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Freshman Year English and Other Moments of Discovery

Cassandra L. Boland

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**FRESHMAN YEAR ENGLISH AND
OTHER MOMENTS OF DISCOVERY**

Cassandra L. Boland, B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Lindenwood University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

2006

ABSTRACT

The following collection of personal memoirs takes place over a timeframe of fifteen years. Each essay is a narrative account of actual life events. Some stories are the typical coming of age accounts, but end with a twist. At the conclusion of each essay, there is a short summary of how each experience influenced my personal growth. All essays share the common theme of "self-discovery."

In order to show how these experiences contributed to this theme, the pieces have been arranged chronologically. This way, as you read you can see how each event affects the next. For example, the story "The Bridal Salon" is about the excitement of getting married and planning a wedding, while at the same time shows the changing relationship between a mother and daughter. The next story, "Long Distance Relationships" displays how marriage can affect a changing friendship, and how the change is not always good but necessary.

By the end of this collection the main character in these stories will have come full circle. In the next series of stories, the lead character will embark on the same journey we all take in our lives, just with a different twist. These stories show how each life-changing event creates who we are in the moment and who we are meant to be.

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A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Lindenwood University in Partial
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Degree of Master of Fine Arts

2006

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro
Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Professor Glenn Irwin

For my boys,
Matthew and Destin

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INTRODUCTION

The librarian at Heatherdowns library in Toledo, Ohio told me I didn't have a chance. When I was nine years old I wrote a book about a small girl who trained to be a ballerina, I drew all of the illustrations myself and bound the book with construction paper and staples. After my parents read it and gave it a five star rating, I decided it was ready to be published. One afternoon I got on my bike, with this book under my arm and rode to the nearest library to see if it could be published. The librarian was very sweet with me at first until I started demanding some answers. I didn't understand why I couldn't just leave my book at the library for little kids to read. She explained writers have to go through great lengths to get their books published and I had to wait a few years. No was an unacceptable answer for any young author, I was no exception.

After the first dead end in my writing career, I did what any determined author would do; I went to another library for a second opinion. This time, I recruited my mother and she drove me to other libraries. I told the same story each time; I wanted someone to publish my book. After the third library refused to take it, I gave up, but not long. Some day someone would read my work. Maybe not while I was in the fourth grade, but soon.

After the fourth grade, I wrote more and more stories. *The Incredible Little Man*, *Mrs. Stoddard for One Day*, *Jenny's Recital* were a few of the stories I concocted. I made each one of these stories into a softbound book. I tried selling

them to kids at school but had no luck. Determined to get the word out that I wanted to be a best-selling author by the time I was in middle school, I started a book writing business. Kids at school would tell me the types of stories they wanted to read, I would write the book and bind it. The business was short lived but at least a few people, including teachers, noticed my desire to become a writer. One day, my fourth grade teacher gave me detention for soliciting books in class. She said my sales career was distracting the students. I explained to her this was business; my goal was to be a writer. It was a good excuse, but didn't get me out of trouble.

Year after year I acquainted myself with different styles of writing. Most writers aspire to write novels or books and volumes of poetry. After years of learning from amazing professors, teachers and aspiring authors I realized my calling to be a teacher. It's amazing what people can do with a little encouragement. The teachers who floated in and out of my life introduced me to talents and feelings I never knew I had. Without meeting these incredible people, I would have never picked up a pencil.

Most aspiring authors I met in high school had numerous favorite authors and playwrights. I never had one. I liked to read and write creatively but had no one author with whom I felt a strong connection. Short stories were my specialty. I didn't understand how anyone would have the patience to write a novel. This lack of a literary model made me feel inadequate. Whenever I told someone I wanted to be a writer, the next question inevitably was "well, who is your favorite one?"

My sophomore year in college, I discovered poetry. As a budding writer, poetry was this whole revolutionary style of writing. Free verse in particular was the style of poetry that opened my eyes to a whole new world. No rules, no commas or periods or MLA format. Free verse poems are just you and what you want to say.

That same year in school I had Dr. Marcus Cafagna for an advanced poetry class. He appreciated everyone's attempt at writing, but he didn't sugarcoat how he truly felt about your work. Most of the English teachers I had in the past seem to love everyone's poems no matter how obvious it was that they wrote their assignment while waiting for class to start. I never knew if I was doing a good job or if the professor had to say something nice to qualify for tenure. If Marcus didn't like your poem, you knew immediately. One of my roommates took his class, after she read one of her poems out loud, his critique made her cry. I guess she wasn't even scratching the surface in her poems and he wasn't afraid to speak his mind. I respected him for his strong opinions. His honesty made it easier to believe his compliments.

The same year I was enrolled in advanced poetry, I was also taking a nonfiction writing class. One of our assignments was to interview a person who made a drastic career change and then write an expose. I had a few weeks to work on this paper; so I kept my eyes and ears open in order to find my subject.

During one of my advanced poetry classes with Dr. Cafagna, he explained his introduction to poetry. It turns out Marcus's exposure to writing was disturbing. He reluctantly explained the end of his first marriage led him to

poetry. I remembered the assignment from my other writing class and asked Marcus if he would be my subject for the expose. If anyone had a good reason for taking up poetry, it would be him.

A few minutes into our interview, I asked him the "big" question, what about your first marriage made you begin writing poetry?" I knew it was a personal question but in order to write an interesting expose, I had to ask the tough questions. I thought maybe it was a tough divorce or even a scandalous affair drove them apart. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Marcus met his first wife, Dana, in college. He was pursuing a degree in finance at the time and she was in school to become a pharmacist. After they graduated, they married and bought a house. Their lives were in place for a family. But slowly, year after year, Marcus's wife fell into a downward spiral.

She had a very turbulent relationship with her father. She was constantly uncomfortable when in the same room with him. She avoided direct eye contact with Marcus when her father was around and he suspected Dana had been abused as a child, but she always denied it.

One Sunday morning, he stepped out to get some doughnuts. He left without Dana, she was sound asleep. When he got back, he couldn't find her anywhere in the house. Then something made him go down into the basement. He crept down the stairs expecting to see his wife organizing their storage, but instead he found the worst image he would ever see in his married life. He looked up and found her. There was no note, just her body hung from the ceiling.

After her suicide, he saw a therapist. He had all the normal irrational thoughts one could have at a time like this; the suicide was his fault, he should have seen the signs and he was a horrible husband. His therapist suggested he keep a journal of his feelings. Even though he considered himself a mediocre writer, he wrote in it religiously. But after months of daily entries, he read and reread what he wrote. His writings told a story. He entered some of his work in poetry contests; his family coaxed him into giving it a shot. His poems always brought home a prize. After two years of grief counseling, he discovered a new part of himself. He said her death brought him to poetry. He hasn't left it since.

After our interview, I went home, sat in the front of the computer and stared at a blank screen. Marcus's story was so heartbreaking and so honest, I had to pull out all the stops and write. Six hours and four drafts later, I had my first draft of Marcus's expose. Once it came out of the printer. I made copies and asked a few of my friends to read it. I didn't want to just write a sad story about a man whose wife committed suicide; I wanted to show how poetry helped him deal with grief.

I turned in my expose the following week in non-fiction class, and made a copy for Marcus. I stood there in his office as he read it. We sat down together and went over each paragraph; he liked the story but had a few tips for me. Our meeting that day meant a lot to me. Even though I wasn't writing a poem for his class, he took the time to go over my piece. His advice on my work influenced other stories I wrote. He taught me to place the drama and action at the beginning of the story to capture the audience. He showed me how a fragment can work

magic and how poetic imagery isn't just for poems anymore. All writing tips aside, Marcus taught me how tragedy can open new doors. He took the worst of situations and discovered a whole new side of himself. Marcus showed me great writing ability has to come from inside, not just from a straight "A" in a writing class.

