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## Words Volume 1 2007-2009

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DES MOINES AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

West Campus  
**WORDS**

POEMS, STORIES AND ESSAYS BY STUDENTS

volume 1

2007-2009



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poems

# Scars

Amie Crawford

After a shower  
my scars appear,  
as brilliant and obvious  
as a shooting star,  
the silver-white light  
shining against  
the depth of the  
black sky.  
The glowing orb  
rockets across the sky,  
gone as fast as it came.  
Where my scars were,  
is now just a pale piece  
of flesh, with no hint  
of scarring.

poems

# Many Fragile Rings

Jake Perrigo

I can remember a time  
When a split in my skin would  
Have shown only five fragile rings.  
And though my grandmother's petals  
Had begun to peel off at the stem,  
She gathered herself to lay me  
In silky blankets that she spun.  
Like a canary who couldn't sing  
She found grace in comforting.  
As I grew, nine rings strong,  
I was left staring at her, a crushed flower.  
But still I remember thinking that if I rode my bike  
Down the middle of the street  
A car would drop me off at her new door.  
I believed the shards of the windshield's glass

Would shoot through the air, straight up to her  
And my body would sprinkle in with them.  
But the fear of being tossed carelessly into the air  
Without anyone to catch me  
Drove me back home every night.  
Now there are 21 rings in my stomach  
And I'm not certain what waits  
Passed the bells tolling over the seas of clouds  
So I've begun weaving my own silky blankets  
Like my grandmother once did  
Because I know now that each morning comes in  
like a snowflake  
And there might not be a candle in the sky  
Waiting to warm the moss-covered souls that have  
left the earth.

poems

# Egartistic

Justin Tyler Amundson

I hear music when you hear wind  
I see the beauty to which you are blind  
My brain is bright and yours is dimmed  
My senses are much more refined  
I bless the people with my knowledge  
And they should be filled with such delight  
I use all the words that I learned in college  
I just hope I use them right  
My pedantic semantics oft' go awry  
And I choose words that really don't fit  
But I know that they will slip by  
And you'll never know I'm full of it

poems

# If It's Okay With You

Jackie Duden

I'd like to just forget  
the way your hand  
felt in mine,  
our soft lips  
brushing together.  
I'd like to just forget  
how everything felt right,  
though it was all wrong;  
how it hurt  
to lose forever.  
But  
If it's okay with you  
I think I'll remember  
why you made me smile,

everything you did  
to make me fall.  
If it's okay with you  
I'll understand why  
I loved you  
and why you  
loved me.  
I'd like to just forget  
but if it's okay with you  
I think I'll hold you here  
and let the worst of you  
make the best of me.



poems

# Home

Rachel Crouse

Wanderers, wanting a home for today.  
Fifty-four degrees with no breath of breeze;  
Perhaps the park on Eighth where the sunlight may  
Be leisurely scattered beneath the trees.  
Or home could be the Grand and East Sixth strip;  
It's the place to go when we won't belong  
To the escrow crowd and the row home drips  
Surrounding the city a million strong.  
For us, home could be the Greyhound bus stop:  
Asphalt, exhausted and diesel-fogged air  
Holding out promise and a change of scene  
For the price of tickets destined nowhere.  
    But I don't find this home a mystery,  
    It's wherever, whenever he's with me.

poems

# The Last Of My Kind

Teresa N. Randolph

They thought I'd be the first  
    to lose  
this game of love that naïve hearts often play.  
    They splash around in the shallow waters  
of virtue,  
    slowly making their way into the deeper  
ends of despair.  
I find myself clinging to the wall  
    watching the others float away  
    into the darkness  
        one by one.

They drift farther away  
    until they are lost.

I am the last of my kind  
who refuses to give in to this  
    lustful conformity  
of naked hearts and empty promises.

I am alone



poems

# Drowning

Jackie Duden

I want so badly  
to love you.  
But  
I've fallen  
into a pool of doubt.  
Now  
I'm squirming  
to reach the surface  
but you  
are pushing me  
back under.  
As I hold my breath  
I lose track  
of which tears

have been cried for you  
and which have been cried  
by you.  
What I want  
is to hold you closer,  
and to kiss you  
goodbye  
all at once.

It's like drinking  
the same liquid  
over and over.  
After a while  
it seems to lose taste.

poems

# A Night in the Park

Teresa N. Randolph

Dark pines shadow over this  
forbidden love.  
Did it hurt?  
Can I touch it?  
Such vibrant swirls of color  
greased over in such a way  
that they shine in the moonlight.  
Don't tell me how my eyes sparkle  
or how your fingers tremble  
when you touch my skin.  
I don't want to hear it.

Take this to your grave.  
Do it for me.  
Walk into the shadows  
the thick smell of pine  
suffocates me.  
Pushed against  
moist dirt  
and crisp leaves  
I don't want to.  
Flashes of red and blue  
save me.

poems

# A Sample Of The Sounds Of Presidential Hopeful And His Captured Jake Perrigo

Presidential Hopeful:

"Hell? Oh, General Men and Lay teas, I am her two take-all the key is-hues. Read-using our envy-of-iron-metals I'm packed, wheel cawas a big-gear con-and-drum"

(clap, clap, and clap)

"All-so my up-own-net lacks convicts-shuns went-it comes toothy bored-her can't-roll is-hue. We knead too seal though-is-bored-hers and key-pudge-obscene A-mare-I-caw four A-mare-I-cans!"

(Clap, Clap, Clap, Clap, and Clap)

A Potential Voter:

"How do you plan to fight the epidemic that is terrorism and still keep airports running efficiently?"

Presidential Hopeful:

"Ere-import a-fish-in-sea is cruise-shall to a straw-anger A-mare-I-caw. I habit hunter-red-aye-plant to war-quip the ere-imports and kip tear-oh-reason offer these-oil!"

(CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, AND CLAPS)

"That saw eye gopher eye two-day! Than Q, and God Bowl Less!"

(ROAR)

poems

## Bus Ride

Carissa Dagget

Peering into the glass,  
and the darkness beyond.  
My shape is vague,  
and indistinct.  
The edges bleed,  
colored black like india ink.  
Then, I peer—  
as if through fog.  
I'm watching the moon  
rise, I think  
this pale orb...  
is some ghostly version,  
of me.

poems

D--- T---

Vahid Mujic

It stands tall against the dark sky.

Moonlight escapes the black  
clouds, just to revive its image  
repeatedly, like an old roll of film.

Its glistening streets reflect  
colors of red, yellow and green,  
the only familiar intrusion of the day.

Steel giants, as if asleep,  
wink one by one, each window  
darkened in the skyline checkerboard.  
Once full of workers, this hive  
looks deserted each night.

Its mesmerizing glow attracts  
even the least curious of travelers  
who, as the day starts, are  
replaced by the noise and chaos  
of a regular workday.

poems

## Outside Looking In

Laura Ferrari

Looking at all the people I realize that I am  
too observant for my own good,

I am missing the true meaning of the  
image that's in front of me.

Analytically consumed, freeing myself  
from what I could be;

Escaping from me.

I am manipulating my own thoughts and  
flooding myself with consistent worries.

A social mask conforms to my facial structure.

But with the ones I love that mask is taken off

Truth and comfort wrap their  
arms around my soul.

I hang up the mask on a hook in my bedroom.

I think;

We are all to be special books,

We are simply waiting on the best kind of reader.

poems

# The Widow

*(inspired by E.E. Cumming's "l(a)")*

Shaina Mugan

A widow went walking when  
**The world** withered today.  
She took with her just nothing and  
Nothing to say

A beaten path **no longer** showed  
His face  
Though time and direction have slipped  
Out of place.  
No measurement.  
No sentiment.

For concepts Once known

When Dusk **whimpers**  
Slowly upon her  
She'll have forgotten **her name**

But what is there to say?  
The world **has withered away**

This does not claim her  
For in her loneliness  
A Leaf Falls.

poems

# The Young Man

Mallory Lillie

There he was, that young man,  
looking vivacious as always.  
He was wearing the same leather  
jacket, and the same leather shoes.  
He was in his normal spot waiting for the bus,  
reading the daily newspaper.

He always arrived thirty minutes  
prior to the bus and always read the  
daily newspaper.  
His routine never changed,  
it was always the same, day after day.

One day, as I waited for the bus,  
I decided I would speak with him.  
But, he was not in his normal spot,  
reading the daily paper. I longed to see him,  
him and his leather jacket and leather shoes,  
even though I saw him the day before.

I read in the newspaper later that day,  
that he was found dead in his apartment,  
still wearing his leather jacket and  
leather shoes, holding the daily newspaper.

# Winter in Mexico

Shaina Muga

Winter air-  
Harsh and zesty  
As it traces my path through the door,  
To mimic the actions to follow.  
I need not ask,  
To shelter myself from lingering lies.  
It gives itself away-  
Still crisp in the air.  
Needlessly, because it's fair,  
I question your days  
Events before you finalize  
The speech you'd prepared.  
I break through your eyes,  
Quite deafening in their silence,  
They won't lie,  
They allow your lips to do  
The dirty work.  
Sending you in an uproar  
Of splattering rage.  
Your tongue's creations come  
First at me—too swift  
For me to dodge. And  
Swarming about madly  
Like the storm conjuring outside

It reeks of Mexico,  
In our kitchen: suburban Iowa.  
Ketchup, Tabasco, and Tequila  
Paint the walls in  
A mural of Fury followed  
By blood of an untamed fist-  
A fist, I thought,  
That would one day find its way  
To my brow.  
But lonesome  
It would find itself,  
Before spring could arrive,  
Without ever finding my brow, lip, or cheek,  
The fist, too, that will never again hold  
Mine on quiet nights  
Or any other night.  
Who would return to  
A winter in Mexico, when it isn't warm?

# Austin

*(an excerpt)*

Bailey Kline

"Austin!" her manager yelled as he hustled past her dressing room door. "You're on."

Austin took a deep breath, looked in the mirror one last time, and slipped on her shoes. The only sound she could hear as she walked down the long hallway was her heels clicking on the concrete floor. She had been singing on stage her whole life, but the butterflies never seemed to leave her. For years, she thought it would get easier, but it never did. The anxiety she felt right before she stepped onto the stage was excruciating. But the minute her foot hit the stage, the butterflies were gone because all those people out there were waiting for her.

"Austin, Austin, Austin, Austin." She heard a loud chant coming from the end of the hall. A smile came across her face, but the butterflies were still there. She stepped into the wings and saw a young man on the stage. For a long time, she had been the opening act for others, but now she had one, two in fact.

"Well folks, the part of the show you have all been waiting for...here she is...Austin." The young man, Blake Anderson, walked toward her. They passed as she stepped on stage and he grabbed her hand, gave it a squeeze, and let go. A big smile came across her face as he dropped her hand.

"Hey ya'll," Austin said into the microphone she had carried on stage. "How ya'll doin' tonight?" A loud roar erupted. Austin's smile grew. "Glad to hear it. I'm glad ya'll could be here. Aren't Blake and Down Home great?" Another roar went through the crowd. Austin fed on the energy coming from the audience. "Well, here we go." She sang her first song and had the audience on their feet.

"I have to admit, I've never been to Des Moines, Iowa before. But this is a great place, and ya'll are making me feel so welcome. I hope you enjoy the show."

Austin pushed a lock of dark brown hair from her face and started singing again. She looked into the audience and saw, in the front row, a familiar face. But she didn't know who he was. There was something about him that made Austin shiver. She quickly looked out into the audience again, farther back this time. With all the bright lights shining on the stage, she could barely make out anyone. It was like staring into the sun. As she sang, she squinted to see more faces, but it was impossible. She focused on a dark spot just to the left of the center and sang to it; there was no use in trying to see anyone.

After a few more songs, she took a seat on a stool that one of the roadies had brought her. "Folks, I wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"I love you, Austin!" a young male voice yelled from the audience. The audience lights flipped on and she could see a boy, about fifteen, jumping up and waving at her.

Austin waved back and replied, "Well, I love you too."

The boy fell into his seat dramatically and put his hand to his heart. Austin couldn't help but laugh.

"So, how ya'll likin' the show?" Austin asked as she took a seat. The crowd applauded. "I'm glad. Now I want to sing a song to you. It's a new song. Ya'll are the first to hear it. A friend of mine came to me one day, and he wanted to write a song. He handed me a piece of paper with his ideas scribbled down. I asked what kind of song, and he said the kind that makes a difference. So we sat down and wrote this song in a few hours. That friend was Blake Anderson, and I feel privileged that he asked me to help him. Blake has written quite a few songs for me, but before this we had never written one together. Blake wanted to make a difference, he wanted to speak out...about abuse. And I have to say he did a great job. This is really his song, not mine."

The music began, and Austin looked down into the crowd. She saw the man again, the one from before, the one who had made her shiver. The part came in the music where Austin was supposed to sing, but she didn't. The band looked at each other and played it again, but again, she didn't sing. Her eyes met the man's, and he smiled a toothy grin. A chill ran up her spine.

"Austin, what are you doing?" She heard Blake in her earpiece. "Sing."

The band played the same part for the third time, and this time Austin finally started singing.

Blake sighed in relief as she started then he looked into the audience and saw the man she had been staring at. Why, he wondered. The man was just another avid Austin fan. She had a million just like him.

An entire following, in fact. Blake stood, staring at Austin. She was slender and medium height with long, dark brown hair. She had amazingly beautiful eyes, one green, one blue. Her smile always made Blake stare. She could light up a room with just a smile. She was gorgeous and only nineteen, nearly the same age as him. She had been doing this much longer than he had, but no one knew exactly how long.

An hour later, Austin said, "Ya'll, that's all the time we've got. Thank you so much for coming out and supporting us," she said to the sold-out crowd. "Ya'll come back now."

She walked off the stage and heard the crowd. She noticed no one was moving. "Austin, Austin, Austin, Austin," the audience chanted.

Austin smiled and ran back on stage. "Just one more," she said, and the audience roared. "And I'm gonna bring my friends Blake Anderson and Down Home back out here to help me out." Austin looked into the right wing and saw Blake smiling at her. He jogged out, carrying his guitar, followed by the three men who made up Down Home.

Austin looked down into the audience, but the man from before was gone.

"Carry on my wayward son. There'll be peace when you are done. Lay your weary head to rest. Don't you cry no more," Austin started. Blake joined in on the following line, and Down Home did the same on the next before the five finished the song together.

"Thanks ya'll," the group said together as they walked off the stage.

The five were joking around when Austin heard her name. She turned around, and the other four guys kept walking. The man from the front row, the one that gave her shivers, was standing right next to the stage. Blake walked back up behind Austin and put his hand on her shoulder. Austin jumped and looked at him.

Austin put her hand to her mouth and turned back to the man, but he was gone. "Huh?" she said and turned back to walk with Blake.

"You did great," Blake told her, but she didn't hear him. Austin was racking her brain; why couldn't she remember where she had seen him before? Just thinking about him still made her shiver. "Austin," Blake tried again. "Austin, earth to Austin."

Austin looked up at him, and his eyes met hers. "Sorry. What?"

"I said you did great. They really love you."

"You sure?" she asked, doubting herself like she did after every show.

"Yes. You're amazing."

Austin smiled at him. Blake took her hand, but she dropped it when her manager, Kevin, walked up to them, saying, "Amazing as usual."

"That's just what I told her."

Kevin glared at Blake and said nothing to him. "Hon, we've got another show tomorrow in Austin, so we need to get going. Tonight, I think you should just get some sleep. You'll need to be rested for tomorrow." He scowled at Blake.

"Yes, sir," Austin laughed.

"Austin, I'm not joking. That means you, in your bus, alone."

"I know what you mean, Kevin." This time she was angry. She knew exactly what he meant, which was no sharing a bus for a few hundred miles with Blake or any of the Down Home boys. She was to be strictly left alone. His comment was focused more on Blake than her, but they both got it.

When Austin turned to find Brad, Josh, and Ryan, the Down Home boys, Kevin said, "Austin."

She turned back and in the rudest voice she could muster, she replied, "I know, Kevin. I'm gonna say goodnight to everybody." She turned and walked with Blake in the opposite direction of Kevin. She took Blake's hand just to make Kevin angry.

"You'd think I was twelve," she said spitefully. "He thinks he's my father."

Austin dropped Blake's hand, and her mood changed when she saw a few of the roadies taking down the set. "Night guys. I would help, but the Nazi is making me go to the bus."

"Aye, aye Captain," one of the roadies replied. Austin laughed.

"Night," she said as she passed the band picking up their stuff.

"For you," the drummer over exaggerated. "Anyways, you're not gonna get back to the bus for at least two hours."

"What?" Austin questioned.

"When you get outside, everybody and their brother is gonna want an autograph."

"No, by the time I get out there, there won't be anyone left."

"Austin, for you they'd wait all week. Maybe longer."

"Thanks for the confidence, Joe."



"Night, sweetie," Joe replied with a laugh.

Blake and Austin finished their rounds but couldn't find Down Home. "Hey, is their dressing room by yours?" Austin asked as they walked down a long corridor leading to her dressing room.

"We share a dressing room," Blake said.

"All of you?" Austin questioned.

"Yeah. We're guys; we don't need that much space." Blake laughed in an attempt to make fun of her.

"You're right," Austin admitted, not letting Blake get the best of her.

"It's right here," Blake pointed as they grew closer to the guys' dressing room.

"Joe, have you seen Austin?" They heard Kevin's voice from around the corner.

"I think she went that way," Joe replied, and Austin knew that Joe had sent him right in their direction.

"Come on," Blake knocked on the dressing room door. "Everyone decent?"

"Okay, girl comin' in." He grabbed Austin's arm and pulled her into the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Hey guys," Brad said.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. "Guys, it's Kevin."

"Hide me," Austin whispered. Blake pushed Austin in the bathroom and followed her.

Josh slowly walked to the door and pulled it open. "What can we do for ya, Kev?"

"Do any of you know where Austin and Blake are?"

"Well, Blake's in the bathroom and I think Austin said she was goin' to the bus."

"Blake, can you come out here?" Kevin called as he barged through the doorway, looking around for any sign of Austin. Kevin was very over protective of Austin. He had seen her perform at his daughter's talent show ten years earlier and knew that he had to represent her. When his daughter died seven years later in a car accident, Austin became her replacement. And she hated it. He kept her on a short leash. He had scared off every boyfriend she had ever had. Now he was trying to scare off Blake, even though they weren't officially dating. Many times Kevin had tried to get Blake to quit the tour, but he wouldn't. Blake took Kevin's crap; Austin wasn't really sure why. Then Kevin found ways to keep them apart. Like he was trying to do tonight.

Standing in the middle of the bathroom, Blake looked around. He flushed the toilet and turned on the water, all for effect. Austin opened the small cupboard under the sink. It was completely empty, so she shoved herself in and Blake pushed the doors shut. He opened the door. "Yeah?"

Without saying a word, Kevin pushed past Brad and Blake into the bathroom. "Lookin' for somethin'?" Blake asked.

Kevin whipped around. "You know who I'm looking for. Austin better be back at the bus when I get there."

For a minute, Blake just stood there. "You know, Kevin, you don't scare me."

Kevin walked out, slamming the door hard.

"Where'd she go?" Josh asked.

Blake led them all into the bathroom and opened the cupboard. The five of them broke into laughter hyenas could not have challenged. Blake put out his hand to help Austin up; she grabbed it and he pulled her out. "Thanks guys," she said. "I owe you my life."

"What's his problem?" Blake asked.

"He thinks he's my father. His daughter died, and now I am getting the brunt of that. I have replaced her, and now he thinks he's protecting me, but really all it's doing is hurting me. I know he's just thinking of me, but I'm really tired of it."

"Sorry kiddo," Ryan said, smiling. He hugged Austin. "You know he's gonna kill you if you're not out there."

"Yeah...I'd better go." Austin walked out and made her way to her dressing room.

Back in his dressing room, Blake said, "She didn't answer my question." Blake was a very attractive young man of twenty. He was almost a head taller than Austin. His blonde hair was shorter than the trend but longer than a military cut. He had bright blue eyes, and his nose was sort of crooked from a childhood playground fight.

"Go ask her."

"Ask her what?"

"Why he doesn't like you. If you like her as much as you say, you've gotta be willing to fight him, and after that little show earlier, we know you are. But you're not gonna have to fight him if you never tell her."

"Well, whether I stop or not, I'm goin' to my bus. Are you guys just going to yours or is there gonna be one of those after concert parties?"

"We'll give ya a ring if there is one."

"Okay."

Blake made his way down the hall and saw the dry-erase board on a dressing room door that read: Austin. Blake stopped, but he couldn't bring himself to knock. He stood there for what seemed like hours, until the door opened. Austin was digging in her purse and didn't even notice him standing there until she ran into him and dropped her stuff.

"Sorry," she said without looking up.

"Don't worry about it."

Austin bent over to pick up her things, still not realizing she had run into Blake. Blake knelt down to help her, and she finally looked at him. "Sorry, Blake."

"Hey...it's okay," he said, noticing that her eyes were red and puffy. "Austin, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're lying." Blake took her hand before she could pick up anything else.

Austin wiped away another tear. "Please, I'm fine."

Blake let go of her hand. "Okay." He picked up an envelope that she had dropped. He couldn't help but notice the return address: Glen Roads, Nashville, Tennessee. "Glen Roads?" Blake questioned.

Austin snatched it from his hand. He's a...a family friend."

"Wow!" Blake was surprised. Glen Roads was an old country singer. "He was my idol. I wanted to be just like him."

Austin, still looking at the ground, wiped away a tear. After everything was cleaned up, she stood, looked in the mirror, tried to hide the evidence that she had been crying, and walked toward the door with Blake.

"Joe was right," Austin laughed. A huge group of people stood outside the door behind a metal railing. Security guards were standing with their backs toward Austin and Blake, making sure no one crossed the line. "It's one o'clock in the morning. What are they waiting for?" Austin questioned. Austin was completely clueless; in her mind, she could never be anyone's idol. She just did what she loved.

"You," Blake answered. "You don't really believe that they idolize you. Look at that little girl. You wore that outfit last week at your show, now she's copying you."

"Well, I'm glad I dress modestly then, if people are gonna dress like me. But why me?" The two just stared at the people outside in the cold weather waiting for an autography or a picture.

"Because you're Austin. You're amazing."

Austin turned and hugged Blake. "Thank you. Let's go."

They made their way towards the door and finally pushed it open. The crowd outside started screaming.

"Now . . ." The crowd became silent as Austin started talking. "What are ya'll waiting for out here in the cold?"

"You!" The crowd cheered.

"Who, me?"

"Yeah!"

Austin signed autographs and posed for pictures for over an hour. She finally got to the little girl that Blake had pointed out earlier. "How are you?" she asked.

"Good. Will you sign my hat?" The little girl pulled the cowboy hat off, revealing a bald head. Austin noticed for the first time that all the way around the hatband were the words "Austin's biggest fan."

"What's your name?" Austin asked as she got ready to sign the little girl's hat.

"Caroline."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Caroline. How old are you?"

"Six."

"And you're already my biggest fan?"

"Yeah. You're my favorite singer."

Austin pulled a Sharpie out of her pocket and wrote:

Caroline—

Thanks for coming to the show. Always remember to  
Follow your dreams, you can do anything.

Your biggest fan,  
Austin

"Caroline, it's time to go." The little girl's father picked her up, and her mother spoke to Austin.

"Thank you so much. Caroline's biggest dream was to meet you. You see, she has leukemia. The doctors don't think she's gonna make it, but I think you just made her life better. Meeting you was the one thing she wanted to do before she dies."

Austin just stared at the little girl as her father buckled her into the car. A tear ran down her face. "Thanks ya'll," she said as she turned around and walked toward her bus.

Blake saw Austin crying and followed her onto her bus. "Austin...Austin...are you okay?"

