work for long.



My first Sunday at the snoball stand coincided with my most exquisite hang over. It followed an active celebration of St. Patrick's Day in the Irish Channel. My friend's very gay and very fabulous landlords, costumed and dubbed St. Patrick and Bubbles, escorted me from party to increasingly drunken party. It was one of those perfect New Orleans days. I came home with cabbage, a sunburn, and a hundred kisses from old men in tuxedos. Even as my long day crept towards dawn I didn't worry about working the next day. For my previous jobs reading manuscripts or answering phones, I made sure I got plenty of sober sleep before work, but being able to work hung over was one of the reasons I took the snoball job in the first place.

But Sunday at the snoball stand is no day for hangovers. Sundays, I soon learned, are the busiest days, and that entire Sunday, my mind could focus only on the object directly in front of me, the snoball, with no recollection of people served or of the passing of time. The line stretched out across the gravel parking lot until it reached the street, but no matter how many snoballs I poured it never diminished. The sunlight through the window scorched my retinas. Over and over again, I flooded my snoballs. From behind the ice machine Pete hollered, "it's flooded. Do it again," and I was embarrassed.

"Don't mind him," Judith assured me. "He's hung over."



When Pete was training me, he told me one of the perks was that I could eat all the snoballs and hotdogs and nachos I wanted. The nineteen-year-old inside of me thought, "Great, I

won't have to spend any money on groceries this summer." But after one chili-cheese dog and cream soda flavored snoball with condensed milk, I knew, at twenty-three, I was well beyond the point in my life when I can sustain myself on junk food. My metabolism and my intestinal track say no. My teenage co-workers scoff, but now I bring sandwiches and dried fruit.



I stand in front of freshmen composition class with curry colored palms. No matter how much I wash, the daily saturation keeps them red rinsed. The dye, a chemical henna, celebrates my marriage to this job. When I am writing on the board or gesturing to make a point my hands remind me of my other job. What would I say to my students if they asked why I look this way? If one of them were to show up at the snoball stand, how could I explain myself? Would I duck behind the ice machine, pray they wouldn't recognize me? My education marks my steps toward success, but the snoball stand marks me too.



I learned how to make the simple syrup today: fill one third of a fifty gallon trash can with hot tap water, add one hundred pounds of super refined white sugar, plug in the jury-rigged Craftsman hand drill to stir. After twenty minutes the elixir has the color and viscosity of spinal fluid. It can be flavored and colored and poured over shaved ice.

Our snoballs are sweeter than others around the city. The same people who complain that the snoballs are too sweet also come back day after day. They can't help it. Neuroscientists have found that sugar addiction follows the same three-step pattern as drug addiction. A person increases her intake of a drug, knows the high, experiences uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms, and then wants to use the drug again. It is an unsteady, upward climb of consumption, the switchbacks of the binge and crash. Sugar activates a chemical that starts an

incentive system in the brain. A brilliant evolutionary strategy that kept our ancestors eating wild berries and prehistoric mangos, but now a glitch that draws humans to their own poison.

The drug lords have found an addiction even children and the poor can afford. The canine cop who stops by every day for a large Hawaiian or the chubby woman with gold teeth are not people out enjoying a simple afternoon snack. They are addicts yearning for a fix. In the afternoons they feel it, the dull throbbing, hands shaking as they turn in their two-dollars and receive their change. They feel the elation as they slurp down that simple syrup. How quickly the cheap buzz dissipates. Every day they need more than the day before, but unlike other drugs, it will be difficult to overcome their addictions through death by overdosing. The sugar won't take them in a boozy dream or in one last overwhelming moment of ecstasy. The sugar will take them slowly, with diabetes and complications caused by obesity, but it will take them.

And I am implicated in their demise. This is not just a job. I'm the sleazy hustler at the bottom of a global pyramid scheme.



Today a woman took her raspberry and coconut medium and sucked on the straw while I poured the rest of her order. When I reappeared at the window she gave me the arch appraisal one would give a cockroach. "There's no juice in this snoball," she complained. "It's dry. Dollar fifty for some dry snoball. I can't even suck it. Look," she gave a pull on the straw, "I can't even suck it." She handed it off to me in disgust.

