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Persona Obscura: A Collection of Essays on Identity and Perception

Heidi A. Fuhr
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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Persona Obscura: A Collection of Essays on Identity and Perception

By

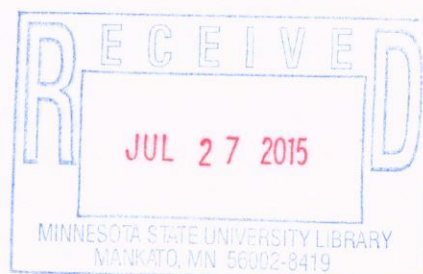
Heidi A. Fuhr

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May, 2015

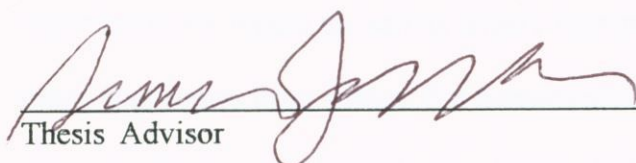


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Persona Obscura: A Collection of Essays on Identity Perception


by Heidi Fuhr

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee:



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April 6, 2015
Date



Committee Member

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Abstract

Persona Obscura: A Collection of Essays on Identity Perception by Heidi A. Fuhr
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Minnesota State University, Mankato. May 2015

As humans, we like to think that our identities grow alongside our bodies and minds, that they are carved out gradually and imperceptibly by the slow-moving glaciers of lived experience. We regard the self as largely immutable—as a genuine, indelible, and whole entity that comes from within. But humans are social animals. Identity doesn't form in a vacuum. We change selves like we change clothes—and quite often *when* we change clothes, hairstyles, vocabularies, intonations, and mannerisms. We assume various, sometimes conflicting personas when we interact with peers, authority figures, parents, children, mentors, lovers, and strangers. When we're alone, our interior personas are ephemeral, changing with every experience we have. Even our deepest, most private identities don't tell the whole story; by means of the subconscious, we obscure elements of our identities even from our own conscious minds.

This collection of creative nonfiction essays explores the concept of the transient, layered self. Which parts of our identities are genuine, which are manufactured, and where do they intersect? What's the difference between the way we perceive ourselves and the way others perceive us? How much control do we have over how we're perceived? What separates the flaws we obscure from the ones we broadcast? What

happens when we're forced to inhabit conflicting personas at the same time? Through the lenses of femininity, mental health, internet culture, and sex, this collection of personal narratives, cultural analyses, and graphic essays attempts to map the complex set of variables that compose human identity.

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Critical Introduction

Since I began the MFA program, I've made dramatic leaps of progress with regard to the artistic aesthetic, thematic focus, and substance of my creative nonfiction work. As an undergraduate creative writing major, I developed a fancy prose style that seemed to give me a distinctive voice, but I used it mostly to write endless, ornate descriptions of people, places, and things that only appealed to myself. I was enamored with my own voice, so I couldn't detach enough to see that my work consistently failed to address the dreaded "so what?" The few times I did complete a halfway decent piece of writing that had some measure of appeal to outside readers, my success was a fortunate accident. The worst part is that I *knew* I was a fraud, that my work was pretty but had no substance to it, that it was purely aesthetic. I thought I was smart enough to mask the lack of depth or focus in my writing with elaborate descriptions and colorful language.

In the MFA program, I learned that personal narrative can't just be "what happened," even if the language is artful. That's what autobiography is for. As I participated in creative nonfiction workshops and read more widely in the genre, I got better at identifying themes and framing devices in the work of other writers, but my own writing still lacked explicit focus.

Eventually, I saw great improvement with detaching emotionally from my own work, which made me more receptive to constructive criticism and gave me a sense of

humility that allowed me to revise more substantively than I ever had before. I also had to learn to detach *intellectually* from my work—allowing me to comprehend my thoughts as others do. Though I have made great progress in that area, I suspect it will be a lifelong learning curve.

One of the most instrumental elements of my MFA experience was teaching creative writing. By preparing lectures, critiquing students, facilitating workshops, and leading literary and craft discussions of published works, I gradually trained myself to be able to quickly comprehend big-picture thematic elements and, when appropriate, concisely prescribe revision strategies. I had to learn to be explicit and concrete when it came to crafting excellent writing, which I had heretofore treated as a kind of mysterious alchemy. Teaching beginners, in a way, made me rebuild my own shaky foundation of writing craft.

The other crucial component of my education has been coming to terms with my natural creative and intellectual processes. Unlike the knowledge I've accrued (and continue to accrue) from teaching writing, this awareness of my creative process happened all at once.