"No," she cried. "That little girl, the one you pointed out, she has leukemia and her one wish was to meet me before she dies. Me. I'm just an ordinary person. Why do people think I'm so great? I'm not amazing like you always say. I'm just normal."

"Everybody's gotta look up to someone, why not you?"

Just then Kevin stepped up the stairs. "Blake, I thought I made myself perfectly clear. Austin is to be alone."

Austin wrapped her arms around Blake's neck. "I'm sorry," she whispered in his ear.

When Austin finally let go of Blake, Kevin said in an irritated voice, "Everyone is ready to leave."

"Okay," Blake said back without looking at Kevin. "You gonna be okay?"

Austin didn't say anything. She just nodded her head and Blake left.

"Austin," Kevin tried.

"Get away from me." Austin went to her room in the back of the bus and locked the door. She threw herself onto the bed and cried herself to sleep.

When Austin woke up the next day, she found herself alone in the bus. The sun was already high in the sky, and they were entering Austin, Texas. She pulled the curtains open and saw signs in front yards that read: "Welcome to Austin, Austin" or "Austin's in Austin" or "Welcome home, Austin." Austin's name did, in fact, come from the town. She had been born here.

She stepped off the bus and noticed her roadies hustling around the stage, getting the equipment set up for the sound check. In four short hours the stands would be packed. She could hear the hustle and bustle of a county fair. The sun shone down on the dirt ground in front of the stage. She took a deep breath of Texas air. The air smelled of diesel and cotton candy, an interesting combination. A ferris wheel was set up to the left of the stage with a tilt-a-whirl and merry-go-round on either stage. Happy screams from children on the kiddie coaster floated through the air. The Travis County Fair had always been a high point for children. Austin loved it; she never missed it.

"Here, Austin." The sound guy handed her a microphone. She began the sound check and looked out over the thick sheets that worked as walls to block the public from the grandstand. From where she was standing, she could see a line already forming at the gates.

The sound check took about an hour, and finally she got back to the bus to get ready. Climbing up the stairs, she heard a noise from the bus. "Surprise!" Josh, Brad, Ryan, and Blake yelled as she finally reached the floor.

"What are ya'll doin'?"

"We thought we'd surprise you," Brad said.

"We know it's your birthday, even if you didn't want anyone to know."

"Thank you, this is very nice of you, but it's just a birthday."

"Hey, you're twenty today."

"I know I'm old."

"Hey, we're all older."

Austin smiled. "Thanks ya'll." She gave them each a hug. "Now get off my bus. I gotta get ready," she giggled.

"Save us some cake. Party after the show. We have two days off."

"We do. And no matter what Kevin says, the party's here."

"Here she is folks," Blake started, "Austin." He walked past her and again he grabbed her hand. She smiled.

"Hey ya'll. How you doin' tonight?" Austin yelled. The crowd roared. "Glad to hear it."

Austin started off with a song. About halfway through the show, she sat down on a stool. "Ya'll don't know how great it is to be home. I've really missed this place while I've been on tour." Then she went into

the speech about Blake's song. As the music started, Austin looked into the audience for the first time all evening. And there he was, the man from the day before. Chills ran up and down her spine.

The place where Austin was supposed to come in came and went twice. And just like a repeat from the day before, Blake said in her earpiece, "Austin, what are you doing? Sing." Finally she looked away and started singing. The concert ended, like the day before, with Carry On My Wayward Son.

Brad, Ryan, and Josh were walking ahead of Blake and Austin. Austin heard her name spoken in a low, dark voice. She turned around and saw the man.

"Austin," he said.

"Can I help you?" she asked. Austin grabbed Blake's hand out of fear.

"I heard you on the radio," he said quietly.

"Everyone's heard me on the radio."

"No, I heard you before, when you were little. You sang with your dad."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The color drained from her face and she turned to walk away.

"Glen Roads?" the man questioned. "He's your father, right?"

Austin was silent. Blake moved his gaze from the man to Austin and back.

"Please, leave me alone." Austin turned and started walking, pulling Blake along.

"Is it true?" Blake asked. "Is Glen Roads your father?"

Without looking at him, Austin simply replied, "Yes."

Before they could step off the stage, they had to sign autographs. Dozens of people had swarmed around the stairs leading to the buses. An hour later, the crowd started to thin. Finally, all the people were gone, and Blake and Austin could make their way to the bus. Austin ducked into Blake's bus before Kevin could catch her.

"Austin, why didn't you say something" Blake questioned. Austin knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Because I'm not proud of it."

"What?"

"You didn't know him. He wasn't that great guy that everyone portrayed him to be. Or if he was, I never saw it. He's the reason that I need reassurance that the fans really care. My daddy told me I was nothin'. He told me I would never amount to anything because I couldn't do anything. I never really knew why it was just me; he never treated my brothers or sisters the way he treated me."

"So he wasn't..."

"No. He wasn't this amazing person that the world saw. I couldn't understand why everyone in the world loved him, but he was my daddy, and I couldn't make myself love him.

Blake was silent.

"I hated him, and I still do. You know, he left me. When I was nine. Daddy told me I was going on tour with him. I was so excited. He had never done anything like that before. It was really strange, but I was nine. Daddy took me to my grandma's house. He said he had a show and he'd be back." Tears ran down Austin's face. "But he never came back."

"After that, I didn't really see him again. Not really. He was on TV, on the radio, in the movies, but I never saw him in person. It's been eleven years and now, now he wants to see me. He wants to see me because...because I'm famous, because I have lots of money. I don't need him anymore, not now, not now that he wants to see me."

"That envelope?" Blake questioned.

"Yeah. He wrote me. My momma died, and he wants me to go to the funeral. She never fought for me. She let him push me around and verbally abuse me. She just sat back and watched."

"What if she couldn't do anything for you?"

Austin began to breathe harder, and her bottom lip quivered. Tears streamed down her face, and she fell into Blake, resting her head on his chest.

"Hey man, where's..." Josh said as he walked up the stairs. "Austin?" he finished as he noticed them.

Josh, Brad, and Ryan turned around and left them alone. Blake let her cry until she couldn't cry anymore. He took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. There was a deep sorrow he had never seen before, like she would never be happy again. Only he knew she would be. He wanted to make her happy, the way she did him. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Tears were no longer falling, and her breathing had slowed. Blake pulled her face close, kissed her forehead, and wrapped his arms around her.

"Thank you for everything," she whispered.

# The Painted Cave

*A Native American Myth Written for Children*

Laura Socarras

## *Color danced in the sky:*

Peranza was walking in a sea of golden maize when she saw the Great White Buffalo. She walked over to him and bowed low to the ground. The Great White Buffalo leaned toward Peranza and kissed her on her forehead.

"Thank you, sir," said Peranza, gratefully.

"Ask of me anything." The Great White Buffalo nodded his head at her.

"Wise one, I would love to have a child," Peranza stated.

"I will give you what you ask, but for one thing in return," the Buffalo said. "On the child's fifth celebration of his birth, he will come to me and learn the ways of the wise."

Peranza agreed.

## *Color danced in the sky:*

Peranza gave birth to a healthy baby boy. She named him Ari. Ari grew up to be an energetic child. He would run around with his spear in his hand and throw it at the nesting robins. When Peranza called him for dinner, Ari would walk slowly back to the hut, stomping on the ant hills as he went. Peranza didn't want Ari to go to the Great White Buffalo so soon, but she hoped that when he did go, he would learn how to behave. Ari knew he would have to go to the Great White Buffalo on the fifth celebration of his birth. He decided that he would play around until the Buffalo sent him home.

## *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari celebrated his fifth birthday by running away the night before. He ran into the woods and slept with the squirrels on the branch of the oak tree. Little did Ari know that he could not hide from the Great White Buffalo. Peranza was looking for Ari all morning.

"Who are you looking for?" asked the Great White Buffalo.

"I am searching for Ari," replied Peranza.

"He's hiding in the tree," said the Buffalo, "and not very well."

Peranza looked up and saw her son. "Ari, come down because it is time for you to go with the Great White Buffalo."

"But, Mom . . ." complained Ari.

"No buts. Come down now!" demanded Peranza.

Ari crawled down the tree reluctantly. He hugged his mother and began to drag his feet, one in front of the other, as he followed the Great White Buffalo.

## *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari followed the Great White Buffalo over the plains for many years. When they weren't walking, Buffalo taught Ari the ways of the Old People. How they sang to the animals, danced in the moonlight, and how they celebrated each other every day. Ari did not want to listen to the Buffalo about the old times; the time was now and he wanted to play. The Great White Buffalo would not let Ari play until he finished his work.

Ari played tricks on the Buffalo. He put acorns and burrs under the Buffalo's bed. When the Great White Buffalo lay down on his bed, he yelled because the acorns hurt his head and the burrs were stuck in his hair. During the day's lesson, Ari threw little pebbles at the Buffalo's head. The Great White Buffalo became very angry with Ari. He decided that Ari should return home and come back when he was older and better behaved.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari ran all the way home jumping in circles and clapping his hands. He didn't have to learn about the Old People any more. He ran across the plains and across the river and through the deep woods. When Ari arrived at his little village, he expected there to be laughter and the cooking of delicious food, but the village was very quiet. All the children were silent, sitting on stones by the dying fire. The men and women just stood there and watched the fire die. Ari saw his mother and ran over to her. Peranza looked at her son and gave a little smile.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Ari asked.

"I can't seem to remember why we are here on earth and how we got here," she cried.

"Don't be silly," Ari laughed.

But Peranza wasn't teasing; she was very serious.

"Are you sick?" Ari asked.

"Yes dear, we are all sick. And the sickness has taken away our memory and our happiness," his mother answered.

Ari grew worried and decided the only one who could help was the Great White Buffalo.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari raced through the deep woods, jumped over the river, and sprinted across the fields. He finally arrived where the Great White Buffalo lived. Ari saw that the Buffalo was lying down and breathing heavily.

"What's wrong, sir?" Ari asked, concerned.

"The people are forgetting who they are, and because of that, I am dying. They are my strength and will to live, and if they forget me, I will die," the Buffalo answered.

"Then you have to make them remember!" Ari shouted.

"I can't. I am too weak. You have to do it, Ari. You have to show them the ways of the Old," said the Buffalo.

"But I..."

"You can, Ari. You can." And the Buffalo closed his eyes again.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari sprinted back to the village. He told everyone the stories of dancing and singing and celebrating, but no one could remember. Ari wanted to give up, but he did not want the Great White Buffalo to die.

Ari lay under the big oak tree where he had hidden from the Great White Buffalo before. He thought and thought how he could make his village and the others after them remember so that now one would ever get sick again. Rain began to fall, and the clouds thundered, and the lightning flashed. Ari spun around, searching for shelter. He saw a cave and ran towards it.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari built a fire in the cave so he could dry his rain-soaked clothes. The rain continued to pour outside. Ari slept in the cave that night and woke up the next morning to see that his fire had burnt out. All that was left were charred pieces of wood. When he was cleaning up the mess, he saw that the wood was leaving black marks on his hands. He picked up a piece of wood and drew a buffalo on the cave wall. Ari got an idea.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari ground up flowers, stones, and fruit to create different colors of paint. He picked up his brush of pig hair and began to paint on the cave wall. He drew the Great White Buffalo creating the world. He painted eagles soaring, fish swimming, and his village dancing under the moon. Ari spent days painting in the cave. When he had finished, the entire cave was covered with the story of his village.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari brought his village to the cave. The villagers looked at all the pictures with wide eyes. Ari showed his mother, Peranza, the picture he painted of himself hiding in the great oak tree and of her and the Great White Buffalo talking to him. Peranza looked at the pictures and remembered. All the people of the village stared at the paintings and started remembering where they had come from. They laughed at the pictures of the children playing in the mud and marveled at the paintings of the creation. They were fascinated with the many colors.

Ari looked at the field outside and saw the Great White Buffalo standing strong and smiling at him. The Buffalo gave Ari a nod and walked back into the deep woods. Ari never saw the Great White Buffalo again, but he told all the village children about him.

### *Color danced in the sky:*

Ari continued to tell the stories to the young and the old. He kept the history of his people alive for many generations. His paintings in the cave remained there to remind the people of their beginning. The people still gazed in wonder at the beautiful paintings. When Ari died, there was a great feast in the village. The people celebrated Ari's life and his accomplishments in the cave. They celebrated life and remembered the Old Stories. Ari is remembered to this day, and his stories have remained in the hearts of his children. And his paintings are still in that cave to remind his people where they came from.



# The Meek Shall Inherit, So Don't Provoke Them

Pharaoh Allen Tilley

It is said in scriptures that the meek shall inherit the earth. Despite all they face and suffer, they are supposed to be the last? But perhaps the meek are not quite as they seem.

Case in point:

Like pretty much any employment, the warehouse jobs at Myerton had their crunch moments and their slow moments. From day to day you could not be sure which would be your destiny. The old saying of "Work Hard and Play Hard" was obviously the motto of the Neilson brothers and their loyal band of sidekicks. These four boys were essentially big, hard-working gorillas. When there were heavy things to move, they moved them. But their primary job in the warehouse was to prepare items for shipping through the use of wooden crates they created.

There was a fifth member of this shipping crew, but he was nothing like the Neilsons or their sidekicks. His name was Tommy, and he was a quiet, toothpick of a man. His was the picture you saw when you looked up the word "meek" in the dictionary. What was so amazing about this easily overlooked man was how beautiful his wife and kids were. You would never have guessed he would have such a great family.

His wife was a beauty in every aspect, and it always astonished Rick and me that he would ever end up with a woman like her. Yet she had not only married him, but seemed to be completely devoted to him as she brought him lunch each day. She was everything he lacked in class, looks and sophistication. Obviously there was something about this nondescript man which we did not know, and she did.

I used to wonder how Tommy ever put up with his coworkers. The Neilson gang was not polite, nor were they easy to get along with. The only good thing about them was that most of us never had to work with them very much. However, Tommy shared the same work area as they did. And the Neilson gang was nearly ruthless in their dealings with their coworker.

At one point Rick and I found Tommy calling out from a wooden crate in a far corner of the warehouse. It appeared that earlier that day, the Neilsons had manhandled Tommy into a crate, boxed him up and moved him to a far corner. Another time they nailed the door shut while he was in the bathroom. Yet another he came in to find his tools glued down to his work area. It certainly appeared that the Neilsons had it in for Tommy. Yet Tommy remained cool and never showed his frustration. Finally one October evening Tommy came walking back to the warehouse while Rick and I were working late. He asked if we could give him a lift home. It appeared that his car had disappeared.

Two weeks later, two maintenance workers were investigating a weight problem in one of the wood dust storage silos when they encountered an interesting thing. Weight was always a critical issue when dealing with the storing of wood dust. The workers had to remove yards of dust to locate the abnormality. Low and behold, buried at the bottom of this silo was Tommy's '72 Buick. Apparently it was the cause of the weight deviation problem. No explanation was ever found as to how it got in the silo, but I am sure that Tommy suspected. Even when his car disappeared three days later and was found on the roof of the west wing of the main plant, no explanation was found. But Tommy must have suspected.

Another week later, Tommy came in to find his work area had been devastated by forces unknown. Again, I am sure that Tommy suspected.

In a place like Myerton, a person has little to call his or her own. You are simply a cog in a vastly larger wheel and any way that you can find to personalize your environment, you do it, as long as it doesn't violate the rules. The shipping and crating crew had, over the years, fashioned themselves crude, small, ragged cubicles out of scrap-crating materials. Their place to call home. These ranged from crude structures like the Neilsons had decorated with calendars of women to the rather sophisticated one that Tommy had built.

Tommy had pictures of his family as well as crayon drawings his kids had made for him on a bulletin board in his cube. It was his sanctuary from his coworkers. So you can imagine his heartbreak when he came to work and found the pictures of his wife and kids strewn on the floor and mangled. The pain of picking up his kids' crumbled and dirty drawings from the cold concrete floor had to be harsh. No explanation was given, nor was a guilty party found. But Tommy was sure to have suspected. It was just another incident where Tommy lost out to forces which he could suspect were responsible but could not prove.

The next day Rick and I had to come in early so we could get ready for a truck that would be arriving ahead of schedule. As we stood near loading dock seven going over the activities at Monkey's Corner from the night before, Tommy walked past us carrying a box and without giving us his usual greeting. Rick looked at me and I at him. Something was astray and we knew it.

As we rounded the corner to the shipping area, we saw Tommy standing in what remained of his once homey work area. You just had to feel sorry for him. Strangely enough, he reached down to the floor to pick up an air hose. Odd, since he didn't have any crating materials nearby to nail together. As a matter of fact, he was nearly three hours early for his shift. Most odd indeed.

From a box he pulled something we had trouble identifying. As he plugged the air hose into the device I began to remember. I had seen this thing somewhere, in a familiar gun magazine sometime in the past and not too long ago.

About the moment when I realized what Tommy had came the strangest sound you have ever heard. Like the noise of a swarm of angry bees. Tommy had pointed his device at his coworkers' structures. With the pull of a trigger his angry bees began methodically disintegrating his neighbors' cubicles. First small holes would appear in the wood, and when enough holes had appeared, the structures would crumble. It looked like a rain of invisible termites eating away at the wood. I can not overemphasize the destruction we bore witness to.

Rick and I were so amazed to see the device in action that we just stood motionless, watching. Yes, I had seen this device advertised in *National Rifleman*, but I could never have known that it would really work like this. The device had been an Automatic BB Gun. It was advertised to shoot up to 500 BBs in a minute and from what I was seeing, it certainly must have been quite capable.

It seemed like an hour had gone by, and from the devastation that occurred, it could have been. But a mere five minutes had passed by the time Tommy stopped. For a moment there was an eerie quiet only to be interrupted a moment later by the sound of collapsing wood structures. Just as calmly as he had taken the BB gun from the box, he returned it. With the manner of a man just going about his ordinary day, Tommy put the box under his arm and walked past us only saying a casual "Good morning guys."

Still in shock and awe, Rick and I walked over to see the mess. Torn wood, pieces of cardboard littered the area as if ripped apart by a giant angry child. And everywhere were the millions of small round balls. Literally millions of them. The only signature left for everyone else to puzzle about. We were speechless.

Rick and I returned to our dock and dealt with our truck as it arrived. The whole time Rick and I talked of just about everything but Tommy's episode, until we were closing up the truck. Rick smiled, looked at me in a glance and said, "Didn't know the bastard had it in him." A moment later the shift horn sounded, and we headed to the office as our truck departed.

As we gathered awaiting our orders and the all clear to start our shift, Tommy walked in and sat down in one of the chairs like his old self. A courteous happy greeting to us all as if the morning episode never happened. He didn't look like a man who had cracked under the pressure of his bullying coworkers. I almost had to ask myself if indeed anything did happen, or had I dreamed it all. He looked right at Rick and me, without ever giving a hint that he was going to explain. I guess he knew that he didn't have to. We knew. We understood.

If I had any doubts whether it had all happened or not, those doubts were wrenched away as the Neilsons came bursting into the office with murder in their eyes and betrayal in their voices. They were reasonably upset that their cubicles had been destroyed. They wanted answers and somebody to kill. A body to damage for this trespass on their turf. They were going around the room pointing fingers and asking questions. The only exception to their accusation was Tommy. Apparently they had not even considered him capable of such an act. Rick and I looked at each other with the same thought: "They don't even suspect him."

Everyone filed out to gawk at the destruction. When Rick and I were questioned by the Neilsons, we admitted to being in the warehouse early, but denied any knowledge of the incident. We claimed

that we had no reason to enter the shipping area that morning, so we had no idea what kind of shape their area had been in when we arrived. This blew away any chance of them figuring out when it had happened. We felt sympathy for Tommy and were not about to give him up to the likes of the Neilsons.

Perhaps most amusing was the fact that no one could figure out why there were millions of little brass balls all over the floor, nor could anyone provide a reasonable answer as to their possible source. And well into a year later we would be sweeping up their remnants to remind us of that morning. We just could never seem to get rid of them all.

Within a few days the Neilsons were up to their old tortures, and Tommy's car was found crated up on the top floor of the east wing of the warehouse. Apparently the gang had learned nothing from the incursion.

Months passed, and then one April afternoon as the shift was ending we stood in the manager's office awaiting a head count so we could clock out and leave. Five. Ten. And then fifteen minutes past the shift's end, the Neilson gang still did not show up to be counted. They might be arrogant idiots, but they would not miss the count. To do so would mean termination. A couple calls over the PA system and another fifteen minutes did not cause them to appear.

That "look" appeared on the manager's face. A look I had seen before. A look like no other. He practically jumped over his desk to reach the big red button on the wall, a button which had seen its fair share of use in this warehouse in last couple years. More so, overwhelmingly, than any other warehouse in the Myerton network of facilities. The Panic button, and that was a good description of the manager's mood at the moment.

We all looked at each other with that knowledge of having been here before. Immediately Bob was looking at Rick with a stare of accusation. A stare which might well lead to a lynching if any hint was made that yet again, Rick might be responsible in some way. We had lost warehouse employees before, and I guess Bob still couldn't get over the fact that Rick had accidentally boxed and shipped Bob to Florida on one occasion. Hey, accidents happen in a warehouse.

This time was different. It wasn't a single employee missing but four. Never had that happened before, and it was going to be nearly impossible to explain how it could, if they were not found quickly.

With the sirens blaring and our safety belts belching screams of alarm, the manager quickly disabled each one of ours to eliminate them from the noise. Now all we had to do was listen for the belts of the missing four as we spread out through out the warehouse.

After nearly two hours of searching, it was apparent that we could not locate our missing coworkers. Personally, I felt they were probably napping somewhere. I could only imagine what the plant manager had to say about four of us gone missing. Certainly he must have had his doubts about the warehouse after so many instances of disappearances. As I said, nowhere else in the company had there been instances of missing employees. So our little corner of the world must have attracted much attention at board meetings. And if we did not find our comrades soon, the next board meeting would be quite interesting indeed.

The plant manager sent every available employee to the warehouse and grounds to search for the missing. The Neilson vehicles were found to be still in the parking lot, so they had obviously not gone home. With over one hundred employees combing the area, the four missing had still not been located by the warehouse closing at six that evening.

As the days passed, people in our warehouse began to wonder if we would ever know what happened to the Neilson gang. It was a cloudy April day when Steve came running by us yelling that the Neilsons were walking up the warehouse drive.

The boys had quite a tale to tell. They told how they had all laid down at lunch in one of the rail cars, which had been loaded in the morning with furniture bound for Canada. Since the car wasn't due to leave until that evening, they figured that they could get a lunch-hour nap and then return to work.

Imagine their surprise when they awoke to the alarms on their safety belts sounding and found that they had been locked in. They claim that they pounded on the sides of the rail car for help, but no one came. It seems they were sitting in that rail car while practically the whole plant had been searching for them. Somehow in the confusion, no one had searched the railcar siding. I suppose no one believed there would be a reason. I mean why would anyone disappear there?

They then told how in Arkansas they had been liberated by a railroad worker curious as to what was making all the noise. Otherwise, they could have been on the road for days more. Imagine listening to the wail of the alarms from those belts all those hours. The very system designed to rescue them or at least alert rescuers would now have been slowly driving them nuts. Their final comments were to the

effect that they knew someone had locked them in that railcar, and once they discovered the person's identity, then the culprit would be very regretful. Well, words not quite that polite.

Tommy walked up to them and offered his sympathies for their plight, but they shoved him aside as they pushed past him. I turned to return to my forklift when Rick grabbed my arm. He looked at me and whispered that he had seen Tommy smiling as the Nielsons walked out of sight. I looked over and saw no such thing. It was only Tommy. Quiet, nice and meek Tommy. I looked back at Rick and told him that he was crazy.