After the nurtured and honest mentor I found in Marcus Cafagna, I foolishly thought all my professors throughout my college experience would be the same way. They would all be a personal writing coach, very vocal about their personal suggestions and have a touching story to tell. I was wrong. Every instructor has a different way of doing things.

I met Dr. Adams my freshman year of graduate school, he taught a short story class that met every Wednesday night. One night a week he held class at Ebbets Field, a sports bar in downtown Springfield, Missouri. Dr. Adams was a borderline alcoholic. Every class he downed at least six drinks. I had a few ideas for short stories brewing in my head at the time and I basically regurgitated these ideas on paper the turned a story in each week. I wrote a story for this class and took another few hours and proofed the work. At each evening class, we read our stories out loud in the bar and received critiques. My work was positively reviewed most of time with a few suggestions here and there. All of the stories I wrote for this class were fun and playful. My first story of the semester was about a young boy kidnapped by a peanut butter worshipping cult, another was about a group of girls who grew their hair for money. Towards the end of the semester, I became engaged and wrote a personal memoir about the stresses of planning of

wedding. It was all very casual and I was happy with my performance in the class. Dr. Adams rarely said much about my work. I never took his silence personally, just focused on pulling off and "A" in the class.

It wasn't until our last project for the class that I knew how he felt about my writing. Before the end of the semester he asked to meet with each student for a one-on-one conference. The day of our meeting I walked into his office, took a seat and expected to discuss my progress for the semester. He had another subject in mind.

"So where do you want to go with your writing?" Dr. Adams asked.

"I'm not sure but I know I want to write for a younger audience, maybe go into young adult fiction" I told him, a little taken off guard by the question. Dr. Adams never commented on my work in the past so I assumed he had nothing to add.

"Your work is all fluff," he said with a stale face. "So far this semester you've written only light-hearted, whimsical kid stories. How old are you anyway?"

"Twenty two."

"Then start writing like it. My best advice to you; write what you know. And stop trying to write what you think we want to read."

The rest of the meeting we discussed the final assignment and what directions I could take. We discussed some of my personal experiences that could potentially turn into memoirs. He gave tough advice but handed me the tools to

work through it. He was right; my work in the class was trite, predictable and sappy. There was more to writing than cutesy anecdotes and flighty fiction.

While Dr. Adams' advice was harsh for a young author to hear, I'm glad he said it. His words still ring in my ears while I draft an essay or proof a hard verse of poetry. Now when I write for a class or just for fun, I realize people want to read the truth. You don't have to be something you're not to succeed as a writer. Just be yourself.

I couldn't tell you my favorite author, novelist or poet. I can't explain my favorite book or short story. I can tell you my fourth grade teacher taught me stick with writing; Dr. Cafagna my junior year taught me how to write through tragedy and how Dr. Adams taught me the importance of honesty in writing. The collection of work following this introduction is a culmination of all the writing advice throughout the years. Some of the stories talk about tragedy and insecurities, while others focus on the joy and excitement of starting a family. Once I complete graduate school, I want to become a writing teacher. I have had some experience in education. The memoir "Freshman Year English" discusses my first teaching experience in Europe and shows how important trust is during the writing process. The memoir "The Bridal Salon" shows how the end of one mother-daughter relationship is be the beginning of a new one. In this essay a new relationship forms while a mother and daughter shop at an overpriced bridal shop. Each of these essays moves the main character onto the next step in her life. They all end one chapter and begin another; one story cannot exist without the other.

To Tell a Lie

As soon as I drove up to my house, I could tell the jig was up. It wasn't the three cop cars in the driveway or the eerie way my house looked when all lights were on at three in the morning; it was my mother's face when I walked through the door. She was dressed in her white night gown, and sat at the kitchen table. A cop rubbed her shoulder. Her face was stained with yesterday's makeup and three cops stood in the kitchen. I had never in my sixteen years been that close to a cop before, it was surreal. Their badges flickered in the kitchen light. The female cop told me I had to be honest with my mother and I should tell her what was going on. But I just stood there, in my work uniform from the night before. I smelled like stale beer.

The cop turned to me and said, "You do know we can have you arrested for stealing your mother's car," The female cop looked at my mom. "Would like us to take her in the station, give her a good scare?" The cop stood with her arms folded in the middle of our kitchen.

"No, just let me deal with her," my mom answered back. The female cop asked again, but my mother assured her I was in for enough on my own without spending the night in jail. Once the cops left, it was just her and me in the kitchen. She sat at the table, bent over a phone book. First I waited for it, but made the first strike.

“It was John, a friend from school. He was at a party, there was drinking. He wanted to leave but didn’t have a ride. He called, then I left and took the car. He didn’t want to drive home drunk, I thought I was doing the right thing,” I said.

“Stealing the car was not the right thing to do. What the hell is this kid’s name anyway? John...John what? Maybe I should give his parents a call.”

“No, don’t because then two of us could be in trouble.”

She agreed not to call or try and look up his number. My sentence for sneaking out in the middle of the night and stealing the car was minimal. I thought I got off pretty easy considering what really happened.

In high school, I had a boyfriend who was four years older than I. My parents at first liked the idea of me dating an older more mature guy. But when I was constantly coming home at ungodly hours of the night, they questioned. This particular evening, Kurt, this older boyfriend, was having a party at his house. I wanted to go. After my mom refused to let me leave, I told her I was going to bed. An hour or so later, I sneaked down the stairs, stole my mother’s car and drove to the party. Another hour later, Kurt’s cell phone rang. It was my mother. He lied for me and told her he hadn’t seen me all night and didn’t know where I was. I immediately jumped in my car and drove home to find three cop cars in the driveway. I had to tell a lie to get out of trouble and plead for a lesser sentence. If I had told the truth she would never have let me see Kurt again.

Shortly after this episode happened, I started to think of all the times I had told the truth and my mother had not believed me. It seemed, when I lied, she

would buy it. But when I was actually telling the truth, she never hesitated to call my bluff.

At five years old, my parents made me tryout for the swim team at our country club in Toledo, Ohio. Naturally, all the younger kids made the team, and I was no exception. Even though I refused to jump off the diving blocks into five feet of water, the team was great for me. Backstroke was my favorite; I even won a few ribbons. Bridget, the coach for the younger kid's team played favorites and lucky for this swimmer, I was one of them. She played with us after practice and taking us to the snack bar during swim meets. Being five years old, I thought she was a saint. She was one of the few adults who treated me like a real person and not just some little kid. Bridget had a lot of friends too. She brought some of them to swim meets, practices and cookouts at the country club. One of her friends, Craig, befriended me right away. He commented on how tan I looked all the time; he even came to my championship meet, which was thirty minutes away. My parents thought the coaches on the team looked out for me. They loved the fact that I was out and about with swim team and made more friends. They met Craig a few times and from what I could tell, they thought he was a nice guy.

After one of our early morning practices, I sat on the lounge chairs and waited for my mother to pick me up. All of the other kids had already left so Bridget decided to wait with me until she showed up.

"When do you think you're mom will be here, kiddo," she asked.

"Any minute, mommy is never late."

Bridget got up from the lawn chair and walked over to the snack bar area. I sat there alone, my feet dangling off the lounge chair, my hair dripping all over the place until she came back. This time Craig followed, but he looked different. He was wearing a bandana over his head and looked like a biker.