Last summer, I registered for all my thesis credits at once. I also took two credits of independent study through the Art department because Professor Diana Joseph, my thesis advisor, had challenged me to make visual art to accompany my thesis project. When I started, I didn't have any idea what the unifying theme of my thesis project would be. From talking to former MFA students and comparing their thesis-writing experiences and study habits with what I thought were my own capabilities, I'd loosely planned to

write as many essays as I could, without thematic parameters, then spend the last feverish weeks before the thesis deadline identifying and strengthening a meaningful connection between them. I started out the summer semester that way, then I lost momentum.

Procrastination has been a vice of mine for most of my life.

A few years ago, I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder. I'm being treated for it, but the symptoms occasionally persist, with varying levels of severity. Over the midsummer weeks, I let my brain wander aimlessly: I went down Wikipedia rabbit-holes. I watched garbage TV shows on alien abductions and ridiculous conspiracy theories. I listened to lectures and debates on theoretical physics, evolution, and the history of religion (for a few weeks, I convinced myself I was an atheist). I became obsessed with the concept of reason, which led me to read widely on psychological processes, human perception, and cognitive abnormality.

It's not that I was being intellectually lazy that summer—in fact my synapses were firing like crazy, to the point where I couldn't get to sleep at night. When I *did* sleep, my subconscious mind made bizarre connections between the concepts I'd been voraciously inhaling. I felt intellectually stimulated, like I was using a bigger percentage of my brain than I normally do, but I felt guilty because I wasn't getting anything done. As the weeks passed, my anxiety increased to the point where I was nearly crippled by it. I'd sit in front of my laptop and stare at the screen, or I'd write a half-page of something new and then throw it away. I wasn't getting anywhere, so I started working on my independent art project instead.

As a visual artist, my limitations were much the same as the ones I had as a writer:

I was a purely aesthetic artist. I was all technique and no substance. Such a thing is easier to pass off with visual art, which is often so abstract that it can be interpreted in infinite different ways. Visual artists can get away with making enigmatic statements about the meaning of their work, as long as people like it. Because their expertise is with images, rather than words, artists often aren't expected to be able to articulate the meaning of their work. That suited my laziness, but it severely limited my work. I'd made a lot of pieces that looked great, but none of them felt genuine to me. With both visual and textual work, I wasn't living up to my potential.

For my summer art project, after the long period of seemingly unrelated compulsive information gathering, I struck upon the idea to make a series of sculptural books. As I was planning the project, everything suddenly came together. I suddenly realized that everything piece of art I'd ever made and everything I'd ever written had been leading up to one overarching theme: the perception of identity, both by ourselves and by other people. The first sculptural book I made, *Persona Obscura*, became a sort of atlas of my own identity, and then guided my thesis project. Those previous weeks that had felt at once like time-wasting and productivity, I found, had actually led me to forming the thematic focus of my thesis. I had to let my mind wander as far as it wanted to, sucking up whatever information it cared to, then make random connections. I don't believe I could have done that as effectively without being allowed to apply my thought process to both textual and visual projects.

The definition of creativity is often misunderstood. It's not something that's only valuable for self-expression or the arts. Creative minds solve problems by making

unusual connections until they find a unique solution. The experience of letting my mind do that led me to form a thematic focus I wouldn't have come to otherwise, allowing me to grasp what felt like profound and substantive artistic meaning, both in my art work and in my writing.

During my very first semester in the MFA program, Professor Geoff Herbach said something that I'll never forget. He explained that good writers eventually figure out what their lifelong writing themes are. Our favorite writers, he said, use different works to explore the same specific worldview or focus, over and over again. Once a writer discovers what their specific worldview is, their craft gets easier. They've figured out who they are and what they've been trying to say. When I heard this, I thought, "Wow. I *want* that," but I knew I had a long way to go before I got there. I hoped I'd stick with writing long enough to figure my worldview out, and I hoped it would happen before someone discovered that I was a fraud.

I don't claim to be quite there yet, but the experience of writing this thesis while making art seemed to start me on the path to the core themes of my artistic life. It prompted me to rediscover themes I'd been failing to address in previous works. I feel like I'm finally on the way to untangling the giant heap of Christmas tree lights that is my artistic focus.

Most recently, I began combining my writing and visual art processes in the form of graphic narrative, a genre that has gained traction over the past few decades, but it still woefully underused. I've found that graphic narrative has forced me to adapt to a drastically different prose style than I'm used to. There isn't a lot of room for textual

content in graphic forms, so one has to write sparingly while still maintaining unique voice and sense of purpose. I find that it's easier for me to adhere to the given focus of the piece in this format.