Over the following weeks, misfortune seemed to rain down on the Neilsons with one accident after another. A glue sprayer that over pressured covering Jack Neilson with glue, a toilet that back pressured on his brother Karl, nearly drowning the poor boy because it seemed somehow super glue had been accidentally dropped on the toilet seat. Frank was buried under an avalanche of furniture, and Sam woke up from a nap to find that he had somehow been sealed up in a cardboard box destined for Wyoming in the back of a truck.

Accidents just seemed to be an epidemic with the four. Rick tried in vain to convince me that Tommy had turned into a Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. He implied that the mysterious things happening to the Neilson gang were Tommy's doing. Of course, I would have none of that. Not Tommy! Sure, he may have cracked once, but he was back to normal now. He looked his same mild and meek self. He was as easy to read as a book. And that smile of his was a little odd, but nothing more. Just odd. I'm sure it's nothing.

# Unexpected Endings

Allison McNeal

Sweat clung to her head, pasting her long blond hair against the nape of her neck. She looked over at Dave; a small smile crept across her face as she lightly traced her index finger over Dave's bare chest. With each intake of breath, her head rose and fell against him, starting to lull her to sleep. Miranda vaguely heard the waves crashing against the Florida shoreline, imagining the crisp, blue swells rising and falling in a rhythmic motion. Her bright green eyes fluttered as her eyelids dropped lower and lower, welcoming sleep. She glanced at the clock beside the bed, the numbers blurring before her eyes. Finally she pried open her eyes, blinked, and noticed it was ten 'til ten. With a small gasp, she jumped out of bed, racing to find all of her clothes that were scattered throughout the room. All the banging and clanging woke up Dave, jolting him out his coma and causing him to almost fall out of bed.

"Babe, what's going on?" Dave asked.

Miranda peeked up from the other side of the bed, frantically searching the room for her diamond-studded DKNY jeans.

"I got to go, hon," she stated. "Michael will be home any minute, and I have to make supper for him."

Her eyes roamed the bedroom, papers and clothes scattered throughout the room, which almost looked like someone had broken into the it and taken someone hostage.

"I don't want you to go home to him, Miranda. I mean it."

She spotted her jeans crumpled up in a ball by the nightstand and tried to yank them on while she hopped on one foot.

Miranda went to Dave's side of the bed and ruffled his dark brown hair, giving him a small smile.

"I'll be fine, don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow, OK?"

She gave Dave a small peck on the cheek, and in return he grabbed her shoulders, kissing her passionately on her pale, pink lips. Soft chills embraced her entire body, and she felt herself go numb with desire and longing. She shook her head, trying to clear the sensations that wracked her body and got up from the bed.

"I have to go, babe. I'm sorry."

She turned towards the door, regret filling her with each step that she took. All she wanted was to be in Dave's arms and to feel safe and secure, but she knew that couldn't happen. While she was leaving, she caught a glimpse of Dave in the mirror, scratching his head and squinting at her.

As soon as Miranda reached her apartment and quietly placed her key inside the lock, she knew she was in trouble. The door swung open with a brute force, and Michael stood staring at her, his dark brown eyes penetrating hers.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"I was visiting my mom at the hospital," she stated.

"Well, did you need to spend the entire day there? I came home and no one was here!"

"I'm sorry, hon, but my mom needed me. You know how sick she is."

"I don't give a crap. You should be here at home with me!"

Miranda saw her husband's eyes bulge and knew he was about to erupt, so she went to the kitchen to make a hamburger to appease him. As she slapped the raw hamburger on the George Foreman grill, her mind kept wandering to Dave. His smooth and gentle touch sent sharp chills throughout her body, especially when he touched the small of her back. She could imagine the soft, musky smell of his Ralph Lauren cologne, and the soft stubble of his facial hair that always tickled her cheek.

"What are you smiling at?" Michael asked.

Miranda casually placed her hands over her lips and pretended to cough.

"Sorry, I had a tickle in my throat."

Michael looked at her, his eyes squinting so hard tears started to form.

"Is my food ready yet?"

"Yeah, it is done. Medium rare, just the way you like it."

Michael grabbed the hamburger from Miranda's hands, almost dropping it on the floor in the process. He stuffed the sandwich in his mouth, the juices from the hamburger and the tomatoes dripping down his chin.

"This is freaking disgusting! It tastes like a four-year-old made this with his shit!"

Miranda fended off the comment, wanting to strangle him, but she smiled instead.

"Do you want me to make you another one?"

"No, I'll just eat it."

Miranda watched in disgust as he shoved the "disgusting" hamburger in his mouth, chewing with his mouth open and spitting small crumbs of wheat bread all over the clear glass table. While she was watching him eat, she tried to remember what had attracted her to him in the first place. His tanned face was covered with bright red pimples, looking more like craters from another planet, and his normally buff body was now saggy, complete with a beer belly that hung over his gray sweatpants. She shuddered in horror of how horrible he looked and felt bile rise from the pit of her stomach.

"Oh, by the way, I got fired today," he stated.

Miranda came out of her thoughts and stared at him in disbelief.

"What did you say?"

"I said I got fired today! Can't you listen the first time?"

"How...how could this happen?"

Miranda paced around the room and twirled her hair in her fingers, trying to calm down.

"Shit, I don't know. I don't freaking care anymore."

"You don't care? How can you not care? We can't just live off of one income, especially not mine!"

Miranda felt lightheaded and sat down at the kitchen table, her head in her hands. Sweat beads were starting to form on her freckled nose as she tried to come up with some other alternative to help them out.

"Well, you've got to figure that one out, don't you? Come out in the living room and watch some television with me after you are done thinking."

With that said, he popped open his second beer and downed it, dripping the brown liquid all down his shirt. The clean white shirt that she washed yesterday was now stained under the pits and had a deep red stain down it, looking like he spilled Spaghetti O's all down his front. She watched him grab a third beer and go into the living room to watch a football game, while she sat in the kitchen trying to think of a way out of their mess.

The next morning, she woke up to an empty bed, noticing that Michael was not beside her. She went into the living room and saw that the place was trashed. Bags of half-eaten potato chips and crumbs were scattered across the floor, looking more like confetti rather than little bits of food. Miranda looked on the couch and saw her husband covered in crumbs with some salsa caked at the corners of his mouth. As she looked at him, she let out a long sigh and started to clean up the demolished living room. Everything was spinning out of control, and there was no way to stop the whirlwind of events that were happening in her life. Miranda needed to see Dave; she needed to feel his arms embrace her and to just forget about everything that was going wrong in her life. She quickly took a shower, going as fast as she could so she could see him before her shift started at the restaurant. As she came out of the shower, however, Michael was waiting for her at the end of the hallway.

"Hey, you're up early," she said.

Michael didn't respond back to her and walked calmly up to her. As he came closer, she saw a burning rage flickering in his eyes.

"What is this?" he asked, enunciating every word and spitting each syllable.

Miranda glanced at his right hand, noticing he was holding a diamond bracelet, encrusted with "Miranda" on the underside, between his two fingers like it was some kind of dead animal. She automatically started to panic and her mind raced to come up with an answer.

"Oh, didn't you give that to me?"

Michael looked at her, anger and hatred filling his eyes.

"Don't you think I would remember what I gave you? Who is this from, Miranda?"

She smiled warmly at him and pried the bracelet from his two fingers.

"My mom gave me it yesterday when I was visiting her at the hospital. It must have slipped my mind last night to tell you."

Her husband slapped her hard across the face, her head snapping hard to the right. He stared at her and brought his face inches to hers.

"You don't need any more jewelry, and we definitely don't need charity from your mother."

Miranda could only nod. The pain was throbbing hard throughout her head. Her husband walked past her and went into the bathroom where she heard the water start running. She ran as fast as she could out of her apartment, tears streaking down her face, stinging her cheeks, and headed towards Dave's apartment. How could he do this to me she thought as she raced down the highway in her small Toyota. A semi sped past her, almost cutting her off in the process. She started sobbing uncontrollably, her shoulders heaving the whole way to Dave's apartment.

When she reached his apartment, she collapsed into his arms just as he opened the door. Miranda was crying so hard that she was beyond the point of hysterical, and she started hyperventilating, trying to gasp for breath. After a couple of minutes, she started to calm down and breathe easier.

"What's going on Miranda?" Dave asked, while he studied Miranda as if she was some kind of alien species that had just arrived on Earth.

She glanced at Dave, hot tears continuing to pour down her face.

"He found the bracelet."

"Shit."

Dave started to pace around the room and kicked the trashcan by his nightstand. He clasped his hands and started wringing so hard that his knuckles turned white.

"Did you tell him?"

"No, I told him it was from my mom. I think he believed me."

"Shit Miranda! You need to be more careful! We can't get caught!"

When the phone rang, Dave jumped about a mile high, and Miranda let out a startled scream. He ran to the phone and hastily picked it up.

"Dave, this is Michael. Sorry man, I can't talk very long, but I was wondering if you wanted to have a guy's night out tonight."

Dave's face turned white and a trickle of sweat dripped down the side of his face. He hastily wiped it away as he looked at Miranda and mouthed "It's Michael" to her.

"Dave? Hello you there?"

"Oh yeah man, I'm still here. Sorry, I can't tonight."

Silence greeted Dave as soon as he responded.

"Geez you can't make some time for your brother?" Michael asked.

"Uh, maybe some other time. I got to go now, but I'll give you a call tomorrow," Dave said.

Dave hung up the phone and looked Miranda straight in the eye.

"We've got a problem."

Minutes later, Miranda and Dave were sitting in silence, trying to decide what to do next. Dave was starting to wear out the carpet as he kept jumping up to pace back and forth.

"Would you please stop!" Miranda shouted.

She could not take this anymore, something had to be done.

"We need to tell him," she stated.

Dave's eyes grew wide at her suggestion.

"No, he would kill both of us if he found out. I can't do that to him."

"We have to. It's better he finds out this way rather than walking in on us."

Dave threw his hand in the air and muttered something inaudible at Miranda.

"Fine, you're right. We'll do it tomorrow after his birthday," he said.



Miranda hurried out of Dave's apartment as fast as she could, realizing that she was going to be late to work. Her mind was racing, trying to comprehend what just happened. Michael was catching on, she knew, and it would only be a matter of time before they were caught. Why had she even married Michael? She didn't even love him, she never had, and the thought of him repulsed her beyond belief. The only person she had ever truly loved was Dave. His dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes had mesmerized her from the first time they met a year ago. She was lost in her thoughts as she reached Pete's Pancakes and decided to give Dave a call before she started her shift.

"Meet me at my work after I get off tonight at 10," she stated. "I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, you know how I love surprises. Can't wait, babe."

She hung up the phone after they said their goodbyes, gave a small sigh, and started her eight hour shift.

After a hectic, whirlwind day of customers coming in and out like the no sales tax day at the mall, Miranda finally sat down and waited for Dave to show up. She peered out the shiny, clean window, staring into the dark, black abyss. The only light emitted was a small streetlight across the highway that was dimly lit and flickering sporadically, like a child was flipping a light switch on and off. Just as Miranda was about to dial Dave's number, a red Honda pulled up, and a very handsome man sauntered out of the car. Dave was casually dressed in a baby blue polo and tan cargo shorts, looking more like a seventeen-year-old than someone just shy of turning thirty. As soon as Dave entered Pete's Pancakes, his eyes lit up and a slow smile crept across his face.

"Wow, you look beautiful," he said.

She gave him a shy smile at the comment and noticed his eyes traveling the length of her body like a dog ready to devour a chunk of meat. She was wearing a bright pink tank top that showed off her cleavage, leaving almost nothing to the imagination, along with a pair of jean capris, slung low at the hips. A hint of silver eye shadow was displayed across her eyelids, which emphasized her bright green eyes. There was still a slight red mark on her left cheek that told the story of what happened earlier.

"Surprise!" she stated.

On the table in front of her was a large bowl filled to the brim with shrimp scampi, bread, salad, and raspberry chocolate mousse with brownies on the side. She gave him a huge smile that lit up her face and kissed him lightly on the mouth.

"This is amazing, babe!" he stated.

After eating the delicious dinner that she cooked for Dave, and both of them cleaning up the dishes, they sat down in a booth to relax and sip champagne. Dave wrapped his arms around Miranda as they sat together, and she savored every moment and inch of his touch. A car zoomed past the diner, its headlights glaring into the window, but Dave and Miranda were engaged in talking about movie they wanted to see later that night. All of a sudden, a loud slam of a car door and a hard pound on the door echoed throughout the restaurant. Miranda gave Dave one of those looks and went to the door, thinking it was a customer wanting to come in and eat. She opened the door, and Michael was standing right in front of her.

"What are you doing here still?" he asked.

Michael looked around the room and saw the candles that were still lit sitting on the table. He pushed Miranda aside, knocking her into the wall beside the door. Michael walked towards the candles and saw Dave sitting in the booth, sipping a glass of champagne.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Michael screamed.

Miranda saw Dave look at her helplessly as she calmly walked towards Dave and sat down beside him. Michael was fuming from head to toe, looking like he was about to burst. His hands were shaking so hard that his arms were having spasms and looked as if he was about to hit someone.

"Dave and I are seeing each other," Miranda stated. "We were going to tell you."

Instead of responding, Michael grabbed Miranda's hair and threw her off the booth, making her skid across the floor. Dave instantly rose up from the booth and raced to her side.

"I'm going to kill both of you," Michael replied. "How could you do this to me Dave? You're my brother, for God's sake!"

"I'm sorry, Michael. I didn't mean for it to happen. It just did."

All of the sudden, instead of lashing out, Michael started crying. Tears streamed down his face as he put his head in his hands and his shoulders started to shake.

"Please, please don't leave me," he said. "I promise I'll be a better husband, Miranda. Just give me another chance!"

Miranda looked at Dave in confusion and wonder as she went over to Michael's side.

"I don't love you," she stated.

"Please baby! Give me another chance."

"I'm done."

Michael looked at her with hurt and anger in his eyes. He walked towards her, inches from her face, as if debating what to do next. Then he turned around and punched the wall, sending white plaster flying throughout the room. After examining the damage, he clasped his bloody hand and left the restaurant without saying a word.

Dave embraced Miranda in his arms as she cried softly. Relief, anguish, and happiness washed over her body as she collapsed into an empty booth, feeling safe and secure. Miranda pulled herself together up and clasped Dave's hand.

"Come on. Let's go," she stated.

# This Is Not A Joke!

Bailey Kline

"I don't hear them anymore," Nicole said as we sat in the loft of my barn watching a movie. School had been let out early that day. And, with explicit directions from my mother, I was home by three...with some friends in tow. It was warm for March, and everyone was so antsy to get outside that five of the eleven people who had come with me were in the backyard messing around.

"If they try to scare us, I'll kill them," I said in a joking tone. I pushed myself off of the couch and made my way through a tall doorway into the back room of the barn. As I opened the short loft door, I heard voices coming from the trees behind the barbed-wire fence that separated my family's property from my neighbors. "You guys, come back here! That's not our property. You're going to get in trouble!" I yelled into the trees. I let out a loud breath as I turned around and went back to the movie. Nothing I could say would make them stop, so it wasn't even worth a try.

Just seconds after sitting down, a scream pulled me back to the door. It wasn't a scream just for fun; it was an honest-to-goodness blood-curdling scream. Looking through the trees, I couldn't see anything but two bodies running through the woods. They jumped up the hills faster than I had ever seen.

Tara came up behind me, put her hand on my shoulder, and bent down to look out the door as Luke and Brett made it to the barn. Brett bent over as he threw up, and Luke tried to catch his breath. "There's a...there's a body back there."

"If this is a joke, Brett, you deserve an Oscar," Tara said.

"What?" Luke questioned, realizing that we didn't believe him.

"A body...back there." He gasped out the words as he pointed out the trees.

"BAILEY," I heard Chris yell from the trees, "DON'T COME BACK HERE!"

I pushed Tara out of the way as I ran for the stairs. I jumped down them three at a time with Ashleigh on my heels. "This better be a joke," I said, "a really good joke."

We left Luke and Brett at the barn as we stepped over the barbed wire fence, slid down the hill, and started back up the other side of the valley. Before we reached the top, I looked up and stopped. Brittany was standing just a few feet above me at the top of the hill. Her face was our first realization that this was no joke. There was a terror in her eyes that I had never seen before. She was crying and looking down into the valley. I started up the hill again.

As I reached the top, I looked in the direction that Brittany was staring. I only looked for a split-second, but when I closed my eyes and turned away, the picture stayed there...right on my eyelids. It was a woman, a sheet around her neck, hanging from a tree just a few feet in front of us. Ashleigh grabbed my hand and I took Brittany's as Ashleigh pulled us back toward the barn. Brett and Luke had made it back to John and Chris, and the four were now following us back.

Ashleigh stepped over the fence and I followed, just in time to let go of Brittany and grab Nicole's arm. "No," I whispered. The boys pulled Tara away from the fence, and Nicole took Alex. We all made our way to the front yard.

"Did someone call 9-1-1?" I asked.

"Yeah, John did."

For what seemed like hours, we stood on the bike path, looking down the highway, watching for a cop car. Most of the girls around me were crying, and everyone was calling their parents. Everyone, that is, except me. I was numb; it was as if this was all a dream. I pinched myself and felt a sharp pain in my arm. I was definitely awake.

After at least twenty minutes, a lone cop car pulled onto the frontage road and parked behind the multitude of cars already accumulated. There was only one cop because they didn't believe us, but I guess that was my first reaction too. Disbelief is a funny thing; everyone has it, even the cops,

people who have seen just about everything the world has to offer. Parents began to show up, and the driveways of my house and the empty house next door were full. People in the cars on the highway began looking over as another cop car showed up. The traffic on the highway began to slow; everyone wanted a peek at the action.

"Okay kids," the cop started, talking to us like we were six-years-olds, "I need you to take a seat. And we need to see your driver's licenses." He didn't say please, he just demanded.

The eleven of us sat on the grassy hill in front of my garage. As the cop came down the line, the boys started handing over their licenses, but the girls didn't have them.

"It's in my purse," I said as the cop held out his hand to me.

"Well, where's your purse?" he asked in a rude voice.

"In the barn."

"Oh," he said, before moving on to Chris, who was sitting next to me.

After a few minutes, he came back to me. "I need your ID."

"I don't have it with me."

"Well, I need it."

"Well, I don't have it!" I said, getting angry. I'm not one to be rude, but he was beginning to annoy me. He was being mean, and we hadn't done anything wrong.

"Go get it," he said.

I got up and ran into the barn. Tears were starting to well in my eyes; no one had ever been so mean to me in my entire life. I wiped the tears away as I grabbed every purse I could find and made my way back.

As everyone's parents arrived, I remembered that I had never even called mine.

After much police questioning and many, many lame C.S.I. jokes with one of the detectives (the only one who was actually nice to us and talked to us like we were people), the police let us go back to the barn. None of us felt like doing anything anymore. No movie could top what we had just seen.

The police pulled their cars around, through my neighbor's yard, and the driveway began to empty as parents went home. Ten of the eleven of us were allowed to stay together for a while.

We all sat in silence; if anyone had anything to say, you couldn't tell from the silence of the bunch. After a while, Luke said, "This really shows us how fragile life is." We joked with him about saying something so deep, but deep down, we all knew he was right.

Then someone added, "Let's carve our names in the wall." So I ran into the house and grabbed my brother's pocket knife. Then we carved our names in the back room of the barn:

<i>Bailey</i>	<i>Chris</i>	<i>Ashleigh</i>	<i>Brett</i>
<i>John</i>	<i>Nicole</i>	<i>Alex</i>	<i>Tara</i>
	<i>Laura</i>		<i>Brittany</i>

For a long time, I had been waiting for something to change my life. I think Sandra Cisneros said it perfectly in her book *The House on Mango Street*, "waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life." The woman we found hanging in that tree on March 9, 2005 changed my life forever. I believe that God brought her into my life for a reason. She pulled me out of a depression that I was afraid would never end. She showed me that my friends were there for me when I needed them most. That was exactly what I needed to show me that life wasn't as bad as I thought it was. And even though this experience is something that I hope other children and teenagers never have to go through, I thank God everyday that this pulled me out of the slump that I was in.

They say she killed herself. No one will ever know the real truth because the only person who knows the truth is dead. And for now that explanation is just fine for us. The school brought in special counselors the next day, and we spent just about the whole day together in a small office, but the closeness never felt so good. After a few days, life went back to normal except for the occasional question or two from interested classmates. Now we rarely talk about it, but it is always right there in the back of my mind or behind my eyelids. But I learned such a great lesson, one that I will never forget.

## short stories

# 11/11

## Christina Carberry

Children laugh and run around on the playground as I lie alone in the middle of the grass with my existential crisis. I'm so exhausted that I've disassociated with the world around me and exist solely in my thoughts. I watch a scene unfold on the playground: a little blonde girl screams at a shy boy who appears to be a couple years younger than she. She's demanding to swing on his swing, and she throws her hands around in the air like she really means business. She lays it on the line with a stern warning: "If you don't let me on there something terrible will happen to you!" It seems like I've been awake for days. It's excruciating. I awoke at 6:30 a.m. today for it, the inevitable end to whatever this has been. I couldn't fully comprehend it and probably still can't.

I saw him off at the airport just a few hours ago. The place was filled with people saying goodbye to their husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, children and parents, close friends and lovers. He has no such title to me. When referring to him, without launching into a story, I have nothing to call him but my friend. How strange it is that after everything, that's all he is to me. I glance over at the playground and see the little blonde girl now seemingly disinterested in the swing, occupying herself instead with a smashed-in pop can. This scene, of this clearly high-maintenance seven-year-old being completely satisfied with a piece of trash, despite having not gotten what she truly wanted, reminds me, in some clichéd way, of what a debacle my life is at the moment. I suppose my dissatisfaction began on the day that I cherish, the day before I met him.

"I don't purport to know anything," I practically screamed over the thunderous, pounding drums as they crashed in the background. Keeley just stared at me; her ears not recognizing any of the sounds my mouth made.

"I can't hear you! Let's just listen, we'll talk later," she promised while slamming back the final drops of yet another cocktail. The guard was watching me like a hawk all night. If I so much as glanced at her drink with a particular, I don't know, fury in my eye, he would have been over there hounding me in a split second. Duly noted, Mr. Bouncer. I wouldn't have tried it anyway; I know better after what happened the last time.

"Fine, it can wait, I suppose." It could, sure, but I didn't want it to wait. I was just starting to think that maybe I'm outgrowing all this, all this stupid "let's go to a bar every night and see some shitty band" bullshit. I love going to see bands that I like - bands that are good—when they pass through town and play *The Entry* but I cannot take another failing local musician doing an obligatory Elliott Smith cover and talking about a world tour that he may or may not be a part of sometime in the near future, say spring of 2013. My annoyance with these shows had sprung up long before that night, but something about this particular point in history, or the ridiculous look on the bassist's face, made me reach my breaking point.

Keeley bobbed her head along with the music during every song, motioning her hand around the air like she was conducting some psychedelic flower child circus. All this came between the sporadic closing of her eyes in deep contemplation of the lyrics. I just don't know how she does it, getting this emotionally vested in every piece of music she hears. I, personally, am rather blasé about my music habits—if it's a cool song, it's a cool song and I'll throw it on sometimes, but I have a very small space in my heart for long-term emotional commitments to bands or albums. I listen to a lot of stuff, but casually. I can't just get my emotions tangled into every note I hear. It's possible that this easygoing attitude makes me a music slut.