Our customers are surprisingly entitled when it comes to their snoballs. Even though they cost only a dollar or a dollar fifty, many people expect them to be as perfect and pristine as a high priced automobile. Yet, pouring a snoball is trickier than one would imagine. Because the top of the snoball rises above the rim of the cup into a three-inch cone, the ratio of liquid to

ice is critical. Too much liquid and the snoball “floods” or spills out the sides. Too little syrup and people will complain that it is “dry.”

“Oh, you can suck it,” I thought. I poured enough extra syrup onto her snoball to make it flood. She interrupted my next order to ask for napkins when it wasted all over her.



My snoball job is ruining my friend Nicole’s life. She told me. She calls to see if I can hang out or go to a party, and I can’t because I am working. The low and the desperate have to work the uncomfortable hours so the rest can enjoy their time off. Even in a city like New Orleans, the hours at the stand are tampering with my social life. I thought it would be fine getting out of work at nine or ten. The bars never close, but my friends, who do not dabble in the jobs of teenagers don’t want to wait for me. My after hours are spent in my darkened apartment, stinking but too exhausted to shower, lonely but sickened by people, with only the company of a six pack of High Life. Those are not the evenings of a young person.



I arrived at the stand at 10:30 this morning and opened in the usual way. I set the pans of processed nacho cheese and chili in the warming pans. I threaded hot dogs on the spinner; poured sweetened ice milk into the soft serve machine. The stand opens at 11:00AM. The opening tasks take more than a half hour, but Pete starts paying me at 10:30AM, so even after I separated the big, wooden shutters and turned on the neon “Open” sign, I was in the back mixing flavors.

At 11:05 a pounding on the counter hurried me to the front. A shriveled old man, framed in the window, was bellowing, “Grandma, hey grandma!”

“Hello,” I said to the man. “What can I get you?”

“Hey grandma, where’s the other grandma, the black grandma?”

“Do-do you mean Debra?” I stuttered. “She’s-she’s off today.”

“Well, get me a large pineapple snoball, not too much juice.”

I stared at him for a moment. “Is-is that all?”

“Yes that’s all, what else does there need to be? Get moving, grandma.”

He glared at me as I ground the ice.

“Hurry up,” he hollered. “How long does it take?” He made me so nervous that I couldn’t get the cone to stay on the snoball. His evil stare disrupted the physical properties of the ice. I poured the yellow syrup until he yelled at me to stop.

Later, I reran the interaction in my mind, revising my part to include clever, well-timed insults.

“Grandma? Who are you calling grandma, Methuselah?”

The next time he came I would be completely stone cold up until the moment when I set his large pineapple snoball on the counter. Then I would “accidentally” dump over all 26 ounces on him. The freezing liquid would stream over the counter, pour on to his shoes, splatter his pants.

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I can’t believe the confessions of my co-workers. They told me that if they don’t want to make a flavor, or they don’t want to get something, they just lie and tell the customers we’re out. Or, if they don’t want to refill the strawberry syrup they tell people that it will take fifteen minutes to make, when in reality it takes two.

Now I understand why I always have to do so much work. We don’t make much money, and I understand not going above and beyond the call of duty, but these kids skimp on the bare

minimum requirements of their jobs. They stand around, talking on their cell phones, or hide in the back. At sixteen they have already become disenchanted with the rewards of a job well done. Maybe they have it right. This isn't my career. Why am I working so hard?



Ashley, the idiot as I have privately taken to calling her, started harping on me today about riding my bike. She's not really an idiot. She's just sixteen, poorly educated and shallow. I know this. But she torments me and that makes me despise her.

"Why don't you just buy a car?" she asks.

"You need a car," she demands.

"You won't catch me riding no bike to work," she sasses, "or riding the dang bus."

She laughs until her eyes tear up imaging me riding my bike around the bad neighborhoods.

I tried to explain. I can't afford a car. I can't afford the insurance. My boyfriend has a job, so he can't drive me to work. Cars are a lot of trouble, and I like to ride my bike. New Orleans is one of the few cities in America in which people don't need a car, and I think that's awesome.