“Hey there little girl, you have got some pretty eyes. And you’re so tan!” He said out loud. Bridget walked away.

“Yeah.”

He knelt down to where I was. I looked around the swimming pool. Once Bridget left, there was no one around. No lifeguards or parents, everyone had left for the afternoon until the pool was to re-open for the evening.

“Let me get a good look at those tan lines.” he started to pull on my bathing suit, and rub under my little brown shoulder.

“Some girls would kill to look like you, Cassie. All skinny and brown like you are.”

I could feel his hands going up my neck. I froze as his cold fingers crept over the little crevices of my body. All of sudden a saying ran through my head, something that I had heard in kindergarten; *if someone touches you underneath your swimsuit, tell an adult you trust*. He pulled me away from the lounge chairs over to the kiddy pool area.

Craig said I couldn’t tell anyone. It would be our secret and I could be his secret girlfriend as long as I didn’t say a word. I was too shocked to say anything back and still didn’t really understand what happened to me. He walked away and went back into the snack bar; I could see Bridget standing inside.

After my mom's blue van pulled up, she apologized for being late. She asked me why I was sitting in the gravel of the parking lot. When I didn't answer back, the look on her face told me she knew something was wrong.

"Cassie, why are you so quiet?"

"Oh, I'm sleepy."

I knew if anyone would believe me, it would be my own mother. She was an adult I trusted. I couldn't tell Bridget about what happened. It took me a few days to come around and but I eventually told my mom what happened that day. She was skeptical I was telling the truth. I explained every detail from the type of bandana he was wearing to what he said to me while he touched me. But with all of this evidence, she still didn't think it could have happened. Looking back on it now, I can understand how absurd all of this must have sounded coming from a six-year-old but they were facts just the same.

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" My mother asked me.

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Do you want to quit the swim team this year?"

I told her I didn't want to quit; I just didn't want to see Craig anymore at the pool. I didn't want him at my swim practices or around any of our birthday parties at the country club.

"Well, if you don't want to quit, then I won't say anything about it."

One morning I was getting ready for swim practice at the pool when the assistant coach announced Bridget was leaving. She took a coaching position at another country club. Even now, nineteen years after this took place, I still think

about how my mother never believed what happened. She couldn't come to terms that something unthinkable could happen to her daughter. I have brought this up to her a few times since, once just a few months ago. She still denies I ever told her the story in the first place.

Right now I'm expecting a child of my own. There will be times when he will make up a story to avoid a punishment or something terrible might actually happen. What story will I believe the lie or the truth? I hope my son doesn't inherit my talent for lying. I hope he can trust me with the truth.

Mirrors

I became obsessed. I can remember at a very young age crawling up to a mirror, pressing my doughy fingers against the glass, and kissing my image like a long-lost love. My parents assumed it was just vanity, but my obsession with appearance was directly the result of being self-absorbed, spoiled and volatile even at a young age. I was also the youngest in family. I had an older sister who was a ballerina prodigy and like every little sister, I wanted to be just like her. She seemed so glamorous in her tutu and slippers, her hair always in a bun for ballet practice. I considered her my own personal mirror. She was the mirror I lived with and looked into everyday. Of course everything that she did I had to at least try, even if I failed miserably at it, but when I turned four things got a little more complicated.

The year 1984 was full of pop-culture and new flamboyant artists were flooding the radio stations. My father was a devoted music lover; the shelves of his office were filled with Duran Duran, Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Michael Jackson. Being the age of four and extremely curious I asked my dad to play me a few records, and maybe I could dance to them in the living room. The first record he played for me was a Cyndi Lauper album, the one that featured "*Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*" and "*Time After Time*." I'm not sure if playing those songs was for his amusement or mine, but I loved dancing to them. I would kick my shiny patent leather shoes off, mess up my hair, and jump until my small knees buckled.

After a few weeks of constant requests for Cyndi Lauper and Michael Jackson, my father suggested I should enroll classes. After all, my sister, Andrea, was already taking ballet classes, and she was a tiny prodigy. At the age of seven she was already at an advanced level and would be auditioning for the New York City ballet in the next three years. I agreed that ballet class would be the most fun. I also remembered the beautiful glittery costumes and makeup Andrea got to wear for her recitals. I had to have a piece of glamour. I was sure after peeking in her closet at all those pretty costume treasures; ballet class was just for me. If I took up ballet, she would become even more of a mirror to me. I could look at her everyday, even pass her in the halls of the dance studio and see a part of myself staring back.

The first day of class I had to look perfect, just like Andrea always did. I took extra time picking out my leotard, pink ballet slippers with bows on the toes and white tutu. With my glittery ballet bag in hand, my mother wrapped my curly brown hair into a small bun on top of my head. I was ready to go. I took one last look at Andrea before I left the house for class; she had a smile on her face. As I look back on this she was either happy for me or perhaps she knew in advance my new hobby would be a disaster.

Once in the front doors, my mother's hand in mine, I saw all the other little girls dressed in pink tutus and ballet slippers. They were walking into one of the classrooms. I dropped my mom's hand and ran into the room. It smelled of old shoe leather and baby powder. Once inside, my biggest and most exciting fantasy had come true, the room was completely surrounded by mirrors. My every

move would be played out right in front of me. The floor was tan like shiny toffee. I swore I could see my reflection at my feet. The mirrors twinkled around the room reflecting the tiny images of all the little girls. A tall, slender, raven-haired woman took her place the front of the room. This was my instructor. She was so glamorous. I pictured her as a famous celebrity like Madonna or Michael Jackson. I was sure she walked red carpets and signed autographs after class.

As the weeks went on in class, I grew to love ballet. I loved making doughnut shapes with my arms above my head in first position, I loved the way my toes crinkled the leather of my ballet shoes and I loved learning how to kick high in the sky. Sometimes I would get so engrossed in watching myself, I would forget where I was, only to get summoned back into reality by my teacher.

It was parent's day. All of the student's parents and families were invited to come and watch a dance class. The morning of parent's day, my father walked me into the room and I showed him where my place was at the bar. I shared my fascination about how you could see every move I made in the mirror and told him he better watch. Before class started, I saw him talking to my famous teacher and then they stared back at me. I was sure she told him how professional I was and how I should get all the prettiest costumes. I knew I was getting to be as good as Andrea, or so I hoped. Before the music started I took off the sweat suit I had worn into class and placed it over the bar next to me.

The class started in the usual way, with toe pointing exercises and arabesques at our assigned places. Then we all moved to the center of room to show our parents the latest routine for the class. By the time we got around to

doing the kick exercises, (which signaled to me class was almost over), I was exhausted.

As I stood there and twirled in front of a waiting room of parents with their arms crossed, dance class was no longer entertaining and I wanted to stop. I was tired of raising my arms above my head and pointing my toes in a perfect way. I glanced around the room and saw all of the other little girls pointing their toes, waving their arms like broken trees, scuffing heels and yawning loudly. *This was all so crazy* I thought to myself. *Didn't we all look nuts?* An entire room of small children all moving in unison; we all dressed alike, walked alike, moved alike and whispered alike. There was no room for my individual style. Ballet forced me to be just like everyone else.

All I could think about was how my feet hurt and how much hair spray it took to keep my bun in place on top of my head. All of this nonsense might be right for Andrea, but why did I think it was right for me? She may want to blend in with a crowd of pink tights and tutus but not me.