In between wishing to go back to my apartment, wishing that I hadn't agreed to let Keeley spend the night, wondering if the party my aunt was throwing the next day would be at all interesting, and trying to summarize the past three years in one clear, concise sentence I found myself casually watching the band. Not even listening really, just watching. The guitarist wore this shiny goldenrod vest over a forest and light green plaid shirt. He reminded me of my ex-boyfriend, needy and complex. I could just sense

his troubled nature from the stage. I don't know why I say ex-boyfriend, because he reminded me of all of them, really. All six guys I've dated are perfectly summarized by this needy, attention-starved hipster wannabe, whose whole image is based upon the principle of trying really hard to not look like he's trying too hard. The most recent of said exes, Scott, is this rich kid from Minnetonka who plays up the "starving artist" bit. He acts like he doesn't care what people think of him, always talking about some new tragic piece he's creating or a problem with the world he makes far more complex than it really is. He complicated me, I yearned for it. When we were dating, he was constantly doing some new strange thing for the sake of his art. I thought it was brilliant at first, but after a while, he wore me down. I finally broke up with him when he decided to only speak in "tongues" for two weeks - since he doesn't know any tongues, it was basically fourteen days of him making weird clicking noises and screaming gibberish at his friends. He called it research—I don't think even he knew what the research was for.

Determined to date men as fucked up as the ones I've dated, Keeley flirted with the band for a half hour after the show before realizing that it wasn't worth it and that she was probably too tipsy to think clearly. We sat completely silent on the bus ride up Hennepin, neither of us wanting to begin to vocalize the thoughts running through our minds. I was wishing that I hadn't agreed to take a bus home so late at night, but Keeley convinced me that it was for the best in case one of us "ended up somewhere else." It was just as well anyway; I had no money for gas. The crisp white lights inside the bus forced my eyes to squint, so I stared out the window, trying to make the most of the long ride from Uptown. We arrived at my apartment feeling beaten down, forty-five minutes later, and soon thereafter Keeley was passed out on my bed, leaving me the couch. While trying to fall asleep I laid awake recounting horrific tales from my past, rewriting the lyrics to some god-awful pop song that had gotten stuck in my head, and trying to figure out if the sole purpose of my existence is to fall asleep cold, sober, and alone at 3:30 A.M. on a Saturday night.

The next day was the big party at my aunt's house that I was expected to attend. Since my parents are far away - 400 miles, they love to remind me - they appreciate it when I can come to these shindigs so Aunt Emily can see how I'm doing. She and her husband have quite a bit of money, so they're always throwing these swanky parties for some cause or event. She's a very fun woman, but her husband and their rich older friends sometimes make for a pretty boring evening. That night was a dinner party and benefit for a local politician.

As I was completely broke that weekend, having spent all my money on a vintage gold necklace at a thrift shop, I was once again stuck on a bus. After having to make two extra long stops for a woman convinced she was having a heart attack, I was about an hour late. I walked in and saw people doing the typical double take at my outfit and the concerned looks on the faces of the old folks. They never respond well to my outfits, and this was no exception. I was wearing the shiny gold double-banded headband, the purple dress with the big green flowers on it, a large silver belt over the dress but under the yellow oversized cardigan, green heels with purple trim, and three long necklaces and two rings. They were horrified. Aunt Emily saved the situation with her cheery attitude. "It's my niece!" she stated, "She's very smart. Almost done with college and only 20 years old!" If I were to ask her, she would tell me that she says such things to give me a proper introduction, but I know it's to give the older patrons the indication that I'm not entirely a strange foreign object to be treated with apprehension—I'm normal, and even smart! All of my peculiar behavior can be excused with the utterance of the word "college." Typical Emily. I can't really blame her though, if I didn't understand the concept of being "artsy," or "indie," or whatever you call it, I'd confuse me too.

I immediately started scanning the crowd for younger faces. I recognized a high-up campaign organizer in the Farmer-Labor Party and his wife, whom I've met a few times at various parties. Besides a couple of Emily's friends who were probably in their mid-30s, the only other youngish looking person stood out. He was wearing this dark gray sweater with a T-shirt under it, which seemed a little strange for mid-September. My first thoughts were that he must be stressed out, anxious, and a control freak, impressions gathered from the way he clutched tightly to his wine glass, smiled half-heartedly at others' jokes and comments, and checked his phone constantly. He didn't give me so much as a smile or second glance when I first arrived. "Friendly," I thought. He reminded me of this anti-social political junkie I went to high school with, a real taskmaster and an uptight pain in the ass.

I was in the kitchen refreshing my sparkling water and trying the spinach dip when he actually spoke to me. He introduced himself as Ian, a lawyer from Chicago now living in New York taking time off to work for a political campaign here in Minnesota. I introduced myself as Heather, a college student and artist from Omaha. He never really explained why he had come to work here, in Minneapolis of all places, but it seemed appropriate. We had a nice discussion about politics, in which I tried to explain why Dennis Kucinich is my dream candidate, only to be mocked by Ian, in between his diatribes about foreign policy and the economy. We ended up having a pretty lengthy conversation, and sometime in

the middle of our discussion of post-modern philosophy and the merits of neoliberal economics, the thought crossed my mind that he was nice once he got talking, and even cute when he smiled.

"I've never met anyone like you," he said, apparently genuinely.

"I'm told I'm unique," I smiled. Right. Go to any liberal arts college campus or indie rock show and you'll see hundreds of me. I prefer to not think about this though, to focus on my one discerning quality from any given group. For example, at the Cloud Cult show a few weeks prior, most of the girls were wearing flats or pumps, but I broke away from the pack and wore Havaianas. I pretended not to notice that all the other girls were wearing print dresses and leggings from Urban Outfitters, just as I was, and focused on my rogue footwear. "See," I could tell myself, "I am unique—I'm wearing flip-flops! No one else is!"

Talking with Ian was the highlight of my night. It felt good to just have a calm, intellectual conversation with someone. I hadn't experienced that in a very long time. There was no pretention, no act to put on. I could be myself around him in a way that I couldn't among my friends, people whose pride is dependent upon being themselves. He seemed to be the antidote to everything I hated about my friends. I didn't have to worry about getting someone to think highly of me, or trying to fit in to some image. We were talking just because we wanted to, because we were enjoying ourselves, not to mutually benefit from the others' existence. And we were enjoying ourselves despite our obvious lack of anything in common. He'd never heard of the music I listened to, never painted a day in his life, never stepped foot in the type of clubs that I go to and never seen anyone like me.

Sometime towards the end of the night, after we'd moved into the sunroom but before a flock of old people came in and started gawking at the vaulted ceiling, he gave me this look, a sort of half-smile and gaze, which from other guys I would know would mean something good, but I knew that Ian was not the type of guy I'm used to. I was unsure of what to do, so I just smiled back, pushed my hair behind my ear, and started examining the trim on my heels.

Things went back to normal when I left the party, and I thought about Ian's suggestion that I stop by the campaign office sometime. I'd been meaning to pick up some stickers and buttons anyway, and his presence may have helped with the motivation a bit. So after a few days of the same old shit, smoking weed in my friend Eric's dorm rooms between classes, watching a marathon of Wes Anderson films, and spending countless hours before a canvass completely uninspired, I made my way to that office, as much as an act of desperation for something different as the desire to pick up supplies. He was sitting in a brightly lit office, perched behind his laptop. I would come to find out that he was always on that laptop, checking news websites, reading political analyses, and writing summaries of each day's news to inform those who are less politically inclined than he (which I presume would include most everyone but the Clintons). I immediately felt a pang of regret when I walked in, but I buried the regret and smiled.

The next few weeks are kind of a blur. We started talking quite a bit, and sometimes I'd show him around the city at night. Since he didn't usually get done at work until nine or ten, we'd end up walking past all the best places without being able to go in. I'd tell him about the great restaurants in the Cities that would never be open long enough for us to eat there, and though I'd rave about the delicious ethnic cuisine and healthy options available, we'd usually end up at Denny's. When not on one of our nighttime excursions, we'd have long conversations on his balcony or mine, which I was convinced for a long time were more about him trying to get his head around me, trying to understand me, than they were about the conversation. He could talk to anyone about the nature of humanity, right? There must be some reason he talks to me, and since I'm so different than he is and don't fit in with his image, I reasoned that he must be trying to figure me out. Intellectual types like him have to dissect everything, and if he had the opportunity to analyze me, of course he would take it. So he'd examine me, figure me out, and I'd get a break from the pretention of my school friends. It worked. And we did have fun together.

I started to realize that it was perhaps something more than this when he told me his plans for his day off. "I get one day off, and I haven't used it yet," he said in his matter-of-fact way. "An old friend from high school lives in St. Cloud so I'm visiting him for the day, but I should be home around seven. We should go out to one of those weird restaurants you've told me about."

He always treats everything so professionally, I was unsure of his exact intentions with this, but readily agreed anyway. "We should. I'll start thinking about which one you need to experience the most."

I decided on a nice but not-too-expensive restaurant downtown, and I realized that he had intended it to be a date about halfway through our meal. I didn't fret about it though, conversation with him was always easy and that night was no exception. Nonetheless, it was a very strange date for me. We went

out to dinner and a movie. No art gallery opening, no local folk show, no poetry slam where we silently critiqued each performer. We had a nice dinner and then went to a movie at a normal theater, both of which he paid for. I don't think I've ever been on a date so traditional. Being normal felt so strange.

We went back to his apartment after the movie, he poured us some drinks, and we started talking. This talk was different than our previous ones, more personal. I went off on one of my tangents; I think it was the one about love being a false concept put forth by religion to keep people together. He subsequently confessed that he believes in it but doesn't think he will ever be in love. His confessions were revealing, such as that one, and sometimes much more trite. "I sometimes tell people at work that I'm 29," he told me. "I'm 31!" I felt as if he should be scribbling down everything he said to me above some shitty D-I-Y art on a postcard.

"I felt out of place in high school and college, so I kept moving. I go from city to city now, and whenever I get close to people, I have to leave so there's always this distance. Political campaigns are perfect for that ... it is hard though. I rushed through several schools so I could have a real job, get settled down, start working ... but that didn't change anything. I still have to keep moving around. Even having a somewhat prestigious job can leave you feeling like shit at the end of the day, you know?"

"I feel that way about school, like ... okay, I did it, I got into a good school, which was all anyone wanted for me in high school, to get into the good college. And now I have and I just wonder, is this it? I have all the right friends and get the good grades and I'm doing well and I'm happy sometimes but was it really all worth it for this?"

"Yeah, I always wonder if I'd be happier doing something else. But in reality, probably not, at least not with most things ... I love my job, really, I just have to wonder."

"I do that too, I wonder, about my friends, all my stupid friends who are exactly who I wanted to be friends with, I mean I'm exactly what I wanted to be and I'm doing what I wanted to do but I don't know how to feel if this is really all there is. And I've tried so hard to fit in with them, to be a part of this group, probably out of a desire to not feel out of place. But I still do sometimes."

The conversation got more in-depth, and as it got later and we got a bit drunk; my memories of the events of the night start to blend together. We had a brief discussion about our younger days, our raw, suburban childhoods—he in 1980s Chicago and me in 1990s Omaha—and I tried to imagine how we both got here, to this point in time, from there. I was trying to pull my hair back up into the bobby pin it had come unfurled from when he kissed me for the first time. It was brief and uneventful, but nice. A few more moments like this followed, always a bit awkward and lacking the immediacy I've always felt with other boys. It was kissing that didn't anticipate anything—he didn't expect sex to follow, or try to use me as his inspiration for a new work of art. We were just enjoying each other's company. It was refreshing.

Nearing 3 AM, we were both getting tired. "I'm probably too drunk to take you home," he said, "So you can sleep out here if you want, or in the bed and I'll sleep out here." I offered to sleep on the couch. I was already pretty comfortable, and I crashed as soon as he brought me a blanket. I fell asleep warm, drunk, but still alone.

He drove me home early the next morning on his way to work. I was half-asleep, a little hung over, and very groggy. I'm sure I looked partially dead. "Do you want some coffee?" Ian asked, generous and professional as always.

"No, I'm okay, I just need sleep."

"Are you sure? This place looks good, and I've been meaning to try it. I only have three weeks left here, I have to make sure I do everything I've wanted to whenever I get the chance."

"Of course, then," I tried to smile. It was just shocking to hear him vocalize his departure in that way that made it sound so real, so final.

He told me right away that he was leaving soon. It's not like I didn't know. He would board a plane bound for New York City on November 11, and that would be it. Still, all the excitement and fun of the night before faded as it really sunk in. A few weeks from now, he'd be off in New York, practicing law, the world at his fingertips, and I'd be here in Minneapolis, stuck indefinitely. Not forever though. I may have successfully escaped my hometown, but I've yet to escape the Midwest. "When this campaign and this-thing-whatever it is, is over, we'll go back to our lives, the same as we were before," I thought to myself. So I mourn his departure just as much as I mourn my lack of a departure. I'll go back to my life painting pictures, partying at night, critiquing and analyzing everything by day, being stuck in the same illusory world made of song lyrics and hallucinations.

The week after that was fine. It was a lot of the same stuff we've always done, just as fun, but still bound by the time constraints his constant working provided. I took him to Minnehaha Falls that Thursday. We walked along the paths darkened by night, admired the scenery, and as we stood



there, in front of this waterfall, 11/11 hung over our heads, just a bit more than it did every other day we were together. He held my hand as we walked silently back to my car. It was nice, fun even, but very bittersweet. I could not escape the thought of 11/11, not a wish or a memory, just a looming, ticking clock.

I saw him a bit that weekend, but after that, it was crunch time for the campaign, and he was completely booked. I chose not to go hang out with my friends during this time, but rather to occupy myself. That typically meant listening to music and contemplating my life. Sunday night, nine days to go, I drove around listening to Emily Haines. My car was finally full of gas, so I drove all over, playing the entire album, letting each note give way to the darkness around me. I've always reveled in "The Lottery," as it mentions my name, but tonight it hit especially hard. I was driving aimlessly, lost in the suburban jungle of Bloomington, and I was just driving by IKEA when it came on. I found myself passing by the southern edge of the airport as the words struck me: "Don't worry, Heather, about forever..." I replayed and replayed it, over and over, and thought about the meaning of those words for the rest of the night.

That week went faster than expected, and Ian was celebrating his candidate's victory in no time. I celebrated local and national victories at Emily's, as she of course had a big party. Ian had to go around town thanking his campaign's volunteers and going to staff parties for most of the rest of the week, but we had two more dates before he left town. It was nothing too noteworthy, and I don't want to get sentimental. It was mostly more of the same, with that sense of impending departure.

When I got up this morning, I fully realized that this is it. This is it, the end of a very quick, strange chapter in my life that has impacted me deeply. I've learned a lot about myself during the few weeks of whatever this has been. I learned that I can actually care about someone; I wish him well and hope for his happiness. For once, it's not about what would benefit me the most; I just wish him well. Our relationship was not about artistic expression or romance or some unfulfilled egotistical need, it was just what it was. With past boyfriends, I liked them because I was trying to fit the right image or because I saw in them something I wished I could be. I care about Ian simply because he is a good person and we get along. It's such a simple concept, but I've rarely experienced it before.

As I sat with him at the airport, waiting for him to board his flight, I reverted back to old habits. I started wondering what was in this for me, trying to analyze what I'd gotten out of the situation. In trying to distract myself from these negative thoughts, I instinctively made fun of the shitty pop song we could hear blaring through a young girl's headphones.

"Don't pull that artsy bullshit on me now," he smiled. "I see through it."

I just smiled in return, not really wanting to know the extent to which he was joking. As he sat there in a plain white button-up shirt and jeans, I found myself unable to fully repress how I felt. My mind wandered, and I started trying to imagine what it would be like if he and I had actually dated. In reality, we never would have worked as a couple, and we both knew it. It wouldn't have made sense. A thirtysomething intellectual type—a lawyer, no less—dating an artsy twenty-year-old college student? It would look strange. Would I take him to shows and vegan coffee shops in his starched suit? Would he take me to meetings and office parties with my headband perfectly positioned over all of my hair and my high-waisted skirt situated just below my breasts with four tank tops tucked into it? Or, worst of all, would one or both of us change? When you're with someone long enough, someone always changes. Especially if you're drastically different. One of us changing would have been the greatest tragedy of all. We are who we should be, and either of us altering this would be a major trespass to ourselves.

Ian's flight was called to board as I was so lost in my thoughts, I could barely think straight. He looked at me, with that look of genuine caring in his eyes. "I'm bad with goodbyes. This has been good. You have my number, so call anytime." And with that, and a long hug, he was gone. I didn't say much. I whispered something to the effect of, "If we ever live in the same city ...." But we won't. I know we won't. I just wanted to say it anyway.

This is not a love story. Not at all. I may or may not have loved this man in the middle of it, but that's not the point. This is about me, and my process of becoming whatever it is that I am. It's about the whole world and image I tried so hard to create being completely shattered by this scrawny little lawyer, and now I'm left a very different person. I was more content with my life before I met him. I had something to be a part of, but now it just feels fake. Of course I'd had problems with this before him, as I will now that he's gone. And I'd rather be enlightened about this world and understand that it's fleeting and pretentious than continue thinking it's the end all be all. I just feel different, and that's scary.

All day I struggle with trying to understand my purpose in life beyond this little college artistic world that will disappear soon enough. I've always considered it my life's destiny to be this person, to have this life and have these friends, but where do I go beyond that? From here on, will I create my destiny, or

will it be carved out for me? I feel alone as the only one who understands that things won't last forever, we have to be something and go somewhere when college life is over and the isolated bubble of indie world fades. We have to keep living.

On the playground behind me, the little boy has fallen off of his swing. He's on the ground for what can't possibly have been more than ten seconds before the blonde girl claims his swing. He looks upset, but just walks away. I am too lost in my thoughts to think much of this scene. I decide that I've had enough thinking for one day, so I call up my friends.

Everything's the same as it always has been. As I walk into Keeley's, everyone's sitting around, Sonic Youth is on the turntable, conversations about abstract art, Kurt Vonnegut, and veganism abound. "Things are good and normal here, I gather," I announce my presence. I'm greeted with hugs and faux European cheek kisses by my three closest friends.

I decide to tell just them the details of my experience with Ian. I could use someone to listen, to offer me some sort of guidance or something. I was only half-expecting them to analyze it like a classic painting, as they inevitably did.

"You should have asked him to stay!" Keeley said. "It could have been like a cheesy, bad movie love story!"

"No, no, no. It's much more meaningful this way. Like a beautiful misfortune, poignant and surreal. I mean, she was at the airport when he left! It's just classic tragedy," Eric said.

"But if he'd stayed here, it would have been a striking contrast, the pretty little hipster versus the neurotic, overworked lawyer. That's where the beauty would come from."

Corrine, always the voice of reason, chimed in. "No, I think it's about what makes Heather happy. And the artistic aspect isn't the small, micro view of their relationship; it's the overall, the bigger picture. And if Ian needed to leave to complete the aesthetic of Heather's happiness, then that's how it is." No one could argue with that logic.

"Besides, he's kind of old," Eric chuckled.

"Vicious Vicious is playing! Let's go!" So I go. Of course I do. But it's different. Now that I fully comprehend that this whole thing is fake and won't last forever, maybe I can make the most of it. Who's to say I'd be better off in Ian's world anyway? This is the scene I've been immersed in since eighth grade, when my first boyfriend Bobby made me a mix CD of The Decemberists and I fell in love with the concept of independence.

I dance and sing along at the show and for just a second, I forget about all of my problems and am almost happy. Being with my friends, clad in our Urban Outfitters print dresses and all, still has its advantages. Maybe the point of this life is to have fun before reality kicks in. Keeley and Eric and Corrine all seem pretty happy despite their ignorance to the fact that it's fake and fleeting. Maybe that's not such a bad thing at all. I'd just rather know. And now I do.

On the way home from a decent night out, the traffic lights are blurred, due to my pure exhaustion. I'm listening to Radiohead, OK Computer. Multiple thoughts swirl around my mind like always, streaming through my consciousness, but I'm completely caught up in the music. I barely even notice that I have thoughts. The same line repeats several times over, and with my complete exhaustion, immersion in the music and its surreal nature, rips through every piece of my being and rings truer than ever. "And for a minute there, I lost myself, I lost myself..."

# August Revelation

Christina Carberry

It is not the type of situation she likes to find herself in. Not the time, nor the place...certainly not the place. Chicago in August isn't very glamorous. Hot and sticky and filled with tourists walking up and down the streets marveling about the big city, it's not even close to glamorous at all. Which is what she thought it would be—glamorous, exciting, always some party to be attending. Instead there is nothing for her to do. She doesn't like to find herself in this situation, sitting alone and thinking. She has learned better than to let herself think too much; life is easier to live without thinking about it. This sweltering mid-August afternoon, however, she can't help but let her mind wander a bit.

She sits in one of the big parks in the city, her exciting event for the week, and just observes. She observes each person that walks by and tries to imagine everything she can about them in that instant: where they're from, what they like to do, where they work, what their favorite food is, what their best friend is like. The man in the yellow knit hat with the bright red sunglasses is a musician who lives with his longtime girlfriend. The older woman in the blue pantsuit is a wealthy doctor's wife who does charity work for children. The young boy sitting on the bench is a straight-A student at his ritzy private middle-school. The people usually don't have much in common with one another, but they all have something that she doesn't have. Some type of happiness.

She tells herself that she doesn't like her life in Chicago because it's not as glamorous or exciting as she had hoped. But though she denies it to her family, that's not really why she doesn't like it, and though she plays dumb, she knows it. She's hardly the glamorous type, can barely handle much more excitement than going to the movies once a week, and even if invited to a party, she wouldn't know what to do with herself when she arrived. So what is it then, she wonders, that causes her to have so much secret disdain for the city that she'd once felt such an urge to live in?

She had done everything right, just what she was supposed to do. After she graduated with honors from her small-town high school, she got into a good college in the city and moved there to study. Her parents quickly told her that though her passion for writing was an acceptable hobby, it was nothing to make a career out of. It pleased her parents to see their daughter move to Chicago and study pre-law at a top university, as it was just as they had done when they were young. The words of her mother at Thanksgiving echoed in her mind. "Emily, when are you and Joshua going to get married?" she'd asked so hopefully. The next step after she graduates, which all of her family is anticipating, is for her to go on to law school and marry her longtime boyfriend.

It seems that the person anticipating this step the least is Emily herself. She loves Joshua, but she can't imagine herself staying this way for the rest of her life. She can't imagine being with him forever, practicing law forever. She can't imagine staying in this circle of being utterly miserable, but she doesn't know any way to stop it. It pleased her to please her parents, as that has been all she wanted from life. She wished to avoid doing the wrong thing and to make everyone happy. Somewhere in trying to make everyone happy, she forgot to make herself happy.

And so sits Emily, broken down at age twenty-two, alone on a park bench. She's stuck on a career path that leads to money but not happiness. She's stuck with a boyfriend whom she loves but is not in love with anymore. She's stuck with friends that she sees at school but can't rely on. She is completely, totally, utterly, stuck.

"Why am I not happy?" she wonders. "I've done everything right, just like everyone else. So why is everyone happy but me?" She pushes her wavy brown hair behind her ear and stares. The reverberations of other peoples' conversation flutter around her and die in a second at her eardrums. She hears laughter from jokes shared amongst friends and nostalgic memories being relived by family members. There are no judgments, no expectations, just love for each other. "It's the sound of happiness," she thinks, "I've never heard it myself."

She walks home alone, fighting back tears and sweat in the blistering August sun. But something is different about this walk. Something entirely different is occurring inside of her. Instead of assuming everyone's life to be marvelous and perfect, she finds herself wondering if maybe some of these people

are just as unhappy as she. Maybe the red-haired woman who walks by quickly in a suit isn't off to some important business meeting, but to have lunch with an acquaintance she despises. Maybe the old man coming out of a nearby church doesn't go to worship some god he loves, but to ask for forgiveness of the many wrongs he's done. By simply opening herself to other possibilities, she begins to see things from an entirely different perspective.