Ashley just shakes her head. "Oh no, no, no."

She looks at me like I am crazy, and I can see that between us there is a line of understanding that only age and responsibility can draw. She is still living in the happy oblivion of childhood. In her world, cars don't need to be insured, someone is always there to give her a ride, and she can avoid the utter humiliation of riding a bike. I lived there once.



Never in my life have I been so suspect as I am at the snoball stand.

“I asked for chili and cheese on this hotdog. Where’s the cheese?” I layered the cheese under the chili. It goes on smoother and makes the chili stick to the hotdog, and that’s why you can’t see it. Why would I want to screw anyone out of cheese?

“You sure you got enough juice on there? Put some more syrup on there,” people holler in. Like guards in a prison shower, they watch me pour. It hurts my feelings. I don’t want to give them a crappy snoball, flooded or dry. I want to do it right, but under the constant, bare-bulbed questioning my integrity is starting to crack.



Nicole invited me to a cocktail party for the Tennessee Williams Literary Festival. I went to the party in my black silk cocktail dress, heels, hair and make-up, and snoball fingers. I don’t think anyone noticed. But among all the milky hands of socialites, and beneficiaries, and hipsters, I could feel them, colored like Lady Mac Beth’s. They seemed to pulse, felt red hot, working class fingers wrapped around the stem of my martini glass. When I showed Nicole, she looked at me with pity. “How embarrassing.”



The old man came back today. I was opening up the snoball stand when I heard someone messing with the side door. Hot, liquid fear poured into my gut. I was alone. I left the door unlocked. No one was around. None of my co-workers were scheduled to arrive until one. Was I to be overpowered, beaten? Shot for the fistful of bills in the cash register?

I crept around the corner, prepared myself to face my final mistake. In the outline of bright sunlight, like an angel from heaven, stood the old man.

“What time y’all gonna open up?” he bellowed.

When I told him not until noon on Sundays, he muttered an insult and slammed the door.

Angelo told me that old man river, that's his nickname for the old man, had shown up the day before right at opening. Angelo, who is only twenty-three, has the grim washed countenance of an all night gambler. He wasn't moving quickly enough for the old man. Angelo told him that he wasn't a morning person to which the old man replied, "Why, did you get some pussy last night?"

I thank the grace that spared me a conversation about pussy with an octogenarian at eleven o'clock in the morning.



This morning I shared my work with Judith's nephew. Michael is high-strung, chatty, fifteen and from upper middle class people in Texas. He is spending the summer in New Orleans working for Pete. If the health inspector comes I should say he's sixteen.

Michael, for the most part, is completely useless. So today, it wasn't strange that he was standing around gabbing while I was serving customers at the window. There is one contractor who always orders wedding cake. We add a dash of pineapple to the white wedding cake to give the flavor a soft yellow color. The contractor bitches when there is too much pineapple and the wedding cake flavor looks yellow. I was helping him, and as he handed me his money he asked, "Is that your son?"

I turned and stared at Michael, whom I would have conceived at the age of eight. I stared at the contractor.

"Are you kidding me?" I demanded.

He must have seen the horror on my face, because the contractor chuckled to himself and gave me a smile like he had meant it as a joke.

My son? My son! Do I look old enough to have a teenage son? Sure, I have found exactly three grey hairs along my part, and there is that deep crease in my brow from scowling, but a teenage son? Maybe I need to get Bo-Tox, or drink more water, or quit working at this fucking snoball stand where I am surrounded by the nubile faces that will always put me at a disadvantage.



I opened up the ice chest this morning. It was filled with blocks of yellow ice. Not brilliant yellow but the color of watered down urine. I called Pete. It is the color of the water that comes out of the tap, he says. The pipes are old.

“Just put a little extra syrup on there,” he advises me with a laugh. When I point out the irony of yellow snow to my co-workers, none of them find it that amusing. I suppose only a native of a northern climate could understand.



Ashley asked me to make popcorn today in the giant old machine that takes up counter space next to the hot dog spinner. Pete showed me how, and since we were slow, I didn't mind popping some for her, even though she spills it like confetti all over the floor while she's talking and munching at the same time. She isn't the one who will have to clean it up.