In the middle of the last lesson for the day, I took my sweat suit from off the railing and laid it down on the floor. After all, I was exhausted and my head hurt from the tight bun and stench of shoe leather. I carefully crept down on the ground and fell asleep right there on the hardwood toffee-colored floor. A few minutes later my father walked over to my place, scooped me up and plopped me on my feet, he told me he was taking me out of ballet class and I would never be back at the school again. He grabbed my hand so tight I couldn't feel my fingers. I struggled to bring myself to tears so he would feel bad for scolding me, but they

never came. On the way home I sat in my car seat and soundly fell asleep with my head against the glass. My tutu ruffled beneath me.

Andrea was not surprised when we came home and my parents told her “ballet class just wasn’t for me.” I went a few more times but eventually I learned to love singing and acting. I knew my place was on the stage, but I wanted nothing to do with ballet. I would never find myself if I constantly wanted to mirror my sister. I had to eventually shatter the glass and break free. I had to find myself. The ballet class I had at four years of age taught me it’s not about how things appear in the mirror or what your sister is good at, it’s about how experiences make you feel. There is no point to accomplishing anything if it doesn’t make you feel good about yourself, even if it does come with pretty shoes and shiny sequins.

Freshman Year English

The second summer semester at Leysin American School in Switzerland, I tutored a young girl named Davina. Most of my students from this school spoke English as a second language; they were from Paraguay or Iraq. For someone who could only speak broken Spanish, imagine my relief when I found out Davina was from New Jersey. I would finally have a student without a language barrier. She was a couple of credit hours short of fulfilling her freshman year English requirement for high school. She was enrolled to take a few hours with me to make up for the lost time.

She was very small, slim with dark thick hair she kept tied in a ponytail. Her fair complexion was spotted with freckles, and she dressed as though she did not want to be noticed. Davina always wore baggy pants and oversized T-shirts to class. Her pretty face and big blue eyes made her stand out, not her clothing.

We small-talked for a little while at our first meeting. I wanted to know what she liked to read: poetry, prose, or novels. I was not going to teach a teenager something she completely had no interest in reading. It had been a while since I was in high school, maybe Catcher in the Rye wasn't all it was cracked up to be anymore. Davina told me she liked short stories, so I negotiated with the school's program director and let her explore the faculty stock room. As both of us looked, we could pick out the book together. We must have spent an hour in the shelves as we searched and read off titles of books. A few of them she had

never heard of, but others made her cringe. Obviously, those were the books I wanted to avoid.

Davina was fourteen; at that time I was only twenty-one. We weren't very far apart in age. I hoped this closeness in age would give me an advantage. I was in her shoes just a few years ago. Even though Davina and I had a great working relationship, I had to keep my guard up as the professional. I couldn't just be her friend; she had to respect me as an authority figure as well.

Back in the stock room, I wanted to get a feel for Davina's favorites. It would be a long three weeks if I picked boring material.

"So, what's your favorite book Davina," I asked her, hopping on top of a counter in the book storage room.

She scratched her bony chin with her petite right hand, a ring on her index finger glistened in the light of lamp that dangled above her head.

"Probably, 'The Crucible'."

"Really, did you see the movie?"

"Of course, I love Winona Ryder, she is my favorite. I see absolutely everything she is in. Even *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and I hate scary movies. Have you seen the movie *Heathers*?" She asked me.

"Yes! That was one of my favorites when I was in high school."

To completely change the subject, I asked her if she had ever written a poem. At first Davina didn't answer, she pretended that she couldn't hear me from over a bookshelf. She finally told me a few minutes later and after I threatened to make her read 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.

"I love poetry; I wish I could write it. But I just feel stupid every time I try," she said and closed the book she was holding putting it back on the shelf. She mixed it in with The Outsiders.

While teaching that summer I had heard this excuse many times. Students felt that poetry was too difficult to write, they never wanted to attempt it. I had to coax them into it. I usually gave my students a few examples of my first poems to read. Davina would be no different; it would take some convincing to get her to try poetry.

"Do you want to learn how to write some poems? As far as I'm concerned this is your class."

I explained everyone has something important say and poetry would give her the voice to tell it. There was no need for her to write a Pulitzer Prize winner, I just wanted her to try it. She decided to give it a shot.

The next day in class I brought her some Sharon Olds, Sylvia Plath, and some edited Allen Ginsberg (there are a few tame pieces I could rework for a fourteen-year old). We went over them in class together and talked about how each poem meant something different to us. She was skeptical at first; there is no way anyone could have read the poems I wrote when I was fourteen. It took a lot of effort from both of us, but by the middle of our semester together, I had created a monster for poetry. Each morning after our exercises, she would ask me to read her poems, never out loud at first, but we were made progress fast. Soon Davina had some favorite poets and styles of poems; she hated *Haikus*, and loved free verse. That would be her style of choice. She developed a great love for Sylvia

Plath, and even had a small problem with *Daddy*; she said it was too ironical. I admired her gutsy opinions and was very impressed with her taste.

One afternoon I was grading essays at my desk, I noticed Davina was not her normal opinionated self. Usually by this time in the afternoon we were discussing the prose readings from the night before or even movies we had both seen, but today it was different. Today Davina was silent.

“Do you want to read something else?” I said to her. “Didn’t you like the assignment from last night? Are you bored?”

“You said I could write a poem, about anything at all?” She asked me and started sifting through sheets of notebook paper.

“Yes, of course. That’s what good poems are made of. You have to put something of yourself into it,” I said. Davina got up and closed the classroom door.

“But what if I told you something really personal and just put it in a poem, wouldn’t you be shocked having to grade it? What if something happened to me and no one knows about it, would you tell anyone.”

“Davina if something is wrong, you can talk about it,”

“This thing happened last year, and no one really knows about it yet, at least here. Some guy who I worked with offered me a ride home...”

Being in a sorority for four years and being a woman myself, I knew where this was going. I listened quietly as she described the rest of the experience. I wanted to give her my undivided attention. Her story went on,

“and in the car he offered me a cigarette and I took it and then he made me get out of the car...I tried to run and he chased me when I tried to get away. But then he caught me”

Considering the subject of her story, she was pretty calm when she described what was going on. She never took her eyes away from mine; there was no way anyone could make up a story like this.

“All I really remember is how heavy he was. My brother is really the only person that knows the whole story.”

Her parents pushed her right into therapy, and then at her request, they put her on a plane to Europe so she could attend school here in Switzerland. This was as far away as she could possibly be from the attacker and where the rape happened. Her parents thought transferring her across the world would remove her from what happened, and she believed them. I guess my class brought her back to it.

After Davina finished explaining her personal tragedy, we sat for a few more hours and talked about her writing. She was desperate to turn this experience into a poem. We worked on a ten line poem about her rape for the rest of the afternoon. It was difficult separating my personal feelings from the goal of our session, to finish the poem. It was hard to focus on just the words when the experience was so terrible.

When she left our session, I reflected on what had just happened. A teenager trusted me with her secrets. Our close relationship, her talent as a writer, all of our work added up. There are some teachers who work for years trying to

get a message out to their students. In just a few weeks I got through to a student and she trusted me all of this personal information. She had said so herself that only a few people knew about what happened to her. All I asked was that she expressed herself in my class through her writing, and she did. It took a lot of courage on her part to share something so intimate with a new face. At this moment as I stood in my empty classroom I realized I was meant to be a writing teacher. After one year of graduate school, a twelve hour plane ride and a tutoring session with a ninth grader, I had found myself.

Davina's poem was amazing. The last day of our class, she read it out loud and the smile on her face once she finished was all the reward I needed. The poem described, step-by-step, her attack. It was very vivid for a fourteen-year-old poet. She didn't want to hide her experience anymore. She decided to throw the poem away once she shared it. We all deal with pain differently. I was happy to introduce the outlet of poetry.