She begins to wonder if everyone is truly happy at all. Maybe those jokes amongst friends are shared in order to keep conversations light and feelings content and on the bright side. Maybe those nostalgic memories are shared to try to recapture happy memories that have since faded away. Maybe everyone has their pride and status to maintain, so they have others believe that they're content when they are not. Maybe her recognition of her unhappiness is actually a blessing because something can still be done about it. After all, she realizes, she is only twenty-two years old. "I can turn my life around," she thinks, "it's not too late."

She walks into a java shop and orders a cup of coffee. "How are you today?" the nice man says as he smiles at her.

"I'm...good." she replies with sincerity. This is the first time she's ever answered "good" to that question and meant it. She adds, "I'm changing my life today."

"Good for you. I am too," the man replies.

"Really?" She is intrigued. "How are you doing it?"

"I quit my awful job, and I'm going back to school to study what I've always wanted. I was sick of working at some dead-end job as a corporate slave. I'm doing what I love now, and it's worth it to have to work at a coffee shop for extra money—I'm in control of my future, not somebody else."

His words impact her greatly. "I'm in control of my future, not somebody else," she thinks to herself, "Interesting." She pays him for the coffee and leaves. As she wanders down the street, she begins to think of what she would do if she were really in control of her own destiny. "I'd break up with Joshua," she thinks, "study anything but law...and keep up with my hobbies." Those hobbies she'd given up long ago when her parents told her that they wouldn't make a formidable career have been haunting her ever since. She's been filled with the desire to write and draw for years but always believed she had something *better* to be doing with her time.

The problem goes deeper than each individual and lies in the very fabric of society. The very basis for how we do things is flawed, she marvels. There's a set pattern that everyone is to follow. "You go to high school to go to college to get a good job to be financially secure to raise children who grow up to go to high school to go to college to get a good job to be financially secure..." Her mind trails off as she is dizzy at the very thought of this! She realizes that the sadness is just a cycle that continues turning because of what society dictates. She wonders, "If sadness is a cycle, perhaps happiness is also a cycle."

So she sets out to do whatever she can to put herself in that cycle. She begins to try to rediscover what would make her happy, since she had given it all up so long ago. She knows that she must begin writing and drawing again, as if her sanity depends on it. She realizes that her parents taught her how to think, learn, study, work, but never to do what makes her happy. So she figures it out all on her own, by experimenting and trying new things.

She finds that she has to re-train her brain. Train it to look for the abstract in the concrete. Train it to look for patterns in chaos. Train it to look for positive things in her life as well as negative things, and attempt to minimize the negative and maximize the positive. She sets out to discover who she is, something no one has ever taught her to do. She stops worrying about what others would say because she realizes that those who judge only do so to fit you into what they believe to be true of life. She also finds that though some people are judgmental, many people are open and welcoming because they're just trying to find their way through life as she is.

"Why should I live by the rules someone else set for me?" she wonders. "I must take care of myself first because I can't begin to help others if I can't even help myself." She realizes that while running in this race for success and privilege, she had forgotten how to feel. She became numb to the world around her. No longer will I be that way, she tells herself; no longer, starting today.

A few weeks later, having given up a formidable career and a solid boyfriend but having gained a wealth of knowledge, she again wanders to her favorite park. "I don't know what I'm going to do with my life. I have no plans. And that's okay because the ultimate goal is happiness," she says to herself. She sits down on her usual park bench, again alone, but with many new insights. She watches the people walk past and wishes that they know what she now knows. She wishes that she could help them. She pulls a small notebook out of her purse and begins marking down everything she has realized. She has decided to help others and herself by formulating a story based upon what she's learned. "I'll call it my 'August Revelation,'" she asserts. "The road to contentment."

She begins to write, "Once you break out of what is expected and follow what you believe in, happiness is easy to find." And it was.

# A Moment Not To Smile About

Laura Socarras

Every evening, my mommy, my daddy, Daniel (my little brother), and me would watch TV.

One night we were watching my favorite show with that *Star Trek* guy, *Rescue 911*. After *911*, Mommy and Daddy were watching a boring show with a white-haired old guy in a suit talking about Wall Street. During that show, my brother played with his blocks. I played with my Barbie and this hard, plastic Wise Man who had a crown.

Barbie and Wise Man were getting married while the old guy talked. I was the pastor in my pink, flannel nightgown. My feet were cold, so Mom gave me back my socks that I had taken off earlier. During Barbie's vows, Daddy turned off the TV.

"Time for bed," Daddy said. "Hurry upstairs."

I left my Barbie downstairs, but I kept Wise Man in my hands.

I was in front of everyone else as we walked up the stairs. Just before I got to the top, I slipped on the third step. It was so fast. First I was walking, and then my head was on the landing. My left hand was on my mouth; I was still holding on to the now-bloody Wise Man.

Mommy grabbed me and ran to the bathroom. In the bathroom, I looked at my hand; it was covered in blood! I thought that my hand was bleeding. Mom grabbed my hand and put it in the sink under running water.

When I saw that my hand was not bleeding, I felt better until I looked in the mirror. I saw that it was my mouth that was bleeding. I got scared, but Mommy is a nurse, and she told me I wasn't going to die.

Mommy told Daddy that we needed to go to the hospital. Daddy grabbed the car keys, and we all went downstairs to the van. Daddy put Daniel in his car seat, and Mommy put me in mine. She handed me a big cloth and told me to hold it on my mouth like a big girl. And I did because I was a big girl.

We got to the hospital. Daddy let Mommy and me out at the hospital door. When we got inside, Mommy wrote on some papers. After he parked the car, Daddy came in with Daniel and sat with us. We waited a very long time before a nurse called my name. I was kind of happy to leave that stinky room full of stinky men with stinky beards and fat women.

The nurse took us to a room with a tall bed. I sat on that bed. It had crinkly, white paper that Mommy let me draw on with her pencil. Daddy said that he would take sleeping Daniel back to the waiting room. A tall, brown-haired doctor came in, after the nurse talked to Mommy. He smiled at me and told me how pretty I was and asked me, "Where did you get that curly red hair?" I was too tired to answer that stupid question, and my mouth was hurting. The doctor told me he was going to make me pretty again.

"No scars," he said.

The nice doctor gave Mommy some medicine to put on my cut. He left the room. Mommy laid me down and put the medicine on my cut lip.

"What's this going to do to me?" I asked.

"It's going to make your mouth numb," Mommy said.

"It tastes funny," I told her.

I don't remember too much after that because I fell asleep.

I woke up in my daddy's arms. The doctor was telling Mommy what to do with my new black stitches. He smiled at me and told me how pretty I was going to be when I grew up. He shook hands with Daddy and left. Mommy wrote on some more papers, and we left for the car to go home.

When we got home, Daddy put Daniel and me into our beds, while Mommy cleaned up the blood from the bathroom.

I couldn't smile very well, so I taught myself to smile on one side of my mouth.

After a long time, Mommy took her special nurse scissors, laid me on her big bed, and cut my stitches off.

"Now you can smile," Mommy said.

"Don't you want to smile?" Daddy asked.

"You won't hurt yourself if you smile now," Mommy said.

I gave my mommy and daddy a half-smile. They laughed.

I never saw plastic Wise Man again. Mommy said that Wise Man was naughty and had to go away forever.

Daddy, Mommy, Daniel, and I still watch *Rescue 911* at night. Mommy and Daddy still watch that boring old guy. Daniel still plays with his blocks, but I play with Barbie and my new Ken. I smile when I marry Barbie and Ken in my clean, pink nightgown.

Click.

"Time for bed. Everyone upstairs."

short stories

# Baby John

Rachel Crouse

Kathleen perches on the edge of a poorly padded chair, her swollen belly nearly on her knees. Cold air is flowing from somewhere, but she still feels overheated—her palms are clammy, and her fingers fidget. These restless hands have nervously rolled a motherhood magazine into a narrow paper baton. All the while, she stares at a ridiculous painting in the doctor's office. She first noticed it the previous day while waiting in this exact chair to see Dr. Bond. The painting fills an obligatory spot on the wall, announcing Dr. Bond's lack of taste in art. How could a man, who holds such an abundance of knowledge about the way things work, not know bad art when he sees it? The uneasy thought settles in the pit of Kathleen's very large, but still, stomach.

She had dreaded telling Fritz that the "bun" was in the oven. They weren't at a great point in life, and he worried about everything: money, weather, future, oil prices. You name it, he contemplated it. She had waited three and a half months to let him in on the secret—three and a half of the sickest months in her life. He was a good man, but not always the most astute. How could he have missed the signs?

"You're what? Preg—pregnant?" He whispered the last word like he was uttering a curse. His mind and mouth raced over every precaution they took, recalling each contraceptive that had been employed and wondering which one had failed.

The timing was not impeccable. Kathleen knew this. There was no money, there was even less time. After Mike and Ruth-Anne were born, Kathleen had decided to stay home with them, and the budget was maxed.

"When has the timing ever been good?" Kathleen countered quietly.

Of course, the kids were elated. They rode cloud nine. Ruth-Anne had taken to making little crafts and coloring pages and proudly labeling each one "For Baby John." Kathleen had told them at one point that she thought it was going to be a boy but couldn't be sure; they named him Baby John. Mike was already a big brother, and when told he was going to be an even bigger brother, he just shrugged his slight shoulders, though his face beamed. Fritz swore Mike grew two inches after being told.

"Wierson, Kathleen?" The weak voice of the nurse questions, rather than demands, her out of her daydreams. It takes a few seconds for her to work up the energy and when she rises to her feet, her short-clad legs look like twigs supporting a cathedral. She sways and hobbles down the hall after the nurse who has raced ahead like she's blazing a trail. Once she catches up, she is ushered into a dimly-lit exam room. The nurse doesn't bother to give any instructions; they exchange a look of understanding. Kathleen has the routine down, and before the door latches, she is halfway out of her maternity wear and donning the supplied gown. As she pulls the airy garment over her head, she chuckles. How they get away calling this threadbare sheet a gown—I'll never know . . .

Fritz had come with her to the very first appointment. They waited forty-five minutes in the exam room for the doctor to make a brief appearance to announce that Kathleen was, in fact, in the "family way" and that the addition should arrive in another five months. He quipped some one-liner about a stork and then squeezed ultra sound goo on Kathleen's belly. Moments later a positively deafening lug-a-thump-a-lug-a-thump filled the air. Having done his share of damage, the doctor waltzed right back out of the room, leaving them to discuss all the finer details of the predicament.

Kathleen could only sigh her agreement to all Fritz's enlightened ranting.

He seemed to find comfort in stating the obvious: No, they couldn't afford another child. Yes, they were in hot water. No, the trailer didn't have more room. Yes, they would be overwhelmed. No, they weren't getting any younger.

His concern spread the more he spoke. He reminded her that together they had a good many things—none of which were money. They had things like bills, broken down cars, and hungry mouths to feed. No money trees, no blank checks, no recently dead and generous distant relatives. This situation was not good. Worse yet, it was not feasible. Fritz's throat was constricting and his words rising higher in pitch. All his thoughts spilled out between gasps of breath, punctuated by animated eyebrows.

Finally, Fritz sat back in his chair and braided his hands together in his lap in a concentrated manner. Releasing a long sigh, he looked Kathleen in the eye, and waited.

She had no words to say.

Then, the baby kicked. Hard. Kathleen let out a start, grabbing Fritz's wrist and placing his palm on her lower abdomen. A smile grew out of nowhere on Fritz's face as he tried to feel the mild activity just below the surface of Kathleen's belly. All his frantic words melted away and pooled into a sappy puddle as his countenance altered entirely.

Fritz's eyes grew to the size of saucers, "I actually feel him kicking!" This was declared with triumph and awe. He decided then and there that this one was going to be not only a boy, but his namesake. "John Fredrick Wierson, we can call him Fritz Junior," he proudly stated.

Kathleen laughed and rested her hand on his. She felt like she could cry. If Fritz was OK with this, then she could be as well. They could make this work. Kathleen said she would devise a penny-pinching scheme. Fritz quickly volunteered to find a night job. Kathleen offered to make all the baby clothes and linens, and so on. Spouting ideas left and right, they were both too scared to stop talking. Lovingly, he reached for her hand and determined it was all going to work out just fine.

They were going to have another baby.

Three months later and here she sat again in the same room, this time alone. Fritz was away working his second job, making all ends meet.

Baby John was, by this time, a full-fledged member of the family, though he had yet to arrive. Every morning at breakfast, Ruth-Anne kissed Kathleen's stomach and talked incessantly to the poor boy, and he always responded with lurches and flailing limbs. Mike, being the stoic veteran that he was, kept his Baby John conversations short and sweet. "Baby John, I'm gonna teach you to play cops and robbers," he would say as he tore through the trailer. He only covered the important points, but Baby John again would let loose.

Fritz was gone when the trouble had started. It had been two weeks since she had felt any movement. It had been two days since she had begun to bleed, and today was her second round of ultrasounds. If the heartbeat is still absent, then that would be that.

Irony can be a funny thing; sometimes it's so funny, it's unbearable. Often times, the cruel humor of irony feels a lot more like mockery. This Baby John, that never was supposed to be, was slipping away without permission.

Today's exam is now over, and Dr. Bond suggests a DNC as he wipes the jelly off of Kathleen's protruding waistline. He says things like "No heartbeat" and "Stillborn." Kathleen is fighting to breathe. Only short, hollow air expands in her lungs, and none of it can be expelled.

All she can see is that horrible painting in the waiting room. It's swimming in her mind in all its poorly-crafted glory. The thin, ill-fitted matting, the texture-less paint splotches, even the illegible autograph in the bottom corner. What kind of person purchases a painting like that? Who has something made just to fill an empty space on a wall? Who makes that kind of a decision? He wants to have the procedure before the weekend; he wants to end it all as quickly as it began. It is all too commonplace, too easy for him to suggest—not nearly as easy for a mother to accept.

Kathleen wills a deep breath. "No, I think we will wait a few days," she says as she dissolves the sloppy brush-stroked canvas from her mind and levels with the doctor's gaze, "give us a few days."

A quiet Kathleen sits at home, watching the weekend trickle by. Whenever she envisions that sorry wall art, her frustrations mount. She has rented an art history book, and it rests unopened on her lap. Fritz has nothing to say; his eyes are sad, and his voice is low and infrequent. Baby John was not one to play by the rules, conceived in spite of all possible deterrents, why should now be any different?

On Monday, Kathleen wakes early with Fritz. He drinks his coffee at the table and catches her tired expression. He understands, and she surrenders.

"I will go get dressed. Will you call Dr. Bond's office?"

He nods his consent.

As Kathleen turns to leave, Ruth-Anne stumbles sleepily into the glow of the fluorescent kitchen light with a lined legal pad in hand. She explains, "I have a surprise for Baby John." Proudly she presents Baby John with an original creation on a wrinkled piece of paper. Kathleen smiles and fingers through Ruth-Anne's unruly curls. Then, ever so gently within Kathleen's belly, a tiny elbow is thrown, followed by a familiar kick.

Later that afternoon, a heartbeat is found, and a few weeks later, Baby John decides he is done incubating and ready to join the family. A full month early, and never short on surprises, Baby John makes a grand entrance.

As a beautiful baby girl.



# First Street

*(an excerpt)*

Bailey Kline

## Unknown Child Discovered in First St. Basement

The headline reached across the page in bold black print. Another human interest story, Meghan thought. That's what it had been described as. Just another story of a happy ending. A happy ending in the papers, yes, but in real life no one could have imagined that child's pain, terror, sense of helplessness, or unknowingness of the world. To her it wasn't just a human interest story... it was her story.

A small Texas suburb was rocked yesterday when a child, maybe ten, was discovered in the basement of a deceased couple's home. The Davenports were killed a week ago in an automobile accident, and the police had returned to the Davenport house on First St. to clear the remains of the young couple's belongings when they discovered a child living in the basement. The child has not yet been identified.

Meghan perched on her makeshift bed: a pair of box springs haphazardly thrown in a corner, covered in a lumpy mattress far past its prime. She sat with her back pushed into the concrete corner, her legs pulled tightly to her body with her small arms wrapped around them. Her head tilted up toward the ceiling and she just watched, as if she expected the feet above to fall through the floor.

She was encircled in darkness. Two small windows on adjacent walls of her confined quarters were covered from the outside. Sunlight had not entered the dank room for almost ten years. The floor was bare concrete, no carpet or tile, just concrete, cold year-round no matter the temperature of the room. A corner bookshelf stood facing the bed; there were books of every kind: college text books, science, math, history and social studies, and many fiction books. The wall around the room was a shale concrete color. On the far side of the room a toilet sat near a shower and sink.

Set in the middle of the wall was a doorway with a tall wooden door that was rarely unlocked. These four walls surrounding her had been her only protection for ten years. She had been a prisoner in her own home; never allowed to even leave her room. She was a prisoner for life.

Seldom had anyone spoken a word to Meghan. She had never learned to talk, she had no real friends, her only friend was the radio, the only communication she had with the outside world. And no one, outside of those who had put her here, knew she even existed. She listened to them every day and then they would go home to their families, but she was stuck; stuck in her room with her books. A far cry from the life any ten-year-old should live.

The footsteps overhead began to heighten. They were right above her, yet they did not know she was there. One set of steps and then another. The footsteps walked away and stopped just in front of the basement door. The knob rattled, it was locked.

"Hey Bernie, Come knock it down," a husky male voice ordered.

"Sure Boss." The man grunted as he shot the lock off.

Meghan jumped and turned her eyes to the door of her room.

Four if not five men hustled down the steps, clomping all the way.

"Why do you think the door was locked? Do you think they keep stuff down here that they shouldn't have?" a young officer questioned.

"I don't know. Just look around. Try that door."

A door opened. "Just old boxes."

"This one too." A man called from the corner opposite Meghan's room.

"How about that one?" They were pointing to Meghan's door.

Meghan's arms and legs began to shake. Butterflies flew around her stomach. The door handle jiggled. Meghan bit her lip.

"Locked." The woman on the other side said. Meghan let out a sigh of relief as a gunshot rang through the house.

The door swung open, and a small brunette woman popped her head in. Meghan sat completely still, her eyes wide open. She didn't even blink. The woman pulled the light cord, and Meghan could see her clearly. She was wearing a badge around her neck.

A single tear ran down Meghan's cheek with the realization that she was free. She was no longer confined to that room. The whole world was in front of her. But instead of embracing the freedom, she cowered in the corner. "Boss, you need to see this."

"What Malloy?"

"It's a kid."

"What?" The captain rushed to her side, and they both stared.

Finally the woman moved slowly toward Meghan. Terror filled Meghan's eyes, and her lip began to quiver. "Sweetie, I won't hurt you. My name's Angela, Detective Angela Malloy." Angela reached her hand out to Meghan, but Meghan just stared at it. "Can you tell me your name?" Meghan shook her head. "You can trust me. I won't hurt you, none of us will."

"Yeah Vega, it's Randall. We need an ambulance to 1753 First St.," the captain said, drowning out Angela.

Angela's hand was still outstretched. "Sweetheart, how long have you been here? Can you answer me? Please. We need to know who you are. Please, take my hand. We need to get you out of here."

Meghan lifted a shaking hand; she slowly moved it toward Angela's, and she finally took it. Angela smiled down at Meghan as she stepped off of the bed. When Meghan's feet were both flat on the floor, she stood but could not hold herself. Her head spun and she fell into Angela's arms. The woman easily picked her up, and they ran up the stairs and out to the waiting ambulance.

The captain stayed behind to inspect Meghan's living quarters. He gazed around the room and stared in amazement at the extensive book case. He walked over to it and looked over the row after row of books. "I didn't read most of these until college," he told himself.

"So Doc, what's wrong with her?"

"Ang, you've just got a terrified ten-year-old little girl."

"What? That's it? Why won't she talk?"

The doctor drew in a breath, "Well, that is not necessarily intentional. In a child who has been neglected for so long, it may have been her reaction."

"A week?"

"No." The doctor seemed surprised at Angela's comment. "This child has been neglected much longer than a week. Much, much longer. You can't tell by looking but she's malnourished. She's extremely sick."

"Physically or mentally?"

"Physically. We have psych come down on every neglect case. Until you know how long she's been in the basement, you won't know what she should be like. She has no mental problems whatsoever. Most kids who are neglected have a bad temper, anger issues, and some even hurt people. But your little Jane Doe has no signs of any of those things. She just doesn't talk."

Angela took a deep breath and left the doctor. The door of Meghan's room stood open, and Angela poked her head in. Meghan sat straight with her back against the backboard. She was staring in the direction of Angela, but Meghan looked right through her. Her mind was in another world. Meghan rarely lived in the real world anymore. Her own world gave her more comfort, more stability. She had seemingly become an introvert, unconsciously of course, but she no longer liked or trusted people. She would rather be by herself, than be in the same room with another person.

"Hon," Angela said quietly, jolting Meghan back to this strange reality. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

Meghan's eyes roamed around the room and then, seeing that they were alone, she agreed. Angela moved closer and set a pad of paper and a pen on the small table that extended in front of the bed.

"Can you write?"

*Yes*, was Meghan's written answer.

"Good. Now, what is your full name? First, middle, and last."

*Meghan Diane Davenport.*

"Well Meghan, I'm Angela." She stuck her hand out, and Meghan hesitantly took it as she had done earlier that morning in her room. "How long have you lived in the basement?"

Meghan looked up into Angela's eyes, her hand didn't move.

"Do you know how long, Meghan?"

Meghan hesitated. *Forever.*

"What?" Angela didn't know if she could believe the child. "Forever? Do you know why?"

*I did something wrong.*

"No, Meghan, that's not it."

*Then why did they do it?*

Angela didn't have an answer. How could parents lock up their child in a dark, dank basement? She had never understood child abuse, but this was beyond abuse. It was torture. Angela picked up the notepad and read and reread the question. Then picked up the pencil and scrawled, *I don't know.*

Meghan came to a stop in the same parking space she used everyday. The moon was the only form of light present except a simple street light above her car. The morning was abnormally warm; she felt sticky. Like her clothes were drenched, although they weren't even wet. A sudden wind slammed her front door shut as she took her bag from the back seat. The back door pushed toward her, causing her to fall to the ground. As she took a deep breath, she sat on the ground for a minute. Meghan glanced toward her bag lying next to her on the dark concrete. A cream colored paper stuck out of a side pocket, a pocket where she never kept anything. "Hmm," Meghan said as she grabbed the paper.

## **Unknown Child Discovered in First St. Basement**

She held the newspaper article in her hand. "What?" she questioned. She stared blankly at the article before finally pushing herself off of the ground. After snatching her bag, she slammed the car door. She glanced toward North Dallas High School before walking in. A big white sign read GO BULLDOG FOOTBALL!!! in orange lettering. Meghan smiled. The same sign hung near the entrance every year, yet the football team never got better. They worked hard, she would give them credit for that, but none of the North Dallas boys had any football talent whatsoever. Yet, out of the 36 high schools in Dallas, North Dallas High games had the highest public attendance rates. No one cared that they would lose no matter what.

The Friday of Homecoming always proved to be a great mystery to the teachers at North Dallas High. No one knew exactly what that year's seniors would do, although the idea was usually the same: toilet paper, spray paint, the works. This year, though, there was no toilet paper strewn through the small trees out front, and the sidewalks were free of spray paint. Last year's spray paint was still visible: a menagerie of Class of 2004's in big orange spray paint block letters littered the concrete. As Meghan walked towards the main door, she surveyed the grounds for any signs of senior action. There was nothing. The school looked as it did every other day of the year. That was, until she entered the building.