She watched me make the popcorn. Two kiddie cups of thick yellow popcorn oil, generously labeled “butter flavored,” and two small cups of popcorn from a fifty-pound bag. I mentioned that popcorn is high in fiber.

“Lauren,” she looked me incredulously, “you know *everything*.” Then she laughed. To her my extended education was amusing and sometimes useful, but nonetheless, an unnecessary pastime.



Nicole and I do our weekly shopping at Whole Foods Market on Sunday mornings. We were frolicking around the wine section. A man came up to me while I was obsessing over Chianti.

“I know you from somewhere. Where do you work?” Behind my hand and in a whisper I told him, the snoball stand.

“That is where I know you from!” he practically shouted.

“Don’t tell anyone, okay,” I pleaded. I was straddling two lives—buying organic yogurt with wages earned selling processed sugar. This is the divergence in lifestyle this summer represents.



There’s something wrong with the mandarin. A couple days ago a woman brought her Styrofoam cup back to the counter. There were gaping, orange lined holes eaten out of the sides. I apologized, offered to make her a new snoball, and then dumped out the bottle of mandarin flavor and made it over.

Mandarin is one of those bottles of flavor in the back with a warning label that firmly suggests that you shake the contents before mixing the concentrate with simple syrup. Mandarin, root beer, blue Hawaiian, pink bubblegum: I always give these bottles a cursory hard shake, like a dog breaking the neck of a rabbit.

Though Pete repeatedly tells us that the flavors only have a shelf life of one week, no one bothers to keep track of when the flavors were made, or how long they have been sitting there. Sometimes the cream and chocolate flavors coagulate, and the more contentious employees (me) will remake the flavor before selling it to anyone. Flavor that sits for too long eventually



ferments into something I would imagine resembles the taste of prison moonshine.

Fermentation, mold spores, clumps and discoloration are not surprising consequences when the bottles sit, loosely covered with tin foil, on the ugly side of room temperature for weeks at a time.

I figured this particular mandarin syrup had been in the bottle too long. Maybe the citric acid had built up at the bottom or something.

A few days later, another customer complained about the mandarin. I have no recollection of who sold this man his jumbo mandarin snoball, but as the resident adult in the stand, I was trotted out to deal with the complaints. He was brown and accented so slightly that I couldn't determine if he was South Asian or Latino, probably Latino since there were titanic soccer matches played in the fields behind the stand and everyone was speaking Spanish. He was hysterical. He was waving a melted cup in my face.

“My lips are burning! What is wrong? Why are my lips burning?”

“Sir, I am so sorry. There is something wrong with the flavor; there must be just a little extra citric acid in the flavor, but it won't hurt you.”

“No! My lips are burning. What is going on? I am going to have to go to the doctor!”

“Sir, I can assure you, it is just citric acid. It is the same kind of acid that is in an orange. The level of acidity in your stomach is so high there shouldn't be any problems. Can I get you another snoball? Would you like your money back?”

Both of us realized that what had happened couldn't be fixed with a refund or a new snoball. There was something wrong with him, probably just a minor chemical burn, but something wrong just the same. He was the victim of a snoball borne toxic event. Maybe he was poor. Maybe he didn't have a doctor. And here he was, facing a snoball stand full of

powerless, underpaid, teenagers. No one could help him or make it better. There was no one to yell at, no one to offer credible reassurance, and no one to hold accountable.

In his eyes I registered the impotence of the two of us, insignificant players, holding hands and do-si-do-ing around a messy, scary world.

I offered to throw the cup away, but the man snatched it out of my hands and mumbled something about taking it to his lawyer or the mayor or the better business bureau. He demanded Pete's name and number, as well as my name and the names of all the kids in the stand. I gave him my name, but kept the kids out of it. I realized I might become part of a lawsuit I couldn't afford.

I called Pete. Then I did some experiments with different concentrations of mandarin syrup, shaken and unshaken with kiddie cups in the flavor room. All of them scored the insides of the cups and ate away the Styrofoam.