Everyday I get closer and closer to reaching my goal of becoming a writing teacher. Now and then I'll catch myself visiting the Leysin American School website looking for some news about Davina. I've emailed her a few times but haven't told her how she helped me. I helped her express her pain and get through personal tragedy while she helped me find myself. Because of her I found my purpose.

The Bridal Salon

My mother and I had our fair share of struggles. I wasn't exactly the model teenager, and with my father being out of town most of my high school years, our relationship was strained. Everything from taking the car keys to what shirt I should wear to school was an argument. When I left for college, things changed. I missed my mother immensely. It took a four hour drive to Springfield, Missouri and one year at a huge University to realize what a wonderful mother I had. When it was time to plan my wedding, there was never a single fight. We were completely in sync. I loved it. It was a new beginning for us.

"Let's look at dresses!" My mother squeaked, her voice echoed in the small church. I couldn't say no after I saw her face light up.

I was engaged for two months when we decided to tour the church. We got the key from Father Cody of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in St. Augustine, Florida. When my mom and I opened the heavy red doors, I could see exactly how old the building was. It was so old there was no inside bathroom and seated only 75 people comfortably. The interior of the church was shaped like a cross. As we walked around the inside of the church, admiring the ornate altar, we gazed up at the little balcony where the choir would sit. It was a little cliché, but I had to try the wedding march down the aisle. My mother took a seat in the front row. I supposed she had rehearsed in her mind what that day would bring.

"You can call in sick," she said and ushered me out the wood doors. "I'll

even back you up; I'll say you had the flu."

A few minutes later, we were back in the car. She said she had the perfect store in mind. I decided to let her lead the way.

We were stopped at red light when my mother told me the story of the day she bought her wedding dress. My mother and father had been married for thirty years. My grandma wanted her to wear the wedding dress she wore from the 1950s. It was a long-sleeved silk gown and dragged all the way to the floor. My mother's wedding was in August and it would be too hot for a long-sleeved, heavy silk wedding gown. Since my mother did not want to wear that dress, she was forced to buy her own. She took a summer job as a waitress in a country club, saved her money and bought the most expensive dress she could afford. She paid a hundred dollars, a lot of money for 1974.

The day of her first fitting my grandmother came along to see how the dress fit and how it would look the big day. My mom was trying to lose weight, so she starved herself for the fitting. She stood on the pedestal while the seamstress pinned her hem when the summer heat got to her. She fainted in the fitting room. When she came to, my grandmother stood above her and smoked a cigarette, then ashed on the carpet. In front of all the salespeople and seamstresses, my grandmother accused my mother of being pregnant a few weeks before her wedding.

Once the car pulled up to the bridal salon, I knew this place was definitely out of our price range. It screamed "expensive." Classic white curtains draped the front store windows, and four gracefully posed mannequins wore dresses of white

silk, tulle, satin, lace, and chiffon. Other mannequins posed as bridesmaids, they were dressed in pastel yellow, pink, and purple. The wedding party display stared back at me as I walked through the wooden white doors.

Two blonde glossy ladies ran to greet us, they offered us a glass of champagne, then asked us to have a seat on the salon couch so a "consultant" could meet us and begin showing us the dresses.

"Do you have an appointment?" One of the ladies asked.

"Yes, I called this morning, Carolyn and daughter," My mom answered back.

I looked at her with surprise, and raised an eyebrow.

"So you planned this?"

"Well, yes, of course," my mother said in her own glossy voice and best fake English accent, "These days you have to make an appointment."

"Please have some champagne!" the blonde, skinny saleslady told us.

My mother and I both took a glass then helped ourselves to some strawberries on the coffee table.

I got up from the couch, glass in one hand and strawberry in the other and started to wander around the store. My mother followed, hiccupping. The store was full of only designer dresses, not the modestly priced knockoffs you found anywhere else. This was the good stuff. The kind of dresses you only saw in Bridal magazines and on fashion runways. The store was one of the larger bridal salons I'd ever seen. There was a huge entry way and walls covered in ivory, white, silver and even some pink colored wedding gowns.

Another gushing saleswoman showed us to a fitting room larger than the first floor of my parent's house. The walls of the crisp silver room were entirely stocked with the most expensive wedding gowns in the store. Elegant, shiny undergarments were laid out on the pedestal along with perfumes and lotions to freshen up with. One of our consultants left the room; I casually started rummaging through the rows of dresses. Then I found it. My dream dress was smashed between two other gowns of pink tulle. I sang out to my mother, "This is it!" and showed her this incredible *Vera Wang* wedding gown.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Try it on!" she squeaked again with screeching delight. She opened the sealed bag the dress was packaged in and I undid the zipper of the dress. I couldn't help it, but I had to squeak with all the anticipation too.

I slipped the dress on; the display was a perfect fit. It was strapless, with a sophisticated bow tied neatly around the waist and a modest chapel train flowed behind. I stood on the pedestal in the fitting room and caught a glimpse of the price tag, \$4,500. As soon as I saw those numbers I knew we couldn't afford it. We could never spend part of the reception budget on a dress.

Our saleslady returned, and gasped once she entered the room. Then she grabbed veils, shoes and other accessories from the drawers in the fitting room. She explained this was a one of a kind Vera Wang gown and of course it was the last one they had in stock. If we bought the dress today she would knock 15% off the price but that still didn't help. My mother and I looked at each other and then she looked at her purse. The saleswoman took a hint and left again to find more

gowns similar but with a more decent price range.

My mother told me if I really wanted this dress, she would work overtime over the next few months and pay for it in cash. While I was tempted to scream "yes!" and run out the store with my dress flung over my shoulders, I couldn't ask her spend the kind of money I knew she didn't have. It was at that moment, when she offered to buy the most beautiful and most expensive dress of my dreams, that I remembered her own wedding dress shopping experience. How she had to buy her own gown, face all these absurd accusations of being pregnant, all just six weeks before her wedding. I tried to relive the scene in my head, how humiliated she must have felt as the salespeople in the department store witnessed my mother's shame of it all. And now I stood there in a high-priced boutique wearing almost \$8,000 of bridal bliss. I didn't deserve it. We left the store empty handed that day. We went to other salons more reasonably priced and eventually bought a dress a few months later.

In the car on the way home that day, I listened to us talk about what style dress would look best with my shoulders, and if I should wear my hair up for the big day. After dress shopping with my mother, I realized she wanted us to have a better relationship than her and her mother did. I wanted it too.

Once I got home I marinated all the steaks then scrambled to find something to wear. Suddenly the phone rang. It turns out his aunt and uncles were now coming over with their two small kids, it would be ten instead of six. To top it off, the in-laws no longer wanted to barbecue, they wanted to bring a ten pound frozen lasagna. All of the barbecue side dishes I had made were now going to waste. We were eating the burgers and hot dogs; I didn't care about the lasagna. This was my show. I didn't buy seven steaks and a pound of hotdogs on a newlywed budget for everything to go to waste. Naturally, after a small jaw clenched argument with my husband about whether or not to have corn-on-the-cob or garlic bread, I frantically dropped the phone. I planned the rest of this perfect evening.

Since we would be having more people than I originally planned for, I started cutting the ears of corn in two halves along with anything else I could find; bread, pasta salad. Everything had to be rationed. Once I started to mash the potatoes in sour cream and butter, the doorbell rang.

I opened the door with a "happy mother's day" hello. After I gave all five relatives a big hug, and with no frozen lasagna in sight, I showed them around the new place. My mother-in-law oohed and ahhed over our new bedspread and end tables. After asking me how much everything cost, she seemed content for the time being.

