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When the Mailman is Late

Anna Kubiak

Genesee Community College

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When the Mailman Is Late

Cracks are really just spiders in disguise. They fool everyone except for me, because I see things for what they are. How raindrops are intruders and feelings are illusions, but people learn to love both because they think they have to. I'm not one of those people. Someone has to see the absolute truth in everything.

It's my gift, my curse, that aching itch in the back of my throat just past my ear that I can never scratch, just swallow again and again and again until it's smoothed over for the moment. My dad always tries to get me to take the drugs the doctor with the fuzzy hair gave me, but little orange bottles are tyranny and pills are just excuses, so we live in peace in a broken little home where the grass is too long and the old cassette tapes move themselves in the night.

I take breakfast at 5:00 a.m. Square bread with discarded crusts, toasted with no butter. If it's late then there's no telling what could happen. Maybe the decaying shingles will fall from the roof one by one, maybe they'll shatter the windows or hit a pipe, maybe the bathroom will flood or a bedroom, maybe no one will help us, maybe we just won't wake up one day. The coffee has to be black because what if the milk corrupts the proportions? What if I think I'm drinking caffeine, but really it's just mostly milk and I've been lying to myself? I would never lie to myself. It would be wrong and might cause my organs to fail or my father's. Or maybe the tree leaning towards the house might decide to fall. No, lying would offset the carefully constructed balance that keeps everything in its place. Lying would cause my whole life to crumble.

I wash the table five times before I eat there. I like the number five; it sounds good rolling off my tongue. It sounds right, like if the rag wipes over the wood five times then the neighbor's cat won't climb too high in the tree and worms won't wiggle their way into my bed. I used to like the sound of four and before that three. It was even one once, but five is better, five almost feels good, but maybe six might be the best.

The plate has to be twisted at a forty-five degree angle and the coffee cup at ninety degrees; as long as it's that way, there won't be an earthquake. My feet are firmly on the floor when I take my first bite, so that the car doesn't break down. I would eat with my father, but he always gets it wrong. Can't he feel when he's teetering over a line that can't be uncrossed? After all, failing is always purposeful because success always feels like luck. I don't like it when he tries to talk to me. Talking doesn't create change; it just makes you feel bad for not changing. He doesn't understand, but I wish he would, because how can you not break something when you don't understand it?

He takes breakfast in his room. I can't go near his room. Things are always moving: books on the desk end up on the floor, sheets are never straight, and the door always seems locked, but if you don't check it once, twice, six times, can you really be sure? He works from home on a little laptop, hunched over all day. I check on him seven times to make sure he's still there. If he runs, his mess, litter, and pollution will drag me with him, and our house will crumble. There will be nothing to come back to.

"Dad." I stand with my back to the wall outside his door looking directly at the opposite wall without blinking. The toe of my right foot is pointed east and my left foot is pointed north. The three second delay we agreed on ensues.

"Yes?" he replies, his voice annoyingly hoarse. He should clear his throat or else maybe the little particles will continue to grow until he can't breathe.

"Clear your throat," I tell him, though he should know what could happen.

He clears his throat.

"Again," I tell him.

He does it again. "What do you need?"

"The mailman is late," I say to the opposite wall.

"Maybe he got stuck in traffic."

My dad sounds exhausted. I know how he feels; surviving is exhausting, but that doesn't mean we should stop. "No. He's always here at 8 a.m." I talk to the wall again.

"Maybe he took a different route today. I'm sure he's still coming." The hoarseness is coming back.

"It's not supposed to be different. He's late. I think he's dead," I say fervently. There can be no accidents in life. Without the big picture, the little pictures wouldn't make sense.

"He's not dead." My dad sighs.

My dad with his nice enough ways, except for his inability to comprehend what is right in front of his face. "You don't know that," I reply. We are past the days when he can comfort me and tell me all the things he knows so that I don't have to worry about them. I now know the difference between what someone knows and what they think they know.

"You don't know that he's dead either," my dad says with a little more enthusiasm.

"But he's late," I explain again.

"Okay so he's late," my dad says. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"I want you to call the mail company and tell them that he's late." Sometimes speaking to my dad is like speaking to a child.

"Fine, how late is he?" My dad seems to be scratching his head.

I check my watch. "Exactly fifty-nine seconds," I say, slowly as the numbers keep rattling by.

"Oh, for the love of..." my dad begins.

"No!" I yelp. "You can't swear."

"I wasn't going to swear, I was just going to say..."

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!" I seal my hands around my ears. Sometimes the oceans in my mind get loud, tossing worries like waves that wash away all the things I need to make sense.

"Okay, I won't say anything," my dad says.

"You can't swear or else I'll have to put salt over all the window panes and then that would mess with the ergonomics of the wood." I'm starting to ramble a little, but how could he not understand how important this is? I've only told him two hundred and forty-one times.