We were forced to deep clean the entire stand in case the health inspector came. But neither the health inspector nor any lawyers ever appeared. Pete claimed he called Snowizard, but the only real result of the Mandarin Incident was that Pete took the bottle of flavor concentrate and put it on a shelf in the back room with a note that read, "do not use" and illustrated with a crude skull and cross bones. When people asked for mandarin we told them we didn't serve that flavor anymore.



A partial list of the things I hate about my job at the snoball stand:

One. I hate it when people lean way over the counter to watch me pour their snoballs. I know they're watching and I get performance anxiety. I especially hate it when they shout

orders into the stand like, “Whoa, whoa, that’s enough” or “Are you sure you got enough juice on there?”

Two. I hate the lady who orders heavy syrup, heavy whip. She is rotund and greedy, and she wants her snoball absolutely drenched in banana and ice cream flavors. I have to use half a can of whipped topping to make her happy. I hate her piggy little eyes, her grubby fingers. I hate myself for serving her so pleasantly, for pouring on the heavy syrup and whip, for knowing her face and knowing her order, for being the person that she specifically requests to make her snoball. I hate pleasing her in exchange for a pathetic one-dollar tip, when I should dump her snoball over her godforsaken head and send her scurrying off to Smoothie King with her curly tail between her porcine thighs.

Three. I hate the smell in the morning when I arrive hot and fresh from my bike ride. The stand is dark and cool from being closed up all night, but the smell never leaves: the stink of fermented sugar stains, of tap water and old nacho cheese, of salty sweat and salty chips, of ice and machine oil, of filthy dollar bills and pickle brine. I hate it when I was the one who closed the night before and the smell is rinsed with chlorine bleach, and I hate it when someone else closes and they are lazy and smell emanates from the sticky grip of the floor.

Four. I hate serving pickled pig lips.

Five. When Nicole brings me a peanut butter sandwich, and I sit with my back to the stand, enthralled in the hot, brilliant sub-tropical afternoons at the park, and behind me I can feel the line growing, dragging me away from a decent conversation and a few minutes away from the stand: I hate that.

I used to take pride in my work. I used to grin for the customers, give them a big “How ya doing?” free of charge with every order. Of course, I was smiling. I took this job because I

thought it would be fun. I believed in the inherent value of quality customer service. I used to like people, respect their humanity, and give them the benefit of the doubt. I used to work hard and feel rewarded by that hard work. Now, I am beginning to feel nothing but resentment.



I worked a double today. Last night Tropical Storm Cindy knocked out power for much of the city north of the snoball stand and sent many of the limbs of the live oaks into the streets. We expected a slow day at the stand, late June and July have been quiet, but instead we were bombarded. Hordes of customers from the air conditioning-starved parts of the city decided to cool themselves with snoballs. Trevor didn't show up at four o'clock, and when Terrianna left at seven, Angelo and I were alone with the line. With no one to grind the ice, we had to complete each part of the snoball process ourselves. Supplies dwindled, syrup splattered everything, and the last person wasn't served until just before nine o'clock closing. My feet ached, and I was dazed with hunger. We didn't finish closing until an unheard of 9:45PM.

I rode my bike through the park. All the streetlights were out. I squinted, hoping to catch a glimpse of yellow lights along the I-10. Instead I pedaled full speed into a downed tree. I had seen it that morning, on my ride to work, but I forgot it was there. I assumed someone would have cleared it during the day. Leaves and small branches were hitting me in the face. The massive oak completely enveloped me. It was as if I were flying through the tree tops. Suddenly, I realized that if I didn't stop quickly I could hit a large limb and go flying off my bike, or hit my head and slowly bleed to death in the darkened park. No one would find me until the maintenance workers finally hacked the debris apart with chainsaws.

I skidded, sliding my bike to the side. When I stopped and realized I wasn't hurt, I scooched my bike to the left out of the grasp of the tree. I stood there for a second, straddling

my unscathed bike, and letting out a stream of relieved curses. I rode home the rest of the way, peering into the darkness, and reminding myself that I am too old to be leaving a job at ten o'clock at night, too old to be riding into trees.