"Ohhhhh Biscuit, I can't believe you!" My mother-in-law shrieked.

Our new puppy urinated all over the guest of honor. She screamed and batted at the dog but made the attack even worse. He just peed all over again, this time on the carpet and drapes. I made a mad rush for the cleaning supplies.

About an hour or so later, our front door opened again, this time it was Matt's aunt and uncle with their two children. The kids immediately ran to the dog and caused another accident. Biscuit just couldn't contain himself. This time he peed all over one of the kids' shoes. Matt's aunt was not pleased. But that scolding didn't stop the youngest child who pulled on my dog's tail.

Soon the apartment was filled with smells of cooking meat, burnt corn-on-the-cob and puppy urine. Matt and I only had a one-bedroom apartment; there wasn't much space for such a large crowd. Once everyone situated on the floor with the T.V trays or on couches, Matt started to barbecue on the porch. It was now time for me to finish everything else. Every couple of minutes I called out to the porch and asked Matt where some kitchen item was. I needed everything from the potato masher to a stick of butter. Since he just put the kitchen items away after the move, I figured he would know where everything was. Just as the water started to boil, I heard Matt's mother. She was talking to Aunt Marci,

"Why don't I show you the place?"

I couldn't help but take out my frustrations on the mashed potatoes, I mashed with a new vigor once I heard that remark. Throughout the evening, my mother-in-law escorted random family members around our apartment. The dog had now peed on all the guests; my mother-in-law was giving tours of my apartment while I was up to my elbows in mashed butter mess. We ended up

running out of food, seating space and sanity. I thought maybe I wasn't really cut out for married life. Every other dinner party I had been too, the woman was always in control, well dressed and unstressed while the men barbecued on the porch. This party had been a disaster, everything from the urinating puppy dog to the rationed food.

A few weeks passed, and I decided to call my mother-in-law and Matt's Aunt Marci to apologize for being so incredibly frazzled on Mother's day. They both came to the same conclusion; not everything is going to run perfect all the time, it's something you have to work at. There are no specific roles for people to follow. I should never try to be something I'm not. Maybe that ten pound frozen lasagna wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Long Distance Relationships

"I don't know if I should be telling you this but, Meghan checked herself into the psychiatric ward," Jessica told me over the phone.

"Is she okay? Did she try to slit her wrists?"

"No but she thought about it, hard...then her boyfriend made her get some help. About time, I think."

Meghan is my best friend from high school. Most of my teenage memories involve her and me sneaking out of our bedroom windows and meeting our boyfriends in the street or teepeeing houses. We were as close as sisters from the time we were in eighth grade to our junior year in college. Two years ago she flew all of the way from New York City to Jacksonville, Florida to be in my wedding and on a struggling actresses' budget. She was a true friend.

Meghan is beautiful, redheaded, with a sparkling smile. I haven't seen that smile since October 2003. It took me a few years of being friends with Meghan to understand why she loved the spotlight so much. Everywhere we went all eyes were on her. Not just because she was a pretty girl, but Meghan is magnetic. Being the youngest of three girls she learned how to get her parents' attention. When she was eleven years old her oldest sister died in a horrific car crash. Looking back on her childhood and the death of her sister, I sensed trouble starting during our first weekend at college together. Meghan broke out into hysterical crying fits before we left to go to the movies one night. Sometimes, at breakfast she would refuse to leave her dorm, I had to practically drag her out into public places. Once she was there, she lit up the room.

Her behavior got worse when we joined a sorority. There were nights she wouldn't leave to go out because she felt her face "wasn't right." I came home from classes and found her on the floor, crying about an empty candy jar of jelly bellies.

Towards the end of our freshman year of college together, she confessed she had lost her dreams. After the summer, she stayed home to collect her thoughts. A starring lead role in a play her first year at junior college won her an audition for a prestigious acting school in Manhattan. After her first reading at the audition, she was accepted into their program. She took out several loans and left for New York City.

I thought, since we hadn't spoken in a little while, it meant that she was just busy. After all she was in New York City and was trying to get by. Knowing Meghan's ambition I was sure she had a ton of auditions and photo shoots. But then I got the phone call. It was her roommate Jessica. Meghan's boyfriend forced her to check into the psychiatric ward of a hospital in New York. She went over to his place, cried hysterically and refused to eat. She thought the world would be better if she wasn't in it anymore. Failed audition after failed audition made her believe her worth was just a part in a play.

I didn't hear from her for about two weeks. I sent her cards and left messages so when she got home, she would have reminders of our friendship and hopefully would give me a call. Three weeks after I got the news of her hospitalization, and two puppy greeting cards later, she picked up the phone. She sounded different. She sounded logical. Her boyfriend had even broken up with

her between the glass visitation room of the mental hospital saying she was too needy, and still not a shake or a tear.

“So, big deal, he’s gone,” her voice sounded scruffy like she had been up for a while.

“Wow, Meghan that is the best thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

She explained she had been diagnosed with a borderline personality disorder. The symptoms are promiscuity, depression, manic behavior, and crying fits. All of the symptoms she listed immediately drew up memories in my head of her lying on the dorm room floor hovering over makeup bags and condom wrappers. But what I noticed most of all was her sense of humor about the whole thing.

“You got unlimited meds and ice cream whenever you want it. I loved it there!”

“Same old Meghan,” I thought.

It sounded more like the book “Girl Interrupted” during meal times, bed checks and dance classes than the horrible electric shock therapy scenes from “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” I made her tell me everything that happened from her admittance to her departure, after all I was nosy and she was my best friend.

She made a few friends in the hospital. She had group therapy sessions everyday and got to catch up on some much needed sleep. After one week, she checked herself out and started taking Zoloft among other drugs. Now she sees a shrink and a nutritionist; she calls them her “dream team.” Old habits still die

hard, even though she's in a serious relationship she'll sometimes go out on dates with guys she meets at bus stops and subway stations. I guess some things never change.

A few weeks ago, I called to tell her the news I was pregnant. She was excited for me but I could sense something was different. Our conversations were about new things. We used to talk for hours about the guys we thought were cute in high school and the latest hairstyle we were dying to get. Now we talk about house payments, utility bills and the hard work of cooking for two. Her acting career was put on hold for a while; she said she needed a break.

Friendships change. While we may not talk about the same things as we used to in college, the new subjects are a lot more interesting. I can fill her in on baby shopping and finishing my Master's degree while she can tell tales of her whimsical lifestyle. I live vicariously through her gutsy decisions and fly-by-night attitude. Meghan has the strength to pursue her wildest dreams, I've known this since the day I met her in eighth grade. Even if she ends up selling potted plants on a street corner in SoHo, she can still say she survived New York City and a mental hospital.

Tough Love

When it came to their kids my grandparents never believed in tough love. With four sons and a daughter, tough love should come with the territory. Somehow my grandfather always forgave his children, no questions asked. My youngest uncle, Matthew, had a drug problem. All through his teenage years, Matt was caught at least twice a month with his drug of choice cocaine, marijuana, or prescription meds. Every time he was arrested, my grandfather drove down to the police station and bailed him out of prison. After two years, the officers knew him by name. Matt was arrested twelve times and never spent a night in jail. The morning I was christened, he was arrested two hours before the ceremony. He was charged with cocaine possession. When Grandpa was ever asked why he bailed my uncle out of jail, he answered, "Matt is my son."

My Uncle Matt is freeloader, a nuisance, a headache, my family's black sheep. He started dealing drugs when he was twelve. He and his brother, Carl, became addicts together in middle school. The two of them became my mother's "second" family. At first they smoked marijuana, but then moved on to harder drugs such as heroine, cocaine and speed. Anything they could get their hands on.