The main doors, made mostly of glass, were painted orange and white. A mixture of toilet paper and orange streamers covered the ceilings and the floor. The walls were plastered with 8 x10 photos of every staff member's high school pictures. Meghan couldn't help but laugh when she saw her picture, thinking "They really did their research." The front door of the school entered into a lobby which overlooked the cafeteria. Past the doors on either side of the cafeteria, there were no signs of any disturbances. The cafeteria looked like it had been ripped through by a tornado, yet the rest of the school stood silent and untouched. Meghan chuckled as she made her way to her classroom. When she approached the door, she saw a small white paper taped to it. She squinted to read the headline as she moved closer.

## **Girl Discovered in Basement Identified**

Meghan ripped the article down and unlocked her classroom. She shook her head as she dropped her bag beside the desk and switched on the lights. Meghan quickly glanced at the room and noticed something strange: a newspaper had been placed in the center of each desk.

## **Basement Girl Identified**

## **Girl Has Been in Basement for Almost 10 Years**

## **Basement Girl's Nanny Speaks**

## **Family Found for Basement Girl**

## **Basement Girl Runs Away**

"Who would do this?" Meghan asked herself. She secured all 27 papers in her desk drawer and locked it. She ripped the two articles that she had found earlier into tiny pieces and threw them away. Then she plopped into her desk chair and began her work, trying to put the thoughts of her past out of her head. They were a memory, just a brief minute in her life. They were gone now, and Meghan did not want to dwell on them.

Meghan stood in front of her classes, but could not concentrate. To Kill a Mockingbird and Romeo and Juliet were routine; she rambled off her spiel. Her head and her heart weren't in it. The newspaper headlines ran through her head like the news briefs on CNN. The lessons droned on, and the students recognized a change in Meghan. Her normal, smiling face and joyful demeanor were replaced with emptiness and an unusual lack of vigor.

Meghan's lessons were usually fun and energized. Principal Newman called her a "ball of fire"; her energy was unlike anyone he had ever met. She was also the smartest person he knew, and he knew a lot of people. Meghan's mental capacity and knowledge would have been grounds for any medical college to study, yet her genius had gone unnoticed. Meghan never studied for a test in her life, yet she never earned anything below an A+. No one understood how her mind worked. Her shrink didn't know what to do with her. She didn't talk much, but he was marveled by what she did say. An eleven-year-old had never sat in his office with so little to say, yet so much going on in her head.

Lunch came slowly and Meghan needed it. She sat down at her desk and opened the drawer where earlier she had placed the newspapers. She pulled out the top one.

### Basement Girl's Nanny Speaks

The picture showed a woman in her mid-fifties with a bun of gray hair at the nape of her neck. Her face was stunningly kind, although she was being lead into the police station in handcuffs.

The article read:

Nanny of ten-year-old Basement Girl found. Nanny Elizabeth Jeffries had no comment, but reports say that Mrs. Jeffries has not seen the child since she was three. That leaves only one question: Has she been in that basement ever since?

The stories about Basement Girl were in the papers for a month, and then all of a sudden, they were old news; tucked into the Life section between the weather and horoscopes. The papers never revealed her identity. Her name was never used, her face was never shown. After about two months, people seldom spoke of Basement Girl anymore. Meghan's new family let her forget it. They never asked what it was like or how she was treated. Meghan didn't want to talk about it, and they left it alone. Although the media said nothing, the lack of knowledge about Basement Girl's identity remained the number one mystery in Dallas. Everyone wanted to know who she was.

Knock, knock, knock brought Meghan back to reality. The door opened, and Meghan dropped the paper back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

"Miss D," a voice whispered.

"Yeah." Meghan spun in her chair to see a short brunette girl standing in the doorway. "What can I do for you, Kellie?" she smiled.

"Well, I'm doing a story for the newspaper on a somewhat old topic."

"Okay. Shoot."

"Well I know you've lived here your whole life, and I was wondering if you could tell me about Basement Girl."

"What?" Meghan was stunned. Out of every teacher in the school, Kellie had chosen her.

"Basement Girl. The girl they found in a basement..."

"I know who she is."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

"How old were you when she was found?"

"Ten."

"Wow, that's a crazy coincidence."

"Yep," Meghan said with a sigh. "Hey," Meghan snapped. "How'd you know I've lived here my whole life?" Meghan's personal life was something that she rarely shared. She had no pictures on her desk, no knick knacks of any sort to show her students who she was. Her desk was perfectly organized, no pencil or paper out of place.

"Mr. Bartlett told me." Meghan looked confused as Kellie replied.

Noah Bartlett, the math teacher whose classroom was up the stairs and to the left, was the same age as Meghan, yet his life was the complete and utter opposite of hers. Noah's parents were both teachers; they had a love for children that they passed to Noah. Among their proudest moments was the day Noah received his teaching degree. John and Laura Bartlett passed along a real gift to all six of their children, the gift of love. A gift that many possess but rarely show to complete strangers. Noah showed love to everyone he met. He trusted everyone until they gave him a reason not to. Meghan was one of the few who had never given him a reason not to trust her. He had been the first person Meghan had met at North Dallas High School.

Meghan and Noah ran into each other a week before school began three years earlier. They were both on their way to their brand new classrooms. Meghan was juggling seven novels in one hand, a laptop over her shoulder, a book bag over the other, and a cup of coffee in her other hand. Noah opened the door and moved to step in as Meghan was walking past. He didn't notice and ran straight into her. Meghan's novels clattered to the ground along with her book bag, and her coffee spilled down Noah's shirt.

Meghan gasped as she looked at Noah's coffee drenched shirt, "I am so sorry."

"It's okay. I wasn't paying attention." Noah brushed some coffee off of his pants, "I have another shirt upstairs."

"But," Meghan began.

"No buts. It's fine, don't worry about it." He bent to pick up Meghan's things, "Let me help you with these."

"I can get 'em," Meghan reassured him.

"I'd be glad to help you."

"You carry the coffee," Meghan laughingly replied.

"I'm sure I can do that," Noah said, looking at the stain on his shirt. He retrieved the novels from the floor, and they started towards Meghan's classroom.

"By the way, I'm Noah Bartlett. I teach math."

Meghan turned to him and smiled. "Meghan Davenport, English," she said as she waved her copy of Romeo and Juliet in the air. She took her keys out of her pocket and quickly unlocked the door, and automatically the lights turned on. Noah followed her in and looked around. "First year teacher?" Noah questioned.

"How'd you guess?" Meghan laughed, pointing to the empty white-washed walls.

"Me too," Noah said with confidence.

Meghan looked at him, "Scared?"

"Yep." Noah told the truth. "You?"

"Terrified." Noah smiled at her.

"So Meghan, where are you from?"

"Here." Meghan said after a minute. "And you?"

"Iowa."

"Iowa?"

"Yeah. It's really just a bunch of corn," he joked.

"Got it."

"Miss Davenport." Kellie pulled Meghan out of her trance.

"Sorry. What else do you need?"

"Well, what else can you tell me?"

"Not much. I didn't follow the story, I was ten. My world was..." Meghan didn't really know what the life of a ten-year-old "was." She had never been a real ten-year-old. "My world was Barbie's and dance, not local news."

"Well, have you ever been to the house on First Street?"

Meghan shivered. "No," she lied.

Meghan hadn't seen the house since the day that she had been taken from it. If she had a choice, she would never see it again. The basement would be forever plastered in her memory, and that was enough.

"Okay. Thanks for the information."

"You're welcome."

The final bell rang and students poured from classrooms. No teacher ventured into the hall until the mob was gone; they knew better than that. Meghan pulled out her computer and began putting in grades, but she couldn't concentrate. She pulled a paper out of the bottom drawer.

## **Basement Girl Identified**

The child found in the basement of the Davenport residence a week ago has been identified. Her name has not been released, but this identification gives the police and DCF control over the girl's legal matters. The child will now be placed in foster care.

The door opened quickly, and Meghan threw the paper back in the desk and slammed the drawer as she spun to see who was there. Noah was standing, feet shoulder width apart, arms by his sides, in the doorway.

"Noah, what are you doing here?" she questioned quickly.

"Meg, some of the kids were talking. Is something wrong? They said class wasn't fun today. You're class is always fun. You show me up every day. What's up?"

Meghan shook her head.

"Come on, you can tell me. I can keep a secret."

Meghan looked at him. "Why did you tell Kellie Brooks that I've lived here my whole life?"

"Why not?"

"Do you know why she asked?"

"She's doing a story for the paper about some girl who was found in a basement." Meghan pulled out the stack of papers and dropped them on her desk in front of Noah. He read a few headlines. "So you know about her?"

Kellie stood outside the classroom, holding the door open with her pencil.

"I AM her!"

### **Davenport Has A Secret Past**

Kellie Brooks

One in every 20 children is physically abused each year. More than 2.5 million cases of child abuse and neglect are reported in that time. Child abuse is becoming more common place, yet it is one of the most immoral acts targeting young children today. For those of us who have received nothing but love in our short lives, we can not understand what drives someone to abuse their own child or the child of another. We can also never completely know what it's like to live life in fear of someone close to us.

I recently ran across an article in an old newspaper, a fifteen-year-old newspaper to be exact, about a young girl known only as Basement Girl. Basement Girl was ten-years-old when the police discovered her living in the basement of her parents' home on First Street, in a house that, to this day, sits vacant. After doing some research, I found an astonishing number of newspaper articles concerning her, yet not one ever mentioned the child's real name. So I decided to investigate.

My first stop was the public library, but they had no information on Basement Girl. So I got the idea to start in the school. I asked around and located one teacher in the entire North Dallas High staff that has lived in Dallas her whole life. That teacher is Miss Meghan Davenport, known fondly to many as Miss D. I'm betting quite a few students reading this article just learned something new. Yes, her last name is Davenport, not just "D." When I questioned her, Miss Davenport didn't give me a comment. She would not tell me who Basement Girl was, and I got this strange feeling that she knew much more than she was letting on.

And boy, was I right. That Miss D is the same age as Basement Girl and she shares the same last name as the child were not only coincidences: they were concrete clues in my search, and evidence that Miss Davenport IS Basement Girl.

Meghan picked up a discarded school paper and looked at the headlines as she walked toward her classroom after lunch. DAVENPORT HAS A SECRET PAST stopped her in her tracks. She halted in the middle of the hall and read the article. "Oh my," Meghan said, covering her face in the middle of the hall. Meghan quickly made her way to her classroom and scooped up the phone.

"Hello?" A woman answered on the other line.

"Jennifer, it's Meghan. Can you please send Kellie Brooks to my room immediately?"

"Will do, hon," the principal's secretary replied.

Meghan sat in her chair and stared at the paper until her door opened slowly. "You wanted to see me?" Kellie's voice was a whisper as she bit her lip.

"How could you do this?" Meghan questioned, turning the paper towards Kellie.

"Nice to see you too, Miss D."

"Kellie, this isn't funny. You completely invaded my privacy. If I wanted people to know that I was Basement Girl, I would have told them myself." Meghan paused. "Why? Why did you do it? Did you put up the articles too? And leave the papers on the desks?"

"First, I didn't want to hurt you. I just thought it was the best story I've had for a long time. And I didn't really think about how it would make you feel. And yes, I left the papers. I'm sorry."

"That was my business. No one else's. If you couldn't tell, Kellie, I'm a really private person. I like my space. Now I don't have any."

"Meghan," Noah walked in carrying the paper. "Oh," he said as he turned around to walk back out.

"No...Mr. Bartlett wait. Kellie, you can go."

Kellie stared at her feet as she walked out. Noah shut the door behind her and then took a seat on the desk nearest Meghan's. "So I guess you saw it?" Noah questioned.

"Yeah." Meghan crumpled the newspaper in her hands and threw it into the waste basket. Meghan sat there, just staring into space.

"You can cry, Meghan. You really can."

"No, I can't," she said without taking her eyes off the wall.

"Yes, you can. I won't think any less of you."

"I don't know how to cry, Noah." She looked at him. "When I was kid, I was scared to cry. They punished me for crying. So after a while, I just let them hit me. And then I didn't need to cry anymore."

Noah didn't know what to say. His understanding of Meghan's silence about her past and her family was shattered. He knew her parents were dead, but he had never guessed that her parents could be so cruel. Not even Meghan understood what she could have done wrong to deserve what she had gotten.

"Why do people do it?" Meghan asked Noah.

"That's one of the great mysteries," Noah replied, looking into Meghan's eyes. Her eyes were almost blank as if she was in a trance and nothing could pull her out. "Meghan," he said.

Meghan blinked, and the life came back into her eyes. Her eyes fell on his face, "What?" she whispered.

Noah looked down at a stack of papers on Meghan's desk. "Do you still think about it a lot?"

"Only when I'm alone," she sighed, "and I'm alone most of the time." Her eyes drifted again.

Meghan walked through the halls after school carrying her bag, but nothing around her made any sense. She had walked these halls five days a week for the last three years, but it was as if she had never seen anything in them or any of the people she passed. All she could think about was that house on First Street, that house that had sat vacant for the past 15 years.

The Davenport house had been for sale since the day they found Meghan in the basement. Many people came to see it; most were young couples with no children. They all had that just married look in their eyes and the whole world ahead of them. For a while a steady stream of young lovers came, but the realtors still could not sell the house. No one understood why, so the real estate agency changed realtors, yet nothing changed. The young couples must have felt the tension in the air; it was hard to hide a room in the basement where a ten-year-old girl had spent every day of her life. The original furniture was left in the house, in every room including the basement bedroom. The realtors could not bring themselves to remove it. It was a testimony to that little girl, and there wasn't a person in the company who wanted to let that go. Most potential buyers were scared off by that one room. The rest of the house was beautiful, but most people thought that room was sinister. Finally the agency stopped showing the house. It was showed only about once a year when someone specifically asked to see it; other than that, no one ever went into the house.

Meghan got in her car and headed for home. When she reached the far end of First Street, where every day she turned right to head into Fort Worth, today she turned left, unknowingly driving towards that house. Meghan's brain was screaming stop, but her heart told her to keep going. Today Meghan wasn't thinking of the hurt that seeing that place again would cause her; she didn't care. She had to see it. For fifteen years, she had lived just a neighborhood away and never seen that house. When she was a kid, she had walked to a bus stop twice as far away as the one that stopped at the end of the street, just so she wouldn't have to ride a bus that passed the house.

Her foot slowly eased on the brakes in front of the old Victorian-style house. The lot was wide and encircled by a large wooden fence on three sides. The front was open, and trees shaded the wraparound porch and much of the front yard. Two small pine trees were planted in a flower bed in front of the porch. The flowers that once stood in between now lay wilted and dead on the ground; they had not been touched for over fifteen years. The red mulch around everything was faded, but the grass in the yard was a bright, healthy green. A red doorway stood just above the front steps. A large window was about four feet away from the door, with maroon curtains. Three white wicker chairs and a wicker couch sat on the front porch. Without thinking, Meghan walked toward the house and put her hand on the white railing. She slowly made her way up the four steps and took it all in. She touched the door, running her fingers over the door frame and onto the siding, before turning and looking around at the neighborhood. Sighing, she sank down into the closest wicker chair.

After she stood, Meghan lifted the faded welcome mat and picked up the key that lay underneath. She unlocked the door and pushed it open. She had seen the foyer of the house only once, the day the police had taken her out. She walked farther in to a large living room with a fireplace. Above the mantle was a huge portrait of a man and a woman. Meghan reached high above her head and dusted off their faces. Fifteen years of dust fell into her eyes.

"Is that them?" a voice behind Meghan questioned.

Meghan screamed and spun around to see Noah standing in the open doorway.

Noah ignored the scream, "So is that them, is that your parents?"

"Yeah," Meghan said, looking back at the picture. "I hope they're in hell. 'Cause that's what my life was." A tear rolled down her cheek as she turned to leave the room. She didn't care about the rest of

the house; Meghan wanted to see her room. She took Noah's hand and led him to the basement and into her room. As Noah pulled the string hanging from the light, dust fell into his face, disorienting him. The light clicked on, and the hanging bulb swung from the ceiling. The mattress in the corner was still covered with Meghan's sheets and blankets. She took a seat on the bed and picked up a teddy bear sitting on the pillow. One ear was bigger than the other, his fur was matted, and he was missing one eye. Meghan hugged it to her chest as tears rolled down her face.

Noah joined her on the bed. "Meghan," he began.

"This was it, Noah. These were the only things I saw for ten years. Nothing ever changed. No one knew I was here. No one cared. My parents never once told me that they loved me, that I was here for a reason. I never got anything more than a 'Meghan you're a goddamn mistake' or 'Why the hell did you have to ruin our lives?' I was an inconvenience. To the world I didn't exist. My nanny was also my mother's midwife. I was born here, in this room. No doctors, no nurses, just a midwife and my father. They didn't take me to a hospital. I didn't have a birth certificate or a social security number until I was ten."

"No one knew you were here?"

"No one except my parents and my nanny. And she knew that they did this to me. She didn't bother to help. She said she hadn't seen me for seven years. She came twice a year to check up on me; they didn't want me dying on them. Then they would have another thing to deal with. No one, absolutely no one could help me. But you know what, I didn't feel alone. I always felt that there was something pushing me to keep going; something bigger than me or this room. That was the only thing that gave me the will to live."

"I'm glad you did." Noah smiled. As Meghan's tears fell, Noah wrapped his arms around her. "Meghan, it's okay. You're safe now."

Noah kneeled in front of the bookshelf an hour later. "Did you read all these books, Meghan? *Frankenstein*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Cyrano De Bergerac*...in French!"

"Yep. More than once."

Noah looked at her in amazement. "I didn't read any of these books until high school at least...if not college."

"Those are my parent's college textbooks and the novels from their college classes. They wouldn't give me any other books."

"But you read in French."

"I also know Italian, German, and Spanish. Noah Bartlett, there is a lot about me that you don't know."

"Like . . ." Noah insinuated, wanting Meghan to tell him more.

"Um, like I...never read a book I didn't like."

"Meghan," Noah said in an "I'm serious" voice.

Meghan laughed. "Like...My IQ is off the chart."

"What?"

Meghan was silent. Noah didn't know if he could believe her. There was something in her voice making him believe she was telling him the truth, but since when did anyone with such a high IQ teach high school?

"Why in the hell are you a teacher?"

"Because...because teachers make a difference. I don't care what I can do, if I don't affect people." Noah sat next to Meghan again. "My life would not be complete otherwise. Teaching is my love; I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

"But you could make so much more somewhere else."

"I don't care about the money, Noah. I care about the kids and their lives and this town. I never wanted anything more than this. No mansions or big fancy cars, as long as I wasn't locked in a basement reading books to keep my mind off of everything around me. I know what it's like to have parents that don't love you, that wish you had never been born. I also know what it's like to be abused and neglected. There are so many kids out there that need someone to identify with and for some of them that can be me. I just want to make someone else's life better, someone who can't do it for himself...or herself."

"Meghan," Noah said seriously, "You've already done that. Every student who has ever sat in your classroom has been changed by you. They may not know it, but everyone who meets you takes something away. A different feeling, a different way of thinking, and it's all because of you."

"What do you mean?" Meghan said in confusion.

"You, the way you are. It rubs off on people. In a good way."

Meghan smiled.



# A Father-Daughter Affiliation

Tarra Sneller

My whole life I had thirsted for information about my father. I would ask my mother random questions about him, and she would always reply with an "I don't know," or "Why are you asking this?" My head would fall, and I would walk away.

By the time I was sixteen, I still had never looked him up, nor asked any more questions. I began to think at that point that if he really cared about me, he would find me. But he never did. So as I waited for that time in our lives to take place, hatred began to boil inside me. I could not believe that there were men out there that had children scattered about and did not care about them. He was no different.

As fate would have it, there did come a window of opportunity. My mother's toilet was having trouble, and she called our cousin, a plumber, to come fix it. Paul, the plumber, had a new member of his team named Josh. As it turns out, Josh somehow knew that I was his Uncle Lucky's daughter. Because I was not home, he left his phone number scribbled down on a yellow Post-It note and stuck it to my bedroom wall.

A few months later, I was at a friend's house; the now-wrinkled and torn yellow shred of paper was in my purse, where I kept it always, in case I had a wave of courageousness splash over me. We were sitting around drinking, and the intoxication brought upon my so-called bravery. My friends talked me into calling him, and they dialed the numbers for me. A rough, burly voice answered the phone, "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Lucky Underwood?" I asked restlessly.

"Yes, who is this?" He also seemed impatient.

"This is your daughter, Tarra Sneller." A long moment of silence. I heard a big sigh on the other end of the phone, and I started to wonder if I had just made the biggest mistake of my life.

"Hi, Tarra. I was expecting your call. I just did not think it would be so soon."

Another pause. The tension in his voice was so thick, I am surprised he did not cough and choke, or sputter the words out heedlessly. Instead, in between the pauses, he sounded calm and silver-tongued. I assume he was pondering his words carefully before he spoke them.

I pretended I was at home, just sitting in my room, and I omitted the fact that I had been drinking. I am surprised he did not smell it on my breath through the wires.

We talked for a little while longer, and he gave me his email address so we could continue the conversation at a later time. That was after he told me that I had a little brother, Nathan, and a little sister, Madison. I could not believe how wonderful he sounded, yet I wanted to make sure I was still mad at him.

In the first email I ever wrote to him, my true feelings and questions came out in a gracious way. I say "gracious" because I formed every question with cautiousness, so he would not get bothered and delete me from his contact list and never speak with me again.

When I got the return email from him, I was ecstatic. I told my mother that he was honest about not being a part of my life. But he also made me wonder if it was all my mother's fault.

My mother read the email and had the opposite feeling come over her. She turned instantly red and started spitting at the computer as if it were my father. She told me he was nothing but a liar, always had been, and always would be. She continued ranting, "I never kept your father from you, he never called once, he never showed up, never paid a dime of child support. You think I'm the evil one, take a look at who raised you all these years, you think it was all me, then why did he never call you, or come to see you? Never sent you a letter, a card on your birthday, didn't even call to tell you Merry Christmas, not once, not ever. Where the hell does he get off saying it was all *my fault*?" She went on for another ten or fifteen minutes. After she was finished, I felt my face turn as red as hers. Except the emotion I felt was not necessarily that of anger, but more of embarrassment, hurt, and some other emotions I could not explain.

I emailed him back, and I said all the things my mother had squawked at me earlier. I felt like it was unfair for him to put all the blame on my mother, but at the back of my mind, I was wondering who was really telling the truth. Over the years, I have learned that both of my parents are guilty in that matter. My father more than my mother, but I can understand, to some degree, how hard it would have been to communicate with words the awkwardness between these two almost complete strangers.

In the next email he seemed to be screaming back at me and said he did not want to talk about it anymore. He wanted to meet me. So we set it all up.

I came home one day, and there was a man sitting on my mother's sofa. He was with a middle-aged woman who bleached her hair so much it was nothing but frizz. You could see her dark roots from a mile away, as well as the rock on her finger. She had very thick coke-bottle glasses that overtook her face. There was a little boy and a little girl sitting next to the man on the floor, as if they were two battered puppies that knew to follow orders. The little girl was overweight, with fire-engine red hair and freckles everywhere. The boy was much smaller with sun-kissed locks of golden hair. He looked exactly like me.

The man sitting on the couch was pleasantly plump himself, wearing a huge coat, as if self-conscious about his weight. The fur around the hood definitely looked expensive. The woman with him was wearing a coat that corresponded directly with his. "Hello, so nice to finally meet you," the male stranger said to me.

"Hi," I said in the quietest voice I possessed.

The formal meeting with my father, his fiancé, and my two younger siblings lasted about an hour. It was very awkward and hushed at first, but as we began talking, a wave of excitement flushed my common sense away. I began running around the house trying to find old report cards, tests, or anything that had a stamp of approval from my teachers. I showed him my softball jersey, and my softball pictures, and told him he could keep one if he wanted to. I must have looked like a psychotic teenager, running around as if I were in an insane asylum. While I was digging for more A+ papers to show him, he said that he did not have much time and that he would like to do this another time.