Don't look at their teeth. Just stare over their shoulders. Don't make the mistake of considering the familiar, rotted nubs of the regulars. Don't look for the cavities; don't watch them grow. Some of them fix their teeth with gold; some have stars or hearts cut out of the gold, a window to the dust colored teeth beneath. In their mouths, more than any other place, the shuddering truths of poverty, and pollution, and poor nutrition are showcased.



I cut the hell out of my thumb last night. I worked a double, neglected to eat anything, and then while I was cleaning the malt machine, I nicked my right thumb on the spinning blade. It's one of those old fashioned machines with the aluminum cups. The blades aren't sharp, and usually you can touch them while they are whirling, but this one had been banged up and there was a tiny jagged edge that is only of consequence if you nip your finger with it while it is still spinning.

The pain was ferocious and circles of blood followed my trail from the malt machine to a fistful of napkins. How beautiful the blood's color was, so vivid, deep red, almost brown, compared to the grainy, artificial rainbow of spilled snoball syrup, I thought. With my hand above my head, blood filled my ears with the whir of stirred sand. "So this is what it feels like to faint," I thought.

I told Angelo I needed to sit down. He put me in the folding chair, helped customers for the last hour, and cleaned the stand. Neither Pete nor Judith answered their phones, so I called

Nicole and asked her for a ride home. She talked me down from the idea of going to the Charity Hospital Emergency Room. We would have to sit there all night, she reminded me.

Blood continued to seep out of the gash. I couldn't feel the tip of my thumb. Nicole took me to her house, fetched me beers, and we watched a movie while I held my hand wrapped in tissue aloft.

You've done it this time; really hurt yourself, I thought. There's no going back and fixing this one. You might never have feeling in that finger again. There is going to be a terrible scar. Your stupid, piece of shit job has scarred you. Was it worth it? Was it worth losing your right thumb, the most important finger? Idiot. You're not a kid anymore.

Last night was the first time I really felt my vulnerable corporeality. Never before was it so clear to me that I have only one, fragile body, and my decisions, and choices, and slip-ups have actual, physical consequences. Like the first ding on a brand new car, I realized that my snoball cut was just the first in a series of injuries and deteriorations and disease of which the ultimate result would be my death. And what stings, stings more than accidentally banging the severed nerves of my thumb, was that this injury was stupid, and pointless, and incurred while I was engaged in a job I'm too old for.



At all my jobs, even in my master's program, I have always self-identified as the young person. From the publishing house to the airport parking garage, I impressed my employers with abilities that went above and beyond my youth and inexperience. I found the role becoming.

But now I know I'm going to have to find a new way to see myself in my work. The inverse of the situation I'm accustomed to, a job that I am overqualified and overeducated for, is clearly not sustainable.

The snoball stand was my send off. I embraced the nineteen-year-old inside. I laughed along with the kids when someone got beamed with a handful of slush, and I ate nachos. I wore my oldest, trashiest clothes and got disgustingly messy. When a sudden deluge flooded out the kickball game across the street, and the players pulled their Jeep up under the awning of the stand, I traded snoballs and candy bars for big cups of their keg beer, and I didn't worry about drinking on the job. Who cares? I thought. It's just a snoball stand. I worked hard and then left it behind when I went home. For once I didn't have anxiety dreams about my work.

I needed the snoball stand to show me what I have grown out of and to help me say goodbye. Without the snoball stand, I might have clung to the myth that a job with no responsibilities and no challenges would be the kind of work I would be happier in.

I have been dragging my feet, holding back on growing up, for too long. As an adult I will have to accept actual responsibility, face complex problems without solutions. I'll be challenged, and sometimes I'll fail. I'm scared of all those things, but they're better than making snoballs. The snoball stand was my last stand. I'm ready for something more.

I had planned to work at the stand until it closed in October for the winter, but I just couldn't do it anymore. I lied and told Pete and Judith that I would get fired from my teaching assistantship if I didn't give up the snoball stand.

My last day was August 27, 2005. I mopped the floor before I left.

## Vita

Lauren R. Rice was born in Joliet, Illinois and she grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. She earned her B.A. from the University of Iowa, where she studied English literature.