He was diagnosed with epilepsy at sixteen, probably just the crutch he was looking for. With epilepsy to blame for all of his troubles with drugs, my grandparents let his reckless behavior slip by. It was always "Poor Matt, we need to feel sorry for sick Matthew." He used his condition to get whatever he wanted, from money to attention.

Just like any other freeloader, Matt had a series of projects and get rich quick schemes. The first career move was a hair salon. After high school he managed to graduate from cosmetology school. Soon after graduation he rented a small salon in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio, with the help of my grandparents and my mother. I visited the hair salon for the first time when I was six years old. My mother wanted Matt to cut my hair, maybe even give me a perm. She assumed since our family donated several hundred dollars to start his salon we would get all free services. No such luck. Right before Matt started the rollers he asked my mother for the cash up front.

“There are no family discounts, Carolyn.” He said to her.

My mom reluctantly reached in her purse and wrote out another check, minus a tip. Without much say otherwise, I let him “work his magic” on my hair as I sat in the brown leather beauty chair. He rolled my entire head in perm rods and coated my locks with a sticky gel until the curl tightening chemicals burned through my scalp. I thought this was how the perm worked. It burned a little at first, but after fifteen minutes of constant hair sizzle I asked him if he could rinse it out.

“That’s how the curl works...its beauty.”

Eventually the burning got so severe I started to cry. Instead of my uncle the stylist, my mother had to rinse the curling solution out of my hair. I had a head like a poodle for six months. Matt didn’t seem to understand how these harsh chemicals could affect a young child’s scalp. After we finally rinsed the

perm toxins out of my hair, he simply went back to tending the other customers. He was oblivious to my crying.

In the end the hair salon was a bust. It was over-priced and eventually Matt lost so much of his parent's money on the project, he couldn't afford to pay his employees. He blamed the failure of his salon on his epilepsy. He thought his occasional seizure made it more difficult for him to cut hair.

As my grandparents aged, Matt craved handouts even more. He called morning after morning asking for money for ridiculous expenses like contact lenses and gas. They always gave in, and would send a check in the mail the next day. It got worse after my grandmother died. After her death, he just had to manipulate my grandfather whose health was failing at the time. I tried my best to visit my grandpa whenever I was in Florida. I knew he appreciated visits and phone calls, anyone who was living alone would. The last time I saw my grandfather in good spirits was six months before he passed.

"This is a real SUV kind of car, it can carry anything,"

This time of year, my Grandfather had just bought his first real SUV; he finally saved enough after five kids at age 76 to afford a brand new car. He had always bought used or pre-owned we liked to call it, but this time he wanted the real thing. Pulling up in front of their old house on Pelican Avenue, I saw him through the window. He lifted the screen and shouted something, but I didn't understand. The words were muffled by the humidity of Daytona Beach. I walked up to the front door, and saw his outstretched purple-leathery hands to greet me.

“Wow, Cassie, you look just as good as you sound on the phone!” He always gave me a hug and a smile when I saw him. When we hugged, I could always feel the prickled scratches of his un-shaven face. He smelled as vacant as his house. I told him I heard about his new car and I wanted to see it. I told him mom and dad just bought a jeep and were jealous, a nice lie but it made him smile as his eyes watered through the creases of cataracts.

“Just right this way, sweetie, you want something to eat, skin and bones, you girls never eat anymore,” he said, ushering me through the dining room, then into the yellow-stained kitchen and the miles of pots and pans.

“No, Pop, I just ate, I swear,” I said, but I had the feeling I wouldn’t be empty handed for long. Warm kitchens were his trademark.

After a quick snack and talks of my schoolwork, he led me to the carport and showed off his shiny red car. In between the lawnmowers and hammocks the SUV sat in the middle, right under the canopy of the garage. He pressed his nose to the glass then begged me to do the same.

“Wow, Pop, this is a really nice car, I love it,” I told him, wiping the fog from my breath off the window. He saw me wiping off the glass then he did the same.

“Yep, it’s nice, and a great deal.”

He showed me gallons of wax and washcloths for cleaning, he was sure he would keep the red car shiny and new forever.

We went back inside, he pulled some albums off the shelf, and he said they were pictures of "Grandpa's gang." It was a small photo album of all of us grandkids. Picture after picture passed by of my sister and me in bunny suits for Easter and in caps and gowns for graduation. As I looked around the living room I could see small trinkets of Grandma, a picture here and a handkerchief there. The way he hung the album showed his true feeling, with each page pushed close up to his eyes, so as not to miss a moment, like they would fall from the pages and slip onto the floor. After a little while, I had to leave and get back home. I gave Grandpa a kiss and a hug, and told him I loved the car. He said next time he would have to give me a ride. That would be the last time I would see my Grandfather alive.

My grandfather suffered from Leukemia and severe diabetes. After my grandmother died, he developed kidney cancer. He lasted about three months in intensive care. I did what I could from hundreds of miles away; sent flowers, stuffed animals, made some phone calls. Two weeks before Christmas my mother called screaming from the phone. Grandpa had died after a long battle in the ICU, his kidneys failed and there was nothing they could do. He couldn't eat, talk or breathe without a machine or an injection. It was better for him to die with dignity they all said. I was on a plane the next day, headed for Ohio, his childhood hometown, to bury what was left of Grandpa.

After the last twenty-one gun salute in the snow, after the flag had been folded and given to my mother, his only daughter, after tears had trickled off the casket, Uncle Matt had some questions about his inheritance. On the way back

from the funeral, on our way to lunch that day, he suggested they sell the car and add it the pot. That way there would be more to split five ways.

“Matt, we’re planning on giving that car to Steven,” my mother said from the front seat. Matt was sitting in the back next to me. Steven was my twenty year old cousin who attended college in New York. He couldn’t afford a car, and my mother wanted to keep it in the family.

“Yeah, but Carolyn, that car is worth close to \$20,000, we could sell it and increase the inheritance. Then we would all get something,” he argued.

“It’s already been decided and you’re not the executor of the will, are you?”

He really didn’t have anything to say to that. All of the sudden he complained of a headache and wanted to lie down right there in the back seat of the car.

On the day of his father’s funeral, not even one year after his mother’s he still only thought of himself. He had forgotten all they had done for him, bailing him out of jail and supporting his whimsical dreams. My mother has talked to Matt two times since the funeral and each time she wonders how he is getting along. No one has seen anything from my grandfather’s inheritance and she likes it that way. But I know Matt will come around some day, with his arms outstretched looking for his next feeding. I won’t be around to reach into my pockets.

Housewarming

Before any life-changing event, whether it is buying a house, getting married or even buying your first car, everyone has his or her opinion. People share their life experiences with you and try to relate to yours. You discuss the differences or maybe you don't. But soon after the conversation is over, you realize this "advice giver" has no idea what they are talking about. This person's experience is nothing like your own and you have no way to relate. Now you are scared. At least I was just after I received some pretty life-altering news.

I was sitting on the bed, Indian-style dressed in flannel pajamas when it happened. The second line on the test turned from a light pink to dark red. It was positive. I had taken a number of these tests in my lifetime: Christmas Eve last year, the afternoon we got back from Mexico in October, after our second anniversary. But none of them had the same outcome as this. They were taken as a precaution, a way to rule a possibility out, to ease my constant paranoia. But this time was different. We had now been married over two years; my husband was sitting on the bed next to me, in his boxers, remote control in one hand; and a plastic positive pregnancy test in the other. And he was happy. I was dumbfounded, shocked, and the fears, bloody sights and warnings about childbirth were racing through my head. *I have to give birth.*

"Babe, what's wrong...hey?" He put his hand to my cheek. "This is a good thing, what is it?"