For example, I struggled during my whole second year to find a way to write about my grandparents' political imprisonment during World War II. It felt disingenuous to write their stories as creative nonfiction because I wasn't there. I had to rely on interviews and research, and it didn't seem right to regurgitate someone else's observations, no matter what kind of literary quality I applied to it. I tried to write it as a screenplay, and then a novel, but I found that I was equally uncomfortable with inventing characters and story arcs. I'd given up on the task until I rediscovered *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, which I'd first read at age twelve. Spiegelman's work was my first experience with both graphic nonfiction and historical memoir. In *Maus* he tackles essentially the same thing I was trying to work with: a piece of family history that happened long before he was born.

After experimenting with graphic narrative, I'm finally prepared to write about my grandparents in nonfiction. As a genre, graphic narrative has its limitations, for sure, but it also grants certain freedoms that aren't strictly allowed in traditional creative nonfiction. For example, in standard memoir, dialogue and scene often read as manufactured or fiction-like. Personal narratives with too much direct scene are likely to be dismissed as the work of a novice. Nonfiction prose carries the onus of being absolutely true, which often means that dialogue is only appropriate when it's from a direct transcript or a single indelible memory, or when it's made clear that the dialogue is

speculative. In graphic nonfiction, speculation is a given.

I aspire to write graphic narrative like Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis*, or Alison Bechdel in *Fun Home*. Spiegelman uses cartooning to explore difficult subject matter without sentiment and with unflinching truthfulness. Satrapi and Bechdel both excel at incorporating personal reflection into their work. What I admire most about graphic memoirists is that their writing is often genuine and concise. Even after these years of learning how to write with purpose and meaning, I still rely too heavily on the flashy prose style I developed as an undergrad to mask my lack of depth. During my three years in the MFA program, I've learned so much about writing with purpose, meaning, and depth, I shouldn't have to resort to clever turns of phrase or linguistic pyrotechnics, but it's a vice I find difficult to break. It's a habit that I've come to recognize as contrived and pseudointellectual. As I leave the MFA program, I hope that writing graphic narrative will force me to break that habit and finally start writing with genuineness.

Love and Congenital Oddness

At age eighteen, my father was hit by a car while riding his bicycle. After a three-day coma, he was never the same. He would suffer from violent, grand mal seizures for the rest of his life. In order to keep the seizures under control, he would have to take a combination of heavy-duty barbiturates daily. My mother always assumed the drugs had adverse effects on his personality: he was scatterbrained, he had a short temper, and he didn't seem to have an internal gauge of appropriate social behavior. After realizing how many of these attributes I seem to have inherited—and even passed on to my daughter—I don't think they're caused by the medications.

I learned very early in life that my father was mortal and flawed. I saw him have terrifying seizures when I was a small child. Once he pulled a fully loaded bookshelf down on himself, and another time he convulsed so hard in the shower he inadvertently turned off the cold water and scalded himself. I still remember a nightmare I had when I was five. I was on top of a skyscraper and my dad was hanging over the edge, his fingers slipping; the look of terror on his face when I tried to pull him up still haunts me.

My father is technically a genius, but he is severely socially challenged. He has absolutely no concept of or interest in how people perceive him. He tends to get fired from jobs because he alienates his coworkers or makes them vaguely uncomfortable. People are generally intimidated by him; he's very intense and abrasive and he has little

patience for almost everyone. He doesn't engage in small talk, and he expects everyone to understand his cerebral, abstract ramblings. Few people do. My mother says he's arrogant, but I can't imagine arrogance in someone so perpetually outcast.

Like me, my father never seemed to be able to control his physical appearance. His clothes are often worn and ill-fitting. His hair is somewhere between Andrew Jackson's on the twenty-dollar bill and Beethoven's. In airports, my father is often harassed by security; he has a slightly Arabic look about him with his dark, oily skin and severe, angular features, but more than that, people tend to read him wrong. For decades, he *always* had a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, even during meals or while falling asleep. He smoked one cigarette after another, somehow without touching them. He'd tap one out of the pack directly into his mouth and let the ashes grow long and drop where they may, and then miraculously replace it with a fresh one. After he and my mother divorced, his home was always insanely messy: books lying everywhere, open and spine-up in haphazard stacks; papers, clothes, and dishes strewn over every square inch of surface area in psychotic heaps of disorganization; coffee rings and cigarette ashes sprinkled liberally over all of it, the whole mess solidified with an indelible film of yellow tar from years of chain smoking.

The fast, dissonant, frenetic style of jazz he prefers mirrors the unsettling atmosphere of his home. My father is a jazz trombonist. When I was little, his trombone always sat in the corner of our dining room next to a music stand, books and loose sheets of yellowed music strewn around it. The caricature stereotype of a jazz musician—laid back, stylish, cool—is the polar opposite of my father, though he certainly had colleagues

like that, men he'd known for years who would come jam with him in our living room with their saxophones and drums and upright basses.