The whole time they were there, no one said anything to me except my father. My mother stayed in the kitchen the entire evening. As they started to leave, I pretended as if I were going to the movies anyway with some friends.

The next summer he asked me to move to Minnesota with him and my siblings, to "get to know them better." I said yes, my mother said no, and somehow, I ended up in a mansion in the suburbs about twenty minutes away from Minneapolis.

When my father said "get to know my siblings," he apparently had a concealed message underneath the true meanings of his words. He meant baby-sit. He meant keep the house clean.

I remember one afternoon I was talking on the phone to one of my friends back home in Iowa, and I had ended up outside in my flannel pajama pants. He yelled at me and was disgraced by the fact that I had the audacity to be seen in my PJs. Those are some of the first memories of getting to know my father.

At the end of the summer I moved back home with my mom. My dad bought a house in a nearby town, Guthrie Center. His sister, Robyn, owned a restaurant and bar there, and they thought it would be a good idea for me to waitress the restaurant. Being employed by family was okay at first. I was able to really get to know my relatives. My grandmother, Pat, worked Saturday morning breakfast shifts, and I loved working with her. Robyn bartended nights, and so, in turn, I got to know her, too. Everyone else in the family was always close by, especially my Aunt Stacy, who could usually be found at the bar. Stacy became my confidant. I could tell her anything, and she swore she would never repeat it. Although she probably did, it felt good to have someone to confide in.

When my senior year of school began, I had everything lined up so I could graduate half a semester early. My mother was okay with that, but my father was outraged. He told me that I was going to move to Waukeet with him and change schools, and I was *not* to graduate early.

By that point in my life, I had almost everything planned out. I was seeing my now-fiancé, and I had full intentions of moving in with him once I graduated. My father did not know of that part of my plan. I thought my dad would be proud of me for graduating early; it was an accomplishment after all. But instead, he was livid. I do not know the true reason for him being so annoyed at the matter, but I assume it was because he feared that I had already become an adult capable of making my own decisions, and he was in despair, having missed my childhood. He could never tell *me* that, however. Instead, he told me that I had no idea what I was doing, and I was not an adult and could not make my own decisions. Subsequently, I had told him that he had not been a part of my life long enough to make my decisions for me, either. We did not speak for almost a year after that.

Once again, there were no cards on my birthday, and there was no phone call to wish me a Merry Christmas.

I called him shortly after I found out I was pregnant and told him that I would like to see him, so we could talk. I knew he would be bruised and furious, but I decided it was the responsible thing to do.

When I got to his house in Des Moines, I sat down calmly on the couch, and the first words out of his mouth were, "So I hear you're pregnant with some forty-year-old man's kid."

I blushed with surprise and corrected him immediately. "I knew you were going to be this way about it. That's why I didn't even want to tell you at first. He's twenty-nine, and we have been living together for a year. We have full intentions of getting married someday, and my mother is *delighted*."

There was a discomfited silence we were oh-so-used to.

"Well, I have had enough time to think about it, and I'm excited to be a grandpa."

I think at this point, I was in awe at the fact of how well he had taken it. I decided that I would give him a chance to be a grandfather, and I hoped he would be in my daughter's life more than he had been in mine.

We did not talk for most of the next nine months, but when the time came, and I gave birth to my strikingly beautiful little girl, I called him. He showed up two days later, bearing gifts, of course, with my younger siblings and a new blonde, middle-aged woman.

They took many photos of themselves with my daughter, as if to be posing for a "World's Best Grandpa" competition. He did not ask me once how I was doing, and there were no photos taken of me, nor a family picture taken with me in it. They stayed for about a total of ten minutes, then left, stating they were going shopping and possibly to the zoo. No one else in his family called or sent a card. He said they were all very busy.

Not only was I crushed at that moment, but my fiancé, Clint, was outraged. From that moment on, he has loathed my father, and will not ever give him another chance. I do not condemn Clint for this; am I supposed to be mad at him for caring so deeply about me?

Since then, I have sent my father many emails telling him, finally, how I feel about everything. I stated that nothing was ever going to get better in our relationship if we did not quit being fake towards each other. He agreed, and we have been trying to work on our relationship as father and daughter.

I do not believe it will ever be a true father-daughter affiliation. I am hopeful for nothing more than my daughter to know her true grandfather, and for the possibility of a friendship between the two of us.

# Naked

Maria Diaz

It was the kind of day where the sun radiates off of everything and creates a shield of warmth that blankets the earth. The world was yellow and cheery, and the reggae music playing in the pickup truck was like an orgasm to the ears. It was the type of music that makes your limbs feel useful and makes your chest erupt with unexpected laughter. These three things combined; the lavish beauty of the day, the man, and his reggae created this euphoric bubble inside of me that was striving to burst out in a scream of joy or in a kiss to the lips of some random stranger. My bare legs were extended in his dust-ridden dash and my bubble-gum pink toenails looked strangely erotic in contrast to the faded gray.

He turned down the music, and yet while he was driving he had this way of piercing me softly with his jade-rock eyes that were so much like granite, exquisite and expensive, yet with the ability to be cold and harsh. He tapped his brakes, and my Pike's Peak Dark Blend sloshed innocently into his cup holder.

"What do you think about being in love?" He peered at me intently as if expecting me to be shocked; he wanted to observe my every action, like he had just made some huge joke, and I was just discovering the punch line, or like a parent watching a child as she discovers presents from Santa on Christmas morning.

This question would have caught me completely off guard on any other day, but today the clouds were wide and open, and an erratic, bright blue peered forth. I felt uninhibited, welcomed. Being a girl whose parents' entwined and painful divorce had branded me, deeply, in the chest—sometimes still affecting the way the pit of my stomach felt, yet I was still relatively optimistic about the subject.

"I'm a believer. I just think it's hard to find, and we're mistaken a lot of the time. But what troubles me most is isn't being love in the first place an eternal thing? Doesn't love mean forever?"

He continued driving, and I was never concerned with where. I assumed my role, opened his dash compartment, took out his glass pipe blown by a Vietnam War veteran and filled the bowl entirely, voluptuously, with light green sinsemilla. Smoking while driving was one of our favorite things to do; we'd cruise through old neighborhoods and observe old Victorian-style architecture; we would take the winding gravel roads through immaculate treescapes, sometimes to abandon the truck and go on adventures through woods and wetlands in search of a spot. The spot was something easily recognizable; there was never a word uttered when we found it, just an acknowledgment through his granite eyes. He would find his rolling stump, or dry piece of flat ground to sit on and roll a joint, effortlessly. I would wander closely and pick weeds that too closely resembled flowers or long pieces of grass to create braided bracelets we'd wear for only hours until the knots would disperse and slip off of our wrists. Months later, I'd find bits and pieces of our braided bracelets, turned brown and crispy under car seats or lying aimlessly and dead in my bedsheets. Sometimes I would sit near him just to watch his thumbs and forefingers move so meticulously, never failing to roll that same joint with the Zig Zag papers I bought him. My favorite part of this exercise was when he was almost finished, and he'd lick the tree sap band at the end of the paper to seal the joint together. His mauve tongue would creep shyly through his lips, as if this action was somewhat sensual, and it embarrassed him to do this while I stared. I always wondered how he kissed, and if he ever thought of me while touching another girl's lips, because I knew when he took his shirt off it was impossible to not compare his dominant collarbone and broad shoulders to those of the boy I was sleeping with. I had never questioned the line between us, or made him question it either. We were both too afraid to approach this enormous border between us—fearful of its collapse. It went beyond lust and false beliefs; dependent on one another, we never prodded or poked love's ribs with a glowing, orange-tipped fire-stirrer.

My eyes were locked with the skies, unfocused but solid. The clouds danced slowly, provocatively—entwining and reforming into one. The cicadas rhythmically echoed one another and the fescue grass grazed my heels, tempting me to touch them, to reassure comfort, persuade the grass not to tickle. His stout and gallant hands fit the back of my head like I knew they always would—gently lifting me,

pulling me towards the destitute terminal, all of our cards on the table now—gambling everything we'd ever owned. The notion of our bodies together as one was already so fulfilling that his tongue on mine was like an apple picked from the Garden of Eden and then brewed into a cider by God himself. It was the most perfect thing I had ever savored; my taste buds themselves were getting goose bumps. There was no pressure to perform, to sit atop him and pull off my shirt or wrap my lacy bra around his neck, to whip my long hair around my shoulder and then onto my bare back, tipping my head backwards to tease my lower end with silky brunette strands. To him, my lips, neck and collarbone were already dessert, caressed by his mouth and faintly touched by his fingers like a child dipping his hands into forbidden paint for the first time, with a readied white wall patiently waiting.

It's difficult to explain the type of nervousness you feel around someone you've known completely and honestly, someone you thought was incapable of ever making you nervous. It's like entering your home on a freezing day when the cold is piercing and harsh, when your car takes fifteen minutes to clear the windshields and your bones feel as if they will take hours to defrost, and then stepping into your steaming shower, your feet feeling the warmth first and that first rush of stinging water that causes you to emit one last teeth-chattering shiver, and then the cold is gone, just like that.

The innocence of those purely granite eyes was something I had never experienced, as he unbuttoned the front of my blouse—as if he was a virgin and taking off my shirt was a foreign ordeal, something forbidden. It reminded me so much of the way he peeled an orange, his favorite fruit, careful so that the peel came off in one attached, long piece—careful to never break the tender, transparent skin that embodied the delicious orange flesh.

The repetitive noise of something so familiar, like the Sunday morning coffee pot and the click and slide of a spatula flipping eggs with fresh peppers, or the squeak and slam of the back porch door—his laugh was so warm and inviting it awakened my sleeping, dreaming mind, the cold chill of logic tip-toeing up my spine.

“You're drooling...Wake up, we're going to get sushi. I know you have to be starving for something too.”

And just like that, a whirlwind of air and an increasing heart rate like somebody is waiting behind a corner of a room thought abandoned. It is almost as if I have the drunken spins, closed and opened eyes ineffective in taking them away. And then my heart crashes, it falls from my chest into my stomach, it slippery-slides down the backs of legs like a sensation I get when I'm afraid of heights and I've come too close to an edge, out the pads of my naked feet, and I realize I am standing in the earth's flesh. Cool, taupe mud squeezing itself into the spaces in-between my toes, feeling so wonderful but childish and wrong, because at that moment I know I am going to have to walk barefoot as to not soil my shoes.

# The Fountain Of Youth

C.Y. Rowland

That great spring of immortality, I know where it is. The fountain that Ponce de Leon was searching for, all the time was flowing by my childhood home in Iowa. It was not a fountain, but a creek that ran under our driveway, parallel to the street and across the length of our acreage. After a heavy rain, it was impossible to cross, and it was a long way to the nearest bridge. It was a place where I had lost many sea-faring Ken dolls and brave plastic dogs. A place I had explored with a backpack and peanut butter sandwich rations. A place of imagination and possibility. A haven from the sorrow of being a child.

And one particular time, as I crouched by the water, pondering life and nature as only a ten-year-old can, the sun reflected on it with such radiant beauty as to draw my thoughts.

It occurred to me that if I could drink that water with the sun so brilliant on the surface, I would be drinking sunshine. I dipped my hands into the brightest spot, and slowly, careful to keep the sunlight in my palms, I closed my eyes and drank the blazing liquid.

I drank the Light, the Water, the Air. Everything that is life-giving in this world I drank. This was the Fountain of Youth, and from that moment I preserved that place in time, so that somewhere, outside or in, I would always be that young girl. The Sun had filled and changed me, and at that moment I became her daughter. I became part of the Nature that surrounds us, setting me apart, making me beautiful somewhere within where no human can see.

When I die, sometime from now, I will become the Earth, and the Earth will not forget me, the one who loved her every moment, who took the time to seek the sky, who stared in the Sun wanting to know her. And the sun, who gave me her light, will shine on me as a blowing weed, a drinking deer, a silent tree. No matter what I become, I will stretch my arms, my branches, to the sky and strive, forever, to touch her.

# The Yellow Wallpaper

by *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*

Bailey Kline

In 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published a haunting short story titled "The Yellow Wallpaper." The writing of this short story and many of her other works was prompted by her own bouts with depression that occurred throughout her life.

Gilman wrote during the Victorian Era, when women were the same as owned by their husbands, and they were made to believe that their husbands knew what was best. During this time, Silas Weir Mitchell, an American physician and nerve disorder specialist, was popularizing the "rest cure." Gilman describes this cure in-depth in "The Yellow Wallpaper" as the idea of doing absolutely nothing and especially nothing intellectually stimulating. She drew her descriptions from her own personal experience with the rest cure. In fact, Mitchell himself was Gilman's doctor. Gilman said this of Mitchell in her explanation of why she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper,"

During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as long as I lived. This was in 1887.

Gilman chose not to heed this advice and in turn wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" to, it is hoped, save other women who were in the situation that she had once been in.

The meaning of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not told straight to the reader, rather it is mocked and insinuated throughout the pages. A major theme of this story is alienation/isolation. The main character, who remains nameless through the conclusion of the story, is left to herself, alone in her room for nearly all of her waking hours (the "rest cure"). In the beginning pages of the story, the main character seems to be normal, but she is definitely depressed. This could be from the way her husband treats her; he acts as if she were an invalid or a child as he asks, "What is it, little girl?" (673; all page references are to the class text, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 9th ed.). As the story progresses, we learn that the main character has begun to see things, things that she believes to be completely lucid figures: "The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it. Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over" (675). When I first examined these few sentences, I thought Gilman intended to mirror the main character's life, as if the woman was imagining herself in the wall. The bars that the woman in the wall was shaking were the bars in the window of the main character's room. She was really, unintentionally, showing us that she wanted out of the room without saying it. She was trapped in this yellow room with bars on the window, just the way the woman was trapped behind the bars of the wallpaper.

The main character's illness steadily progresses until she no longer sees the woman only behind the wallpaper shaking the bars, she now sees her out and about in the places that she herself is not allowed to go. I believe this occurs because she is so tired of being stuck in her room that she needs to feel the outside, and she does that vicariously through the woman behind the wall: "I think that woman gets out in the daytime! And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her! I can see her out of every one of my windows! It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight!" (675), the main character says of her alter ego. She is jealously sitting inside watching out the window that has become her only connection with the outside world.

There are many instances when the main character insinuates a desire to harm herself over the course of "The Yellow Wallpaper." She first says, "I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!" (677). To me, this sounded like she wanted to harm the woman in the wall. I have come to believe, by this point in the story, that the woman in the wall is actually the main character; therefore, she feels the need to hurt herself. She

then says, "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try" (677). She says this so blatantly and without any sense of self-consciousness that it sounds like jumping out the upstairs window would be nothing but fun. At this point in the story, she no longer fears for herself; she is invincible.

The main character finally cracks just a day before she is set to depart the despicable yellow room. Her husband is away for the night, so the woman finally has the room to herself in the time when the woman is moving. She says, "As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (676). The way she describes it, the main character believes that she is working together with the woman from behind the wall. She believes that there is another person in the room with her, but in all actuality she is demolishing the wallpaper on her own. She is helping the woman (herself) out of the mesmerizing hold of the wallpaper. Finally she is free of the wallpaper, and she can now creep around the big room, "But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get me out in the road there! I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!" (677). The main character is tired of her husband treating her like she has no disease and as if she is a small child; she has finally escaped the hold that he has on her. She is teetering on the brink of insanity, and the silence in the room and the rest she has endured have made her disease worse. Then when she sees her husband she says, "I've gotten out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (678). She is telling him that she has won; she was sick and he was wrong. Now it is too late for him to help her because she is gone.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was written with just as many layers as the wall in the story must have had. Between the literal and figurative meanings of the story tied in with real historical facts, Charlotte Perkins Gilman weaved a tangled web of scenes that inevitably keeps any reader guessing until the very end.

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# The Grizzly Bear

Johnna McNeley

Ed Scanlan, or “Mr. Scanlan,” as he expected from his first-year high school history students, gave my friends and me the intimidating and frightening appearance of a grizzly bear. The first few weeks of school, we feared him. We did not know what to expect from this large, hairy creature. What was a grizzly bear doing in a small farming community?

Mr. Scanlan’s large frame housed over 250 pounds. His stature was powerful and over six feet tall, which enabled him to tower over many as a grizzly would tower over mountain goats and mountain sheep. Dark hair topped his head and a dark, bushy beard always framed his concave face, which was shaped like a grizzly’s. A dark mustache, which always twitched when he spoke, covered his lip. Most of his face seemed to be hidden, except for the eyes. Those eyes, even though covered by glasses, could bore deep into any student that dared go up against him.

Mr. Scanlan’s hands were large and powerful. The curve of his long fingers was only slight, yet noticeable, as it helped him pick up pieces of chalk to write on the blackboard. His feet were always covered in dark, textured leather cowboy boots, with the end of each forming a point, which made them ready for digging or kicking.

Respect from students was demanded, not only in the classroom but also in the halls as students passed each other. There were many occasions we could hear his loud, booming voice echo through the hallways as he scolded someone for not doing as he expected. Usually we heard him get after Stuart. Stuart was an ornery high school student who was difficult for many teachers, and he liked to challenge The Grizzly to a fight.

Stuart knew how he was expected to greet Mr. Scanlan, yet he would not call him by the appropriate respectful title. He would not take his hat off in the hallways or classrooms of the school. Stuart also said unkind things to girls and other teachers. He presented a challenge for The Grizzly.

One day Stuart’s challenge was met. As Stuart strutted down the hallway in between classes, The Grizzly growled, “Stuart, take off that hat.” Stuart retorted, “No, and you can’t make me!” So The Grizzly removed his hat for him. This created quite a confrontation that echoed throughout halls and rest of the building, concourse and gymnasium. We stopped in our tracks, backing away from the situation, yet straining to see and hear. We could hear the murmurs of students saying “Oh no!” “What’s going on?” and “What do we do?” This was the moment we had all hoped we would never have to face—the unleashing of The Grizzly’s fury! Our fears were relieved when the principal came and took control of the situation. We never truly saw The Grizzly’s anger released.

After the incident with Stuart and The Grizzly, we walked on egg shells around them. Eventually we saw that Stuart was calming down, and teachers were relieved.

As school progressed through the year, by early spring we began to notice the true character of The Grizzly unfold. During class time, his voice did not boom as we thought it did before; it was actually softening, as he noticed we paid attention and learned from him. As he called upon us, the look of pride and respect shone from his eyes as we answered his questions. We even saw the ends of his mustache curl up to form a smile in class! Shortly thereafter he even chuckled out loud at stories some of us told of our adventures.

I recall a time he was lecturing to a social studies class. He paced the front of the room as he spoke. He was intent with getting the information from his heart to our brains, and to a few of our hearts as well. When he finished lecturing, he began a discussion with the class. During the discussion, as we participated his eyes glowed with excitement and anticipation. He could see that he had gone past some of our brains and reached our hearts; it was obvious he was delighted with obtaining his goal. His soft side was beginning to unfold.

In the hall between classes, we began to notice as Mr. Scanlan laughed and talked with students. We no longer heard his voice booming and echoing, rather we heard his deep laughter drift through the hallways.

One spring day my friends and I were in Mr. Scanlan's class for study hall. Because of the beautiful day, we had the windows open. The birds chirped, and a breeze carried in the smell of freshly-mown grass, mixed with the smell of mown hay from the field nearby. Mr. Scanlan, though still of the same large stature and still hairy, had a peaceful look about him. He was quietly reading his own materials, periodically glancing around the room to ensure all was as it should be. His look was one of contentment. We had grown to see The Grizzly was actually tame.

We had gotten used to quietly talking in study hall once our assignments were finished. One day we were carrying on, in a quiet murmur, about how we wanted candy bars that afternoon, since the ball team was selling candy bars that spring. I had a gutsy friend who did not have money on her at the moment to buy one, so she quietly announced to us in a whisper, "I'm going to ask Mr. Scanlan if he'll buy me a candy bar." My friends and I all looked at her, then at him, whispering at the same time, "No, you wouldn't dare do that!" With a confident look in her eyes and her jaw fixed in determination, she responded, "Yes, I will." She boldly slid out of her desk and walked to the front of the room.

Mr. Scanlan laid down his magazine and looked at her as she approached him. We saw his eyes were soft and gentle. He asked, "What do you need?" She blurted out the question without really thinking, "I really want a candy bar but don't have any money to buy one right now. Can I borrow a dollar from you so that I can buy a candy bar this afternoon?" His eyes looked around the room as he determined how to handle this. His eyes danced, and with a sly grin, he said, "Why yes, I believe I have a dollar you can borrow." We were in shock!

This started a whole new wave of boldness among us. Over the course of the last few weeks of school several more of us gained the nerve to ask Mr. Scanlan to borrow a dollar for a candy bar. He had that same look on his face, and he said, "Why yes, I believe I have a dollar you can borrow."

This is how our school year ended with The Grizzly. We found that when we fulfilled his expectations of respect, his true character was more like that of a teddy bear.

# Women In Literature

Bailey Kline

Over the semester we've read many short stories, poems, and plays with very different themes and ideas. But a main theme that I found in a number of these pieces of literature was women. The stories ranged from a centrally good look at women to a fairly strong dislike of them. For hundreds of years, women have been considered at a lower level than men, and it wasn't until the past hundred years that these ideals have changed. For many, these thoughts have been a long time coming while for others, like me, it has always been this way. Women have the rights now to be equal to men, but many of these stories were written before these rights were put into action.

In 1892, almost thirty years before women achieved the right to vote, Charlotte Perkins Gilman made a blatant statement against the everyday norm of women in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." Perkins Gilman grew up in a very progressive and feminist household, which set the ideals that she portrayed in her story. She also suffered from postpartum depression after giving birth to her first and only child. Her husband found a doctor that prescribed her the "rest cure," and her life was then lived much like that of the main character in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Jane says of her diagnosis, "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?" (667; all page references are from the class text, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 9th ed.). She knows that there is something wrong with her, but because she is a woman, her say does not mean anything to her husband or the doctor. The men have the idea that a woman must do what they say or she will not get better. Jane quotes her husband in her secret diary, "He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get" (668). I believe that John, Jane's husband, brought the family into the country because he was ashamed that his wife was not perfect. She was sick and that was not something that everyone else in town needed to know. Jane could have gotten the exact same rest in their home, but John wanted to get her out of town. He then overlooked the fact that his wife was seeing things in the wallpaper, as Jane points out, "I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wallpaper!" (669). He should have seen this as a sign that his wife was not getting better. He spoke to her like a child, "What is it, little girl?...Don't go walking about like that—you'll get cold" (673), further degrading her as a woman. He showed very little respect for his wife, laughing at her and calling her little girl throughout the entire story. Perkins Gilman used the character of John to symbolize every man of the time: the kind of man who only had a wife for show and to take care of the children. This story showed, in great detail, how women were treated in 1892.

I also discovered a great deal of discrimination against women in "Trifles" by Susan Glaspell. In 1916, when this play was written, the women's rights movement was underway. Suffragettes were becoming very popular with women all over the country, but very unpopular with men. Glaspell got the idea for this play while reporting on a story in Iowa. She used the true-life story as the basis of her play. The play centers around two women and shows very openly how women focus on the small "trifles" in life instead of the big picture. It also shows how women stick up for each other, through dialogue, such as "There's a lot of work to be done on a farm...Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be" (1317). The male county attorney then jokes about how women stick together, "Ah, loyal to your sex, I see" (1317). Later on, the women find Mrs. Wright's quilt squares and talk about what she might do with them. The men walk in on their conversation and then make fun of the women, "Sheriff: They wonder if she was going to quilt it or knot it!" (1319). It seemed to me like the women were trying to make small talk and make what they could out of the bad situation in which they had found themselves. Glaspell also showed that the women are much smarter than the men think when they discover the badly stitched quilt squares, "Mrs. Hale: Mrs. Peters, look at this one. Here, this is the one she was working on, and look at the sewing! All the rest of it has been so nice and even. And look at this! It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!" (1319-1320). In "Trifles," Susan Glaspell showed the difference between women and men when they are put in a certain situation.