"Just a little overwhelmed, what about you," I asked.

"I'm sure that will sink in, but I'm excited."

"Sure you are. You're not the one who has to give birth."

"One word, Cass, epidural. You will be fine. Besides, it's a long way off."

Later on that evening, we purchased five more home pregnancy tests and the latest edition of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, *Baby Wise* and *The Girlfriends' Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth*, plus two baby name books. Twenty minutes and an empty bladder later, we were sure. It was official, I was pregnant.

The very next morning we moved into our new house. As a rule, we decided not to break the news about our baby to relatives until we had a doctor's diagnoses. After a quick and frantic call to my doctor the next morning, my appointment would not be for another two weeks. So we would stay silent, at whatever cost. If this meant we had to avoid family members like the plague, then so be it. I thought it would be bad luck to share the news with anyone this early, but Matt on the other hand felt the need to tell everyone we were having a baby. In the line at the drugstore as I bought Windex and toilet paper for the house:

Matt: "Hey, my wife is pregnant, did you know that?"

Cashier: "Wow! That's wonderful!"

Me: "Thanks."

This crazy dialogue went on all morning. Everyone from the gas station attendant at QT to the flooring expert at Home Depot knew I was expecting and

that Matt was the proud father. When I was just six weeks pregnant, my husband insisted we park in the "Expectant Mother's" parking spots. Never mind the strange looks we would get from bystanders who could not tell I was pregnant. I asked Matt why in the world he was telling all of these people. He explained that I never said he couldn't tell perfect strangers, just family. I guess he won that argument.

I was surprised, however, that he kept his cool around his brothers and sisters as they helped us move into our new home. But it's very hard to keep pregnancy a secret when you're supposed to be lifting heavy objects like entertainment centers and microwaves. At one point in the day his brother asked me to help him lift a loveseat. Trying not to appear pregnant, I enthusiastically tried my hardest to lift it. Matt caught a glimpse of me attempting to lift over forty pounds and rushed over to take my place. I assured him I was fine, but was soon demoted to carrying in blankets and pillows.

I figured someone would get wise that day. Once we finished moving, Matt went out the local liquor store and bought a keg for everyone to share. Keg beer was his way of saying thank you for a job well done. While the clan sat on our back porch and drank beer, I sipped Sierra Mist. No one seemed to notice my drink of choice.

By the end of the night, I thought I was in the clear. His family started to get tired; it was getting late. I felt exhausted and dozed off on the couch, when Matt's sister, Mandy decided she would bring in a few more boxes from off of the truck. As she walked in the front door, she slipped on our rug. All of the books

in the box she was carrying spilled out and came crashing onto the floor. They landed with a loud thump that resonated through the room. These books included the most recent issue of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, and our whole collection of baby name reference books. The room froze.

“Do you have something to tell us?” My mother-in-law asked.

Matt walked to the center of the room, picked up the book and said,

“Well, dudes. We’re gonna have a baby!”

There was no avoiding now, the floodgates had opened. We were now obligated to spread the news. No matter how Matt’s family promised not to say a word until our first doctor’s appointment, their excitement made it obvious; we had to tell the rest of the family. My parents live in Jacksonville; unfortunately I would have to break the news to them over the phone. But the rest of the Boland clan lived here in St. Louis. We figured the next big family event; a cousin’s birthday party would be the best time.

This next birthday party was Angela’s sweet sixteen. On the back of our “change of address” cards, we wrote “we’ll be adding 2 more feet to our new home October, 2005!” We thought this line made the news obvious enough. Or so we thought. Once we had handed out all of the cards one-by-one Matt’s family members asked what room we were remodeling. Some wanted to know if we were adding a game room or finishing the basement. After the third person asked when our game room would be open, we had to tell them.

“We’re talking about baby feet!” I announced above the chatter of the party. Some of them were shocked, other aunts and uncles came up to me and actually started to pat my belly.

“It works after all...don’t it!” Uncle Danny shouted, while Aunt Pam asked about my morning sickness and told me I looked weak.

As we broke the news to more and more relatives, friends, coworkers, etc., I discovered a recurring pattern. Matt was being congratulated on a job well done, while I was confronted with questions about aches and pains and nauseated mornings. Sometimes, and this was scary, other more experienced mothers would feel the need to discuss their horrific birth experiences with me. Forgetting I was twelve weeks pregnant myself, I heard all about Aunt Marci’s miscarriages in the fourth month of her last pregnancy. My mother-in-law explained how epidurals could slow labor. Matt’s grandmother, I learned, had five C-sections and two ten pound babies. Two women I work with had high-risk pregnancies and were put on bed rest; two others shared graphic stories of episiotomies. Two of Matt’s cousins were born with jaundice. A friend of ours, who happens to be neonatal intensive care nurse, spilled tales of premature babies who died in the hospital. Each of Matt’s aunts gained at least sixty pounds when they were pregnant, and since I was carrying a “Boland” I felt I was doomed to the same fate. Women were coming out of the woodwork, explaining the idea of breast pumps and the pain of contractions. After three months of these confrontations, I vowed I would never be one of those women who shared their horror stories of pregnancy and childbirth. If I ever came across other pregnant women, I will focus on the joy of

the situation and not explain how they will lose control of their bladder in the second trimester.

Over Fourth of July weekend, my older sister announced she was eight weeks pregnant. She, lucky for her, got to tell everyone in person at my parents Fourth of July picnic in Florida. After the yells and screams of excitement were over and hugs were all passed around the room, I asked her the first question.

"So, do you feel sick?"

"No, should I be feeling sick?" She asked, I could tell this question had made her nervous. She turned from a blushing pink to a worried white.

I was six months pregnant at the time and by now had considered myself a professional. Since I had been through these first few months myself, I felt obligated to tell her about all I experienced and that she inevitably would experience the same. All of the sudden I started telling her tales of my horrendously ill mornings, how Matt practically had to carry me out of bed so I could make it to work. She had already gone through the prenatal exam so I didn't have to enlighten her on that one, but that didn't stop me from telling her *all about the meat and poultry aversions I had in the first trimester or how one morning I actually turned a light shade of lime green from nausea. Her eyes grew bigger and bigger as I explained each terrifying story, complete with visuals. She eventually heard enough and started to ignore me as I went on with my stories. I took the hint after about twenty more minutes.*

After our conversation I realized what I had become in just six months--
every other pregnant woman that I hated. Without realizing it, I assumed her

pregnancy would be exactly like mine. And somehow, since I had been pregnant before, I thought I was some expert on the topic when, in fact, I was just as scared as the next person.

Before she left my parents house for the airport, I apologized for my graphic stories. I explained I didn't mean to scare her; I wanted her to feel like she could talk to me about anything. Apparently, she was used to women approaching her with horrific pregnancy stories just as I was. She explained how every other pregnant woman on her block openly discussed their birthing horror stories, a detailed a play-by-play on back labor and warned her about the aches and pains of pregnancy.

Right then and there my sister and I decided to be part of the minority of un-paranoid moms-to-be, who would rather smell wet paint than poison another woman's pregnant existence with tales of trauma. Sometimes I think back to when I was planning my wedding or choosing a college, how everyone had their way of doing things, and their own set advice. The right thing to do is just smile and walk away. In the end, we know what's best for ourselves. There is nothing wrong with giving advice--when someone asks for it. But it's wrong to assume every person can relate to the experiences we have in our lives, especially when unwelcome advice turns pure happiness to fear.