When I was little, my mother worked the second shift at a factory while my father took care of my brothers and me, so he took us with him when he played at bars and jazz clubs. One of my first fuzzy memories is of being at one of these clubs with my older brother. I must have been three or four years old, dressed in footie pajamas. He'd put us to bed in sleeping bags on the floor of the club's dark storage room, with the music stands, amps, and microphones.

When I was a little older, I wanted nothing more than for my father to be normal. I used to get so embarrassed when we'd go to a restaurant. He had a particular way he'd talk to the wait staff that involved joking, but in a somewhat abrasive, demanding manner. I felt sorry for those waitresses, most of whom would look at him like he was a lunatic, rolling their eyes and slinking away as quickly as possible. I always imagined them snickering to their coworkers in the kitchen about the nut job they just served, or maybe spitting in our food. He was careful to tip properly, even if the service was bad. Once, after an especially hostile interaction with an especially dumb and humorless waitress, he went across the street to the bank to get exactly fifteen percent of the tab in pennies, which he unrolled and left in a pile on the table.

Like my mother, my dad majored in business. Very early in his career, though, he realized that he would never fit into the corporate world. In his late thirties, out of nowhere, he began training as a cabinetmaker and started his own custom furniture business. His shop was almost as much a mess as his home was, but he made some

beautiful furniture, pieces that were more artistic than functional. As a teenager, I spent many hours involuntarily assisting him at his shop and helping lug wood around town. It only just occurred to me to wonder why it was always me who had to help him, not my brothers. I think my mother sent me there to get me out of her way. My father and I were two of a kind, misunderstood social misfits. We had more patience for each other's faults than the rest of the family had for us.

My father is very unsentimental and cynical. One year, my little brother insisted that our dad get a Christmas tree. He scribbled a quick, violently gestured sketch in pencil—a vaguely pine-shaped scribble—on the back of an old power bill and stuck it to the wall with a piece of duct tape. We stacked all our gifts under it that Christmas season. It wasn't meant to be hostile or disturbing. It was his honest and playful attempt to give my brother what he wanted. Our father is nothing if not genuine.

The summer before I started high school, my two brothers and I lived with our mother in the University of Minnesota's family student housing. When my mother finished her degree, we had to move. Until she could afford to buy a house of her own, the family would move in with her mother in the suburbs. I thought my mother hated me, because one day she nonchalantly mentioned that I would be moving into my father's house while she and my brothers moved to the suburbs. I felt betrayed. There seemed to be no logical reason for it. I was her only daughter, and I was the middle child. Nothing about her decision made sense to me.

My grandmother had a nice home compared to what we were used to; she cooked

the best, bland Minnesota comfort food and her neighborhood was dotted with pretty gardens and filled with middle-class families with lots of children. My brothers would go to Hopkins schools, which were much nicer than Minneapolis schools.

I was to be cast off to North Minneapolis, where my father had just bought a HUD house. North Minneapolis was—and still is—a place of housing projects, gangs, shootings, and crack. There, I attended Patrick Henry High, a brutal zoo of school where I didn't know anyone and where I was a racial minority. Even though virtually all of the students at Henry came from poverty-class families, I was teased to tears on a daily basis for wearing the same clothes every day. My father's cabinetmaking business wasn't thriving; he had just lost the warehouse space where he'd kept his shop, and he'd moved his table saws, lathes, and routers, and the cabinet full of noxious varnishes and solvents to the basement of his house.

At first, I was hurt that my mother sent me away, not only because of the disparity of quality-of-life. She easily could have brought all three of us to our grandmother's; the house had six bedrooms and a finished basement, and my mother had just gotten her first job that offered a livable wage. She was sending me away not for practical purposes, but because she had never liked me the way she liked my brothers. I was my father's daughter. I looked like him and I had inherited all of his worst faults. My mother had struggled to try to raise me to be like her—neat, conventional, industrious, affable—and she had failed. She was through trying to mold me into something I wasn't, and sending my to my dad's was, perhaps, a last-ditch effort to *scare* me into being normal. Either that, or she was completely finished with me and decided to throw me to the wolves.

After I moved in, my father and I got along pretty well. I felt a solidarity with him; we were the damaged outcasts who didn't fit into my mother's tidy, bland, conventional world. My dad didn't make me clean, or go to bed at a certain time, or do laundry. He bought me cigarettes because they were a necessity for both of us like toilet paper or air. Unlike at my mother's house, however there were times when we went without toilet paper for days at a time. It was a trade-off: security for freedom. While my mother and brothers enjoyed hot, meat-and-potatoes meals at six-thirty every night, I was left to fend for myself, checking expiration dates on weird deli foods, like lox and pickled herrings and dark Jewish bakery breads. The refrigerator was mostly filled with a hundred condiments with little actual food value, like expensive specialty mustards, chutneys, and tapenades. On the plus side, my father would often spontaneously decide to take me out for a meal. Sometimes we'd sit for hours on a Sunday morning and eat a fancy brunch, other times we'd go out late on a school night for chicken wings. Unpredictability suited me fine.