"Okay, okay, you win." My dad groans. "I have work to do now, so run along."

"But the mailman's late," I tell the opposite wall. "I think he's dead. Probably popped his tire then got bitten by a snake when he went to fix it."

"I'll call the company, if he doesn't show up, okay?" My dad seems as though he's trying to soothe me. "It's not likely that he got bitten by a snake so you can find something else to worry about."

"It's more likely than a plane crash. I worry about things that are worth worrying about, like missing mailmen." I pause. "Because he's late."

"Why don't you go check if he's here now?" My dad's fingers begin clicking away again.

"But then I'll have gone up and down the stairs eight times before 9:42 a.m." I almost stomp my feet, but then they would be out of place.

“I don’t know what to tell you. Sometimes you have to go up and down the stairs more than eight times before 9:42 a.m.” He doesn’t sound like he’s listening anymore.

“No, that’s not right, you have to call the mail company and tell them the mailman died. He’s two minutes late, he’s not coming.” Hyperventilating is just drowning without the water, but he doesn’t seem to know that.

“Alright, I’ll call, but you have to go downstairs, because I have work to do.” Dad doesn’t sound like he’s going to call, but deals are deals. Breaking them is like lying, and lying would cause the house to collapse on itself one brick at a time. Being brave when I’m scared is lying too, but people seem to think that’s okay. My dad wants me gone because he thinks I’m crazy, but I’m not crazy, I’m just careful. For all he knows, I could be saving his life every moment I spend mine seeing things he can’t.

The stairs look warped when I look at them from the top. I cleaned them twice yesterday. I’ll clean them again today, but it isn’t time yet. I should have been reading the newspaper when it arrived two minutes ago like I do every morning except for Sundays when I read the first forty-three pages of the dictionary instead. Every step seems like a warning flag, because after all what are possibilities if not ways things can go wrong. I take the stairs fast to get it over with.

If I believed in curses, I would believe that I cursed myself. Everything was safe and right the way it was. Change can only mean that new factors will throw off the old ones and I can be left to figure everything out all over again.

As I suspected, the mailman isn’t there when I go downstairs. I don’t know what to do with myself. What is the point of a plan if no one else cares how important it is? After reading the newspaper, I usually clean the kitchen, but I can’t clean the kitchen until the newspaper arrives, but that won’t happen until the mailman comes, but he won’t come until Dad calls the company, but Dad won’t call until he wants to, and there’s no telling when that will be. I hope it will be soon, but what is hope really if not confirmation that there is no proof of anything?

I have no choice but to venture onto the front step to get the newspaper as quickly as I can. I feel something like remorse for the events of the morning, but that doesn’t make sense because remorse isn’t sad enough to be depression, and it isn’t guilty enough to be regret, so there doesn’t seem to be a purpose for it inside me. If I step on the crease between the tiles on the step, surely the mirror in the closet of the guest bedroom will shatter and little pieces will lodge themselves into the carpet, and when I go to clean it I’ll cut my hands and knees. If the sun hits the top of my head before 12:17 p.m. then the chimney will clog and suffocate us in our sleep.

“Hello.” A voice catches me by surprise. There is a small child standing in the neighbor’s yard. I dislike small children; because they always have juice

stuck to their chins and rude questions spewing from their mouths. I don't reply. I don't speak to anyone other than my dad before I've read my newspaper, otherwise the ink from the newspaper will leach into my skin while I'm reading it and cause irreversible damage to my nervous system.

"You're supposed to say hello back," the boy whines.

I have to respond otherwise he'll come over to me and that would be far worse. "I don't speak to anyone before I've read my newspaper." I pause. "It's bad luck."

"You're waiting for it now?" The boy is still coming closer.

"Yes, the mailman is three minutes late," I reply.

"Okay," the boy says, and walks towards me. "I'll wait with you." He sits down on my front lawn in the grass that's too long.

I glare at his impertinence. This is ridiculous. All the muscles in my body are rigid. What's the point of having property lines if no one respects them? What's the point of having children if they don't listen to you? Why would anyone be outside before 12:17 p.m.?

But the kid doesn't say anything, he just sits there watching the road like I am. I don't like it. Waiting is just disappointment before you realize it's there, and quiet is really just a blanket that covers the real problem. And yet, nothing bad is happening. So, I sit on the porch until the mailman pulls up with my newspaper exactly seven minutes and twenty-eight seconds late, and I can run back into my house where it's safe and comfortable and everything makes sense. But I don't make it inside before the boy calls after me.

"See you tomorrow, then," and at first I hate him for saying it, because friendship is just sacrifice and suggestions are really demands, yet as I begin to remove the dishes from the cupboard, I think just maybe I will wait for the mailman on the porch tomorrow, because what are obnoxious, annoying children if not expressions of growth and what am I if not someone who sees things for what they are?