Another story that really jumped out at me was “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway. This story deals with a topic that is often avoided: abortion. Although Hemingway never straight out tells his audience the exact nature of the short story, it is implied in many quotes. First, Hemingway wrote, “It’s really a simple operation, Jig...It’s not really an operation at all” (133). He put the story in the man’s point of view, but he gave great insight to the woman’s point of view as well. He really showed the man as very insensitive.

The woman begins with, “Then what will we do afterward?”

“We’ll be fine afterward. Just like we were before.”

“What makes you think so?”

“That’s the only thing that bothers us. It’s the only thing that’s made us unhappy.”

“And you think then we’ll be all right and be happy?”

“I know we will. You don’t have to be afraid” (134).

Hemingway brings up a topic in this story that, at the time, was very dangerous for a woman, not only psychologically but physically as well. He then shows how much the woman loves the man because she is willing to risk it all to make him happy, “I won’t worry about it because it’s perfectly simple.”

“Then I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t care about me.”

“Well, I care about you.”

“Oh, yes. But I don’t care about me. And I’ll do it and then everything will be fine” (134). In the end, Hemingway, a man, wrote a good short story that showed the difference in emotional effects (without stating them) of abortion on both men and women.

A fourth piece of literature, a poem by Jamaica Kincaid, really explains itself in this category. The poem is entitled “Girl,” and it gives task after task of things that a woman is supposed to do if she wants to be viewed as a suitable lady. First, Kincaid gives actual, physical tasks, “Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil...” (543). Then she speaks of grace, how to behave to make a boy like a girl, but also what not to do, “this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don’t squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know...” (543). After giving a woman directions on how to make the boys like she ends her poem with “always squeeze the bread to make sure it’s fresh; but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman that the baker won’t let near the bread?” (544). To me, these lines mean that even if you did everything that she described, a woman might still not be good enough. In general, I believe that Kincaid was saying if a woman may end up being looked down on anyway, what use is it to follow all the rules.

The final piece I have chosen to go in depth on is “A Pair of Tickets,” a short story by Amy Tan. This story describes a daughter’s journey to her mother’s homeland to discover the reasons for the choices her mother made in the past. Before she knows much about the story she defends her mother’s actions by saying, “They are my mother’s twin daughters from her first marriage, little babies she was forced to abandon on a road as she was fleeing Kweilin for Chungking in 1944” (237). She does not have an answer as to why her mother left her twin daughters, not the real, full reasons, but she defends what her mother did because it is, in fact, her mother. Tan also shows that the young woman’s father often wondered why she had left her daughters. They both wonder how a mother could leave her infant daughters behind, but she shows how he, as a man, understood why she did what she did. Men may judge women more harshly than they judge themselves, but she shows that they do have the capacity to put themselves in their wives’ shoes. The young woman and her father discuss why her mother left her children, “So why did she abandon those babies on the road?” I need to know, because now I feel abandoned too.”

“Long time I wondered this myself...But then I read that letter from her daughters in Shanghai now, and I talk to Auntie Lindo, all the others. And then I knew. No shame in what she done. None.”

“What happened?”

“Your mother running away” (243).

Tan also illustrates another fact about women and the way they are seen in her story. The main character said, In this picture, my chin-length hair is swept back and artfully styled. I am wearing false

eyelashes, eye shadow, and lip liner. My cheeks are hollowed out by bronze blusher. But I had not expected the heat in October. And now my hair hangs limp with humidity. I wear no makeup; in Hong Kong my mascara had melted into dark circles and everything else had felt like layers of grease. So today my face is plain, unadorned except for a thin mist of shiny sweat on my forehead and nose. (240).

The main character says that she is plain because she wears no make-up. This shows how a culture, even a culture much different from my own, can have the same beliefs as many other cultures of the world. Women are often "checked out" by men. A man has to make sure a woman is pretty enough for him to be seen with before he will even consider going out with her. And women often conform to what men are looking for, even in literature. Tan illustrates how men can be sympathetic to women's feelings if women give them a chance to try. She also shows how women, of all cultures, have grown accustomed to conforming to be what men "want."

This semester's literature has given me great insight into the way the world views women. Four of the five authors that I mentioned were women, and yet even they sometimes had conflicting views. Charlotte Perkins Gilman believed in independence; Susan Glaspell shed light on women's intelligence; Jamaica Kincaid said that, no matter how hard they try, some women never measure up; Amy Tan wrote that women often conform to the pressures that are put on them, many times by men; and Ernest Hemingway believed that women would do anything for the men they loved. But no matter how much their views differed from one another, they all had one thing in common; they believed that women were going somewhere. They knew that there was a great future ahead for women, even if they never saw the revolution. Today, women are a driving force in society and that only came about because many strong women (like many of these authors) spoke out for what they believed in.

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# Anti-Smoking Campaign: Using Guilt To Persuade

Toni Osier

Imagine “a small child crying and fussing in her car seat. The child is in a closed, moving car, and the mother is smoking a cigarette while driving. The smoke from her cigarette is billowing to the back seat, surrounding the child, and making the baby cry and cough” (Centers). Would this scenario make a person feel guilty? That is the hope of The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation’s public health agency, which is responsible for running this television commercial. One of the goals of the CDC is to provide information about the effects of smoking and another is to reduce the number of smokers in the United States (Centers). These goals and the use of guilt to accomplish them are not new to the anti-smoking campaign.

Recognizing the health risks of smoking, the Surgeon General released a report on smoking in 1964 (“Evolution” 131). Using this report, federal legislation impacting cigarette marketing was developed (“Evolution” 131). This report was the start of a strong federal government anti-smoking campaign which relied on the use of guilt to persuade smokers to quit. According to the “Evolution of Legislation” published by *Congressional Digest* in May of 1994, the release of the 1964 Surgeon General report was only one of many actions taken by the federal government to deter smokers. Because the 1964 report directly linked smoking to lung cancer, the federal government stepped up its efforts to reduce smoking by enforcing a mandatory placement of health warning labels on cigarette packages in 1965, removing all cigarette advertising on television and radio, and strengthening the warning labels on cigarette packages in 1970 (“Evolution” 131). The anti-smoking campaign further gained strength in the 1980s and 1990s with a heightened number of reports being published by various federal government agencies, mandatory smoking bans being placed on domestic airline flights, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services becoming the first smoke-free Federal office (“Evolution” 131). Rules and regulations were not the only weapons used by the government to deter smokers. Guilt also played a role in the federal government’s campaign.

Enlisting the power of guilt, the federal government ran television commercials in the mid-to-late 1960s to persuade smokers to quit by presenting vivid images and facts about the effects of smoking on the human body (Centers). The guilt was aimed at the smokers themselves, in an effort to make them reconsider what they were doing to their bodies (Centers). These commercials did have a positive impact. The CDC says “Anti-smoking messages had a significant impact on cigarette sales; however, when cigarette advertising on television and radio was banned in 1969, anti-smoking messages were discontinued” (Centers). The government thought it had won a battle and since the tobacco companies could no longer advertise on television, the government felt there was no need to continue their campaign against those ads. In the year 2000, however, commercials showing the ill effects of smoking once again began running on television (Centers). In the same way, those commercials used guilt to persuade; however, the push seemed to be aimed more at secondhand smoke.

With the airing of commercials in the year 2000, the hope was the awareness would make smokers feel guilty about how their illnesses affect their loved ones and how their secondhand smoke makes those around them sick (Centers). The CDC reports “secondhand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals known to be toxic, including more than 50 that can cause cancer...cause sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more frequent and severe asthma attacks in children” (Centers). It also says there is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure. Even brief exposure can be dangerous (Centers).

Armed with the risks of secondhand smoke, the anti-smoking movement was instrumental in the establishment of organizations with the only goal of spreading public awareness of the dangers of smoking and secondhand smoke. One such organization is called Just Eliminate Lies (JEL Iowa). The organization was established in Iowa in the year 2000 under the Division of Tobacco Use Prevention and Control, and is namely aimed at youth (JEL). JEL Iowa has run several television commercials over the past seven years.

As an example, JEL Iowa ran the following commercial in 2007. The commercial features people being served and eating inside a restaurant. The camera pans around the restaurant and shows plates and glasses filled with food, beverages, and cigarette butts. A teenage boy pours ketchup onto his cheeseburger, and cigarette butts come out with the ketchup. He dips what at first appears to be a french fry into the ketchup and as he takes the french fry to his mouth it becomes apparent that it is really a cigarette butt. The next scene shows a teenage girl lifting her fork to her mouth to take a bite of food, and the fork is filled with cigarette butts. As the camera pans out, a table tent becomes visible. It reads, "Everywhere should be a non-smoking section."

JEL Iowa is not the only organization to run television commercials to discourage smoking in young people. Another equally important organization is the American Legacy Foundation, an organization also dedicated to reducing youth smoking. Their national youth smoking prevention campaign is known as "truth" which was established in February 2000. "Truth" has received praise, as noted by Kim Krisberg, author of "Anti-smoking campaign lowers youth smoking rates with 'truth,'" published in *The Nation's Health* in April 2005. Krisberg spoke with Matthew Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. According to Myers,

The truth campaign works because it uses the exact same techniques the tobacco industry uses to attract kids. It plays directly to youths' rebellious nature and desire to take control of their own lives by providing them with facts about how the tobacco industry has sought to manipulate them and deceive them. All evidence shows that ads that tell you to "just say no" or provide youth with dry facts have very little impact on their attitudes or behavior. (qtd. in Krisberg 12)

Understanding this and taking a slightly different approach than JEL Iowa, the "truth" campaign directs its use of guilt toward the tobacco executives, while presenting the facts about smoking and secondhand smoke to the public. A recent commercial released by "truth" shows teenagers placing a huge banner on a city street outside a major tobacco company. The banner reads, "Last year's tobacco related deaths." One of the teenagers says, "Wait until we show tobacco executives the five million people that died because of their products." Another teen says, "Maybe were being too negative, maybe it's a 'typo' or something." Both teenagers then start singing about how the numbers must be a "typo," because "There is no way that many people could be killed." As they quit singing, one of the teens questions the number by saying, "Maybe the number is five hundred." The commercial ends with the other teen saying, "Wait! There's no way there's that many 'typos'" (American).

Television commercials are not the only way organizations send their messages. In addition to television commercials, print ads are also available. Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights is one more organization with the common goals of reducing smoking and providing information about secondhand smoke. Their website provides access to several examples of anti-smoking print ads that have been used in the anti-smoking campaigns of various states. Similar to the JEL Iowa and "truth" television commercials, the print ads rely on the guilt factor to send a message.

For instance, one print ad shows a picture of a small boy whose mother is in the background smiling and smoking a cigarette. The caption reads, "He has his daddy's eyes and his momma's lungs. Secondhand smoke kills." Another ad featured on the website shows a picture of a young girl who looks rather sad. The caption reads, "This morning I inhaled ammonia. Cigarette smoke contains 4,000 chemicals. Secondhand smoke kills" (Americans).

Overall, the guilt used in anti-smoking campaigns, among other factors, has had an impact on the economics associated with anti-smoking and smoking-alternative products (those products designed to help smokers quit). In his January 14, 2008 article, "Resolutions jump-start diet aid, anti-smoking product sales," Michael Johnsen, Senior Editor at *Drug Store News*, a retail drug industry publication, writes "According to the Nielsen Co. in December [2007], U.S. consumers are expected to purchase more than \$61 million in anti-smoking and smoking-alternative products...in January [2008]." Johnsen goes on to write, "For the 52 weeks ended Nov. 3 [2007], sales of anti-smoking products increased 3.3 percent to \$707.1 million across all channels (including Wal-Mart), according to the Nielsen Co..." (29). Furthermore, the CDC reports "the prevalence of current smoking among adults aged 18 years and over, fell from approximately 23% in the period including January through June in the year 2000 to 19.2% in the year 2007 during the same months." These statistics are very encouraging, but the battle to reduce the number of smokers must continue.

Although the reduction in the number of smokers is encouraging, many smokers defend their habit. Smokers may find it easy to justify smoking as a choice they can make for themselves, because

they are only harming themselves; but as reported by the CDC, research has proven this thinking to be terribly wrong. The fact that secondhand smoke has been proven deadly and the ill health of the smoker having an impact on the lives of family and friends should be proof to smokers that they are not just harming themselves.

Smoking may be a choice for the smoker, but it is not always a choice for those being exposed to secondhand smoke outside in public places and walking down the street, or for the children trapped in the vehicles and homes of those who smoke. This message can be heard loud and clear in the recent commercials and print ads that concentrate almost entirely on the effects of secondhand smoke in an attempt to get smokers to quit by use of guilt. The anti-smoking campaign's use of guilt to persuade may be the best weapon available to reduce the number of smokers. However, this campaign requires a joint effort between the government, non-profit organizations, and the public in order to protect everyone from the ill effects of tobacco and its smoke.

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# E.B. White Imitation

Brandon Logsdon

The place I believe was the most important of my childhood is the creek/park behind my house. As a child I remember it being such an abyss, I couldn't imagine walking from side to side. As I grew older, I also began to remember it in different stages. Stage one- "The Jungle"- The grass and weeds towered over us and there was nothing to be seen but a vast green wall of foliage. My friends and I looked at it as a place of mystery, but that barely contrasted to the feelings of joy we had whenever we stepped forth into this "Amazon." We would arrive with a stick, using the primitive tool in a machete-like fashion; this would clear a path into the field, which seemed to go on forever. Most children would be scared of being lost in such an environmentally safe wasteland, but we never were. Singing songs learned from Disney movies like the Lion King, "In the jungle the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight!" would be all that you would hear if you were to enter the large field. The oldest and tallest of us was always leader, and we formed a single file line following his every move. God forbid we got lost without one another. I could only imagine the way it would have felt, but that never happened with our wisely devised, but unspoken codes, of conduct.

Stage two- "The Creek"- After around a year or so of the "jungle stage," the city decided to reform the field into something better, something more appealing to the senses. To us frequent explorers, this was a sad day, hearing the lawnmowers cut down our playground. Little did we know what was truly behind the grass; in fact, after the mowing took place it was almost better than before. With the four foot tall grass gone, things were unveiled: large weeping willows, a spectrum of wild flowers, and most important, in the distance, the headquarters for around eight years of my life-the creek. The creek was a wonderful place, full of new discoveries, and fun to be had. I reminisce of the times where finding a crawdad, a baby snapping turtle, or a gigantic bullfrog would make our days. Learning to make two-liter bottle minnow traps, or just throwing extremely heavy rocks into the flowing stream would cause us to smile from ear to ear. In the center of the creek was a large concrete tube, so if the water ever should flood, it would stop it at the height of that large tube. It seemed like a good idea then, but I remember the day when the creek did flood and the powerful torrent of water flowing down the stream was so powerful, it went right over the tube and began flooding the field around it. Now I realize the creek was mainly used for some sort of storm drain system, but as a child, walking from end to end through the shallow water with our fluorescent colored water shoes, we felt like Lewis and Clark rowing the Mississippi.

Stage three- "The Park"- The stage that I don't really understand even after all of these years. The destruction of such a beautiful natural environment is a mystery to me, but I guess it had to be done (things can't stay great forever). The thunderous sounds of the large construction vehicles clouded our peaceful residence. The Norwalk Park and Recreation had a reputation for never finishing things on time, and all of their projects in the creek/field area took longer than we could expect or tolerate. This thinking was only mentally delaying the inevitable change which was to come in the near future. The northern playground was first, then the basketball court, third the southern playground, and finally, the skate park. I would like to say at the age of ten to twelve that I resented the fact that they were destroying my "second home," but I can honestly say I accepted and embraced the new technology being put into this area. I spent countless numbers of hours playing pick up games with whomever was on the courts, or a hybrid form of hide and seek/dodge ball that anybody who played would dread being "it" because of the infinite number of hiding places. It was the best time of my life that I can remember, and thinking about it now makes me wish for those days again.

As a teenager today, almost eight to ten years later, I can see that my paradise was lost. How I wish life could be this simple again, waking up every morning and rushing to get outside and go back to the creek to discover a new animal, or racing out to the basketball courts to imitate players like Scottie Pippen, Chris Webber, Kobe Bryant, and Latrell Sprewell, or preparing to voyage through a seemingly endless field of grass. I can look back at it all and smile and accept that it's all just memory now, but how I wish that for just a split second I was seven years old again, and I was truly excited for life.

# Force It Of Corset

Danielle Pringle

As far back as the ancient Greeks, and possibly even earlier, women have gone to extremes in order to obtain their culture's ideal of beauty. Even today this is still a common worry for women and girls. But possibly one of the biggest struggles of achieving ideal beauty has been getting the perfect female figure. For centuries, a small waist has been beheld as an extremely beautiful feminine asset. In order to obtain a small waist, women have gone to extreme measures of dieting. But a much faster, easier and more popular trend until recently to achieve a smaller waist was the method of binding the waist with some form of material.

Today we know of this common practice as corseting, used by women. However, today when you walk down the street or in a mall, restaurant or fancy party, you don't see women in these figure-shaping devices. We actually haven't seen them as common underwear for about five decades. But why is this particular undergarment that has lasted for centuries, through constant changes and developments, no longer worn? In order to help us better understand the evolution of this trend, we have to look at the corset's history.

Pauline Weston Thomas and Guy Thomas from *Fashion-Era* point out that corsets have been around since ancient Greece. At that time, leather cords were used to bind the upper female frame, giving the body a slender look. But the more familiar corsets with lacings and made of sturdy material began to be used in the 1600s. Simply owning a corset at this time was a sign of wealth because the restriction of movement that went hand-in-hand with corsets meant that such a woman could afford not having to do any physical labor or chores, as stated in the Encyclopedia of Social History:

The analysis of clothing and fashion is never simple. The often tight-laced corsets worn by women from the 16th century to the 20th century displayed both status and sexuality: by hampering the body for farm or domestic work, the corset indicated a leisured social position, while by reducing the size of the waist and thus accentuating bosom and hips, it indicated sexuality. (Stearns 210)

This style of corset, according to Douglas Gorsline, author of *What People Wore*, was made of hinged iron that slenderized the waist and flattened the chest. Ouch, talk about uncomfortable. Later that century, corset manufacturers started making corsets out of flexible steel, and later still, with whalebone. The whalebone style remained in fashion until the late 1700s. Around the end of the 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s, a new clothing style similar to that of the Romans and Greeks came into being. The idea now was not to show off the natural waistline but to raise the eye level up to just underneath the bust. This particular fashion did not require the use of a corset and was a far more humane fashion for women of the time. Sadly, this look didn't last long. Around the 1830s, the natural waistline returned and so did the use of corsets.

The 1830s developed a corset that would be slightly different from earlier corsets in that it would be longer in length, so that it started at the top of the breasts and ended at the top of the buttocks. This gave the female body the classic, and highly prized, hourglass shape, as quoted by *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1868) found in *Am I Thin Enough Yet?: The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity*,

I went and ordered a pair of stays, made very strong and filled with stiff bone, measuring only fourteen inches round the waist. These, with the assistance of my maid, I put on, and managed to lace my waist to eighteen inches. At night I slept in my corset without loosening the lace in the least. The next day my maid got my waist to seventeen inches, and so on, an inch every day, until she got them to meet. I wore them regularly without ever taking them off, having them tightened afresh every day, as the laces might stretch a little. They did not open in front, so that I

could not undo them if I had wanted. For the first few days, the pain was very great, but as soon as the stays were laced close, and I had worn them so for a few days, I began to care nothing about it, and in a month or so I would not have taken them off on any account. For I quite enjoyed the sensation, and when I let my husband see me in a dress to fit I was amply repaid for my trouble. (Biber and Sharlene 24)

There was more than just pain at stake for women, though. Corsets were the cause of many health problems, as the following examples from *Writing On Air* illustrate:

women wore corsets, cinching the waist into an ideal sixteen-inch circumference. This greatly impaired the capacity of the diaphragm to take in a full breath, resulting in a lack of oxygen to the brain and atrophy of internal organs. Fainting spells and "weak constitutions" were common characteristics of fashionable women of the period (Rothenberg and Pryor 190).

Not only did corsets cause lack of oxygen to the more vital organs, but in 1925 *Drawing Blood: Technology and Disease Identity in Twentieth-century America* listed corsets as a cause of Chlorosis (Wailoo 212).

By the 1890s, people finally started speaking up about some of the common problems of corsets. This would not put a stop to corsets, however, since fashion at that time demanded that women be small-waisted in order to fit the ideal of beauty. What it did lead to was the creation of the "health" corset, designed by a female corsetiere, Gaches-Sarraute. She had studied medicine and so devised a corset that was designed to force the chest upwards to allow the diaphragm room to move up and down instead of just flattening it, and the design took pressure away from the more vital organs. Though this was a well-designed corset that could have decreased discomfort and damage to the body, it didn't decrease the waist size enough if worn properly. With the help of maids, women were able to over-tighten the health corset giving them the small waist they desired, but at the same time it pushed the womens' buttocks backward and their bosom forward giving them an "S" shape, thus completely destroying the whole point of the "health" corset.

From 1907-1916, an hourglass figure was no longer as important to fashion. Corsets were now designed to slenderize the whole figure starting at the bust and ending over the hips. This corset grew longer until eventually it went all the way down to the knees. Women were barely able to walk in these contraptions, but thankfully, they didn't remain in style for very long.

World War I brought the use of elastic belts, and Weston Thomas and Thomas in *Fashion-Era* point out that in 1914 Mary Phelps Jacobs was the first to patent the first modern bra. With all the men away at war, women were forced to take up more "masculine" roles which didn't allow for restricted movement. When the war was over, many women refused to go back to the old way of tight, boned corsets. They enjoyed the freedom they developed during the war. A rebellion against the traditional fashions would start, and the new rebellious look would be called the Flapper.

From 1918 to the 1930s, the female silhouette became more boyish looking than ever. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, no waistline, and no breasts were highly preferred to the curvaceous figures of Edwardian fashion. The clothing became very loose as opposed to very form fitting. Most women began to prefer to wear latex girdles, which flattened the abdomen, as opposed to a corset. If a woman was too busty for what fashion called for, she could buy a bra called a Symington Side Lacer as a way of binding the bust. As a result, corsets sales greatly decreased.

Although the fashion of the 1930s brought back the feminine figure, according to "A Short History of Corsetry," the invention of latex undergarments was revolutionary. Corset manufactories started designing and selling bras and girdles made of rubber and latex. From the 1930s to modern day, most women preferred wearing the more flexible and comfortable girdle as opposed to the restricting bone-made corsets. Modern girdles are now made with nylon and elastic.

There are a few people today who still wear corsets, but most are associated with fetishes. Even the corsets you can find at online lingerie stores are not made of the same brutal materials that they were in the past. Despite our advancement in undergarment manufacturing, not all women are fully satisfied by needing underwear to obtain ideal figures. Thanks to today's advancement in medical technology, not all women require body-shaping undergarments.

Another reason for current decrease in corset use is the evolution of our medical technology. Instead of turning to specially designed underwear to create a small waist, many women have turned to plastic surgery. The variety of plastic surgery that is available continues to grow, and has become very popular in recent years. Common surgeries include breast implants, liposuction, and tummy tucks.

However, surgery is a very expensive and often dangerous course of action to take just to obtain a “perfect” figure. Have we just traded one unhealthy habit for another? Whether we have or not, fashion and its ideals of beauty will likely continue to influence the way we dress, accessorize, eat, look and live our everyday lives.

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