There was no structure at my dad's house. At midnight, when my brothers were sleeping peacefully at our grandmother's house, having eaten, bathed, and finished their homework on a secure and tidy schedule, my dad would be in the basement turning table legs on the lathe, blasting Coltrane so it could be heard over the power tools, and I'd be in the kitchen making pancakes with expired milk, or more likely crepes, because there were dozens of weird specialty cookbooks from all over the world on my dad's bookshelves, but not one copy of *Betty Crocker* or *The Joy of Cooking*.

My dad was an unconventional parent, to be sure, but he wasn't neglectful. When

I told him I wanted to take math classes, he got so angry he threw me against the wall and very nearly hit me. I did have to go to school every day. I *hated* high school. I was a complete social outcast and I was academically bored.

I was a good student for a while. I took calculus in tenth grade. My school didn't offer any math classes beyond that, so my dad went to the school and literally yelled at the principal until he agreed to either create a new course or send me to a post-secondary math program. My dad expected good grades, but he didn't demand excellence in all of my classes, just the ones that mattered. I failed gym class my freshman year because I refused to participate in touch football. My dad thought it ridiculous that football was compulsory—and even more ridiculous that my GPA could be damaged by not playing it—so again, he went to yell at the principal, who eventually changed my grade to a *C* and excused me from further team sports.

As I got older, my dad became very protective of me. A drunk guy followed me home from the bus stop one night, begged me to have sex with him the whole way home, then tried to grab me outside our house. I told my dad about it. He grabbed an oak plank from the basement and made me get in the car. We drove around the neighborhood, slowing down to inspect likely suspects. When I saw him, I didn't want to tell my dad it was him, but I did. He was so upset by it, I didn't want to deny him the chance to resolve it. He was angrier than I'd ever seen him when he got out of the car, wielding the piece of wood like a Soprano with a baseball bat. I cradled my head in my lap, covering my eyes and ears with my arms while he beat the guy up.

When I was in my twenties, my father lived alone. Every once in a while he'd have petit mal seizures or auras—pre-convulsing, mini-seizures that can indicate the onset of a big one. For some reason, out of all of the responsible, mature, normal people to call in a crisis, he would call me. He didn't call his girlfriend of almost ten years; I think it had something to do with the way he wanted to be perceived by her, as independent, undamaged, and perhaps a little more normal than he really was. He didn't call my mother, who would have known what to do after dealing with his condition over fifteen years of marriage, still loved him, and would have gladly come to help. He didn't call my older, more responsible brother. He didn't call his own brother, who was to him what my brother was to me: the golden child whose successes and easy affability sharply juxtaposed with our awkward black-sheepedness.

It was frightening to get those calls. I knew he was having an aura when he wasn't able to speak properly on the phone. I'd answer the phone and he'd say, "Heids, I . . . just . . . what?" with great frustration and urgency. I'd tell him to get in bed and wait for me, then I'd rush over and try to discern whether or not he'd taken his pills. I discovered that he could sometimes avoid progressing to a grand mal seizure by eating the right foods. Once he wanted spaghetti and meatballs. He asked me to take him to the Italian restaurant down the block. He couldn't manage to tell the waiter what he wanted, and when I tried to help, he brushed me away, frustrated. At his apartment, I'd sit for hours and monitor him, terrified, until the crisis passed. We never really talked about it afterward. I think he would have preferred it if nobody had to see him like that, not even me.

Eventually, after almost twenty years, he moved in with his girlfriend, a beautiful and sophisticated saxophonist named Kris. She loves him fiercely, damage and weirdness and all. They bought a house in Albuquerque together. My father won't admit it, but I think they chose Albuquerque because they were hardcore fans of *Breaking Bad*. I think he fancies himself a Walter White type of guy.

My dad is one of my best friends. He flew all the way to Minneapolis for my college graduation. My mother couldn't make it from six miles away because her condition was acting up (fibromyalgia or Crohn's disease or Lyme disease or neuropathy—pick one). When he comes to town, he doesn't stay with his brother or his sons, all of whom have nice suburban homes with guest rooms and cable TV, who cook and have matching furniture and dishes, who could pick him up from the airport in late-model, fully functioning cars. He stays with me, in my dumpy, messy apartment where we can chain smoke indoors. He feels more comfortable at my house where he's not a guest, he just belongs. And when my lousy, garbage-filled car overheats on the way back to the airport, he helps me figure out what to do.

Urban Nature Essay

For as long as I can remember, I've had a foggy memory in the back of my mind. In it, I'm with my father and my big brother, splashing around in a fountain of cascading pools in the middle of Minneapolis. The fountain is surrounded by greenery, houses, and buildings, and there are tiny pink flower petals everywhere—in the grass, on the surface of the water, slowly falling through the air like a pink snow storm, piling up in drifts on the ground. Throughout my childhood, and even sometimes as an adult, I recalled that place. The memory was so tenuous and magical, I wasn't sure if it was an actual experience or a dream. It was too perfect to be real, but somehow I was *sure* it existed. I tried to explain the memory to my father, but he didn't know what I was talking about. I looked for it around the city's lakes and creeks. By the time I had my own children, I gave up on finding it. I knew every corner of the city of Minneapolis and I'd never seen such a place.

One of the most popular subgenres in many literary communities is the nature essay. As an academic, I've read a lot of personal narratives, poems, and creative journalism on the topic of nature. It's a favorite among writing and literature professors, workshop groups, and poets. The inherent value of nature writing at times seems almost dogmatic to me. My inability to revere nature writing has often been met with

disappointment and bafflement from my colleagues and mentors.

Recently, I slogged my way through “Hyacinth Drift,” a Joyce Carol Oates essay about the Louisiana bayou. I read it because it was assigned in a writing workshop, not because I wanted to. It's not that I don't think Oates is a literary genius. It's not that I'm some kind of nature-hating right-winger or a technology junkie who's completely lost touch with the physical world. I wanted to like “Hyacinth Drift.” My problem is that “nature,” as many nature writers define it (read: pristine wilderness) simply isn't relevant to me.

I'm an urban being to my very core. I'm from Minnesota, “The Land of Ten Thousand Lakes” (a gross overestimation), and more specifically, I'm from Minneapolis, “The City of Lakes.” But I grew up surrounded by concrete, steel, and industry. Nature as I experienced it was curated and tamed for landscaping purposes. Alternately, it was allowed to grow wild to serve as a dumping ground for runoff and industrial waste, or because its adjacent developed places had been abandoned. But as a kid, I enjoyed nature in its urban forms.

There are certain flora and fauna, geologies and structures that will always remind me of Minneapolis. Some of them are so ubiquitous that I rarely notice them: squirrels and pigeons. The less glamorous insects, like cockroaches, ants, and wasps. Lawn grass and sandbox sand, shrubs and hostas. But more interesting kinds of inner-city nature could also be found, if one looked hard enough in the City of Lakes. My bodies of water were fountains, garden hoses, and industrial runoff sites. My “geological formations” were parks, drainage tunnels, and secret manmade caves. For wildlife, I encountered

domesticated pets, urban vermin, and creatures who shouldn't have been where they were. I enjoyed the occasional rhubarb patch or lilac bush in a neighbor's garden, ate mulberries off the trees whenever I could find them, and played under a giant weeping willow tree.

One of my favorite places to play as a little kid was in downtown Minneapolis. On the intersection of Washington Avenue and Nicollet Mall, there was an office building that rested on great "legs" on top of an artificial hill. On one side of the building, there were stairs, but the other side was just a concrete slope as wide as the building and a third of a block long. There seemed to be no reason for the hill; none of the other buildings on the block had one. The slope was too steep for wheelchairs, and it terminated at the bottom with three steps. My father used to take my brothers and me to skateboard down it while he sat at the top and read. The place was made more special because the hill was divided down the center with a long marble fountain. We'd take off our shoes and splash around in it to cool off, or in the fall, we'd skate down its empty canal. I was five years old, my big brother was six, and my little brother was one, so we weren't doing fancy tricks; mostly, my big brother and I would take turns sitting down our relatively huge skateboard, or standing up if we dared, and flying down the hill. When little Elliot got bored, we'd sit him on our laps and take him down with us.

Our dad was *fun* like that. He liked to take us to do subversive things, things that weren't perfectly safe or legal. Sometimes he took us to Minnehaha Creek, where we'd ignore the "No Trespassing" sign and jump the fence to climb up behind the waterfall. In the winter, the water turned into a thick sheet of ice, but in the summer, it was powerful

enough to soak us with spray. Then we'd walk along the creek and climb up the steep sandstone ravine walls. We never seemed to fall, or if we did, we never really got hurt.

Between the ages of seven and fourteen, I was fortunate enough to live in the University of Minnesota's family student housing complex. It was like a mini international community. There were single mothers, young couples with newborns, and tri-generational families with revered elders and sprawling litters of kids. Any door one might knock on could just as likely be the home of a family from Laos, Nigeria, New Zealand, Jordan, Greece, Korea, or Cuba as it could a family native to Minnesota, and there were a lot of doors. Each of the complex's twelve buildings housed sixteen apartments, every one of them inhabited by a family with children.

There were eight playgrounds on the complex and two sprawling baseball fields. In the winter, the ball fields served as dump sites for the four parking lots worth of snow. The snow heaps could reach spectacular heights. One year, it was more than a story tall, even after it melted and refroze enough to be solid ice. It breaks my heart to think that if such a thing existed in the vicinity of children these days, it would be cordoned off with bright orange construction mesh, or even a fence. As cooped-up apartment kids whose parents treasured quiet time to study, we were free to climb it, slide down it, and push each other off it during games of "King of the Mountain."

The apartment complex wasn't diverse in its wildlife or geography, but we made due with what we had. For trees, we had two kinds: jack pines and crabapple saplings. The trees were so abundant, the purple-pink crabapple blossoms dominated the landscape for a few weeks each spring, and their tiny hard fruits stained the sidewalks in the fall.

Any car parked under a tree would be doused with bright purple bird shit.

The ground on the complex was reliably covered in either concrete, asphalt, playground sand, or standard lawn grass (always mown short and fertilized for optimal greenness). The surfaces were so staid, we children often found ways to alter them, at least temporarily. We spent whole afternoons bailing handfuls of sand out of grave-sized holes, then scraping out clay with our fingernails. We dug holes deep enough to stand upright in.

When we got bored with digging, we'd transform the landscape further by using one of the complex's other natural resources: gardening hoses. I fantasized about digging an entire sandbox out someday, piling the sand on the sidewalks that rimmed it as a kind of beach, and filling up the whole thing with water. I imagined we'd be able to dive off the top of the slide or jump off the swings into the water. We had to use covert strategies to get our hands on The Handle, a special hex-nut shaped faucet key that turned on the outdoor water spigots. There was only one Handle for each of the twelve buildings in the complex, so often it proved impossible. If we were lucky, a garden hose had been left out, but often we had to get into one of the locked laundry rooms, where the hoses were stored, which required swiping a key from one of our parents or catching the door when a neighbor exited. During all this, one of us would have to guard the hole against little kids and concerned parents who'd undo all of our hard work if given the chance.

One summer, all the variables lined up in our favor. We secured The Handle and a laundry room key ahead of time. A few of us got permission from our parents to camp out in a tent in the baseball field so we could guard the hole. We spent days digging a

fantastic abyss, then we turned on the hoses at dusk. By morning, the sandbox did indeed look like the surface of a very muddy lake. One of the busybody neighbors ratted on us immediately, a young first-time mother whose precious toddler wore a helmet to climb on the playground equipment. We barely even got to splash around before we found out that we had caused what some considered to be vandalism. I was grounded for a time.

Other than the garden hoses, there weren't any waterways in the complex. But as I grew older and gradually gained autonomy and expanded the boundaries of my world, I discovered pools, ponds, and rivers. The first, and closest was the kiddie pool at Van Cleve Park, a tepid, chlorine-filled puddle that was usually overrun by pissing toddlers. Van Cleve Pool was the final resort of desperate children suffering the worst of the summer humidity and boredom. Unless one could sneak out of the house and jump the pool's fence after dark, the perimeter was patrolled by adults.

By the age of twelve, I discovered a much better "unsanctioned" body of water. I looked for it on recent maps: it's still there, but it doesn't have a name. My friends and I knew it as Kasota Pond. It was small and filthy—no more than 50 yards in diameter—tucked into the scrubby woods between a little-used industrial road and the railroad tracks. There were signs that warned: CONTAMINATED: NO SWIMMING OR FISHING! We weren't foolish enough to swim in it. Having grown up on tales of three-headed fish in the nearby Mississippi River, we knew what contamination was.

There was an island in the middle of Kasota Pond that was *just* close enough that we were always plotting ways to reach it. According to neighborhood legend, Billy Wilson, one of the older boys, had once made a raft and floated out to the island. He

spent a night there, smoking cigarettes and lighting off firecrackers with his friends. A giant drainage tunnel that protruded from a concrete slab emptied into it, though we had no idea where it originated. I now realize it wasn't a natural pond, but a manmade waste dump. It was one of those magical childhood places—strictly the territory of children. The adults in our lives didn't know it existed, and the ones who did probably didn't like to acknowledge it did. Years later, working as a telephone fundraiser for environmental causes, I learned the term “Superfund site.” I remembered hearing the term applied to Kasota pond when I was a kid, only then I heard it then as “Super *Fun* site.”

Billy Wilson's legendary rafting adventure notwithstanding, our adventures there don't sound all that exciting in hindsight. We'd skip rocks. Play truth or dare. Craft fishing poles and miniature watercraft from sticks and garbage we found. Search for mutated wildlife. My brothers and I took a special delight in finding water-dwelling animals and keeping them in gallon ice cream buckets as unsanctioned pets. Our mother would make us release them after a couple of days, when the smell of painted turtle or crayfish (that's what we call crawfish up here in the Deep North) grew too strong to hide.

A few years later, my friends and I discovered the secret hidden places on the Mississippi River. The river has been the setting of many of the key moments in my life. I birthed my children in the University of Minnesota hospital on the west bank, and I may have even conceived my first-born in the woods directly across the river from it. I went to rehab in that same hospital. The group therapy room had a huge picture window that looked out onto the river and its bridges, cat walks, parks and woods, where I'd committed many of the shenanigans that landed me there. I'd spent nearly every waking

moment of my adolescence between the abandoned flour mills that stood on the banks of the river, the trestle bridges that crossed it, and in the steam tunnels that ran underneath it.

The steam tunnels were a labyrinthine system of brick-lined passageways that lay underneath the Mississippi River and the adjacent University of Minnesota campus. Their purpose, as far as my friends and I knew, had something to do with the university's heating system. We learned of them from the older neighborhood boys—Billy Wilson and his friends—when we got old enough to warrant their attention (read: smoke cigarettes with them, drink beer with them, and make out with them). Before they all left for college or ran away or went to prison, they passed down the secret route into the tunnels to us younger kids.

To get into the tunnels, we had to hike through the woods on the bank of the river to a hard-to-reach location where a drainage tunnel emptied. The older boys instructed us to always bring a flashlight, a gallon of water, a piece of chalk, and enough food and cigarettes for a whole day. It was probably eight feet in diameter, and we couldn't get to it when the water was high. In the pitch-dark tunnel, we had to wade through a hundred yards of knee-deep water. At the end, above the water, a sheet of plywood blocked the entrance to the tunnels. The gallon of water was to prevent dehydration: along one wall of the tunnels, ran a two-foot thick pipe that was hot enough to burn skin; it caused the air temperature to stay at around 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The flashlight was to see: the whole system was underground and completely dark. The chalk was to mark the way on the walls: there were a reputed eighteen miles of winding tunnels, with dozens of intersections, and even a lower level of sub-tunnels. It was easy to get lost in there.

The first time my friends and I went into the tunnels without the older boys, we figured out a few things they hadn't. For one, there were light switches inside that would turn on whole city-block lengths of tunnels. We wondered how they could have possibly missed them. We found both an exit and an entrance that didn't involve wading through a drainage pipe. The exit was through an elevator that went up to the east bank's university hospital. You had to have a maintenance key to go down through it, but we could get out virtually steps from the bus stop. The alternate entrance necessitated sneakiness. The tunnels were maintained by an industrial building on East River Road with tall smoke stacks on its roof. If we went after five p.m., we could get in through there while evading the workers. There was a trestle window near the door that could be pushed open, just big enough for the smallest of us to get inside and open the door for the rest of us. We then had to sneak down three levels without being seen and enter the tunnel system through a hatch in the floor. Somehow, we never got caught.

The best thing we discovered was a sandstone cave about a city block deep. We had to hike through a few miles of tunnels to get to its entrance, which we had to climb up a ladder to reach. The cave was the same width and height as the tunnels, but with rough sandstone walls. A string of light bulbs went all the way back to the end, but one there, we turned them off and lit candles instead so nobody would know we were in there. We knew what the older boys didn't: there could be workers lurking around, and they'd surely call the cops on us for trespassing. The best thing about the cave was that it was cool, even in the summer. We'd sit back there for hours in the dark and play truth or dare, which usually led to a boy and a girl being sent to a dark part of the cave to make out.

We'd smoke, carve our names into the walls, wrestle, make plans for new adventures. Nobody but us knew we were there. Before we left the neighborhood, we passed on our stream tunnel knowledge to the next set of adolescents. I wonder if kids are still playing there today. I doubt it.

I did end up finding the enchanted place from my early childhood dream. One spring when my children were little, we detoured off our normal route to look at the mansions of the Lowry Hill neighborhood. We came upon a tiny park on a triangular median. On it, there was a fountain of cascading pools. It was surrounded by crabapple trees in late bloom, and a breeze caused the pink petals to fly everywhere like a pink blizzard. Though it was only a few blocks from one of the intersections I traveled most, it had been more than twenty-five years since I'd seen it. I was stunned. I like to think I experienced something similar to Joyce Carol Oates in "Hyacinth Drift," or John Muir in "My First Summer in the Sierra."

I tried to explain to my kids that I'd spent nearly my whole life unsure of whether this place was real or just a dream. I don't think they understood why I was so awed. I took off my shoes and felt the grass on my toes, picked a bouquet of crabapple blossoms, and touched the fountain water with my hand. I asked my kids if they wanted to splash around in the fountain. My son looked around and said, "Mom, I don't think that's allowed."

On Mad Dog 20/20

I spent the prime of my young-adulthood accomplishing absolutely nothing. Living in abject squalor on the very margins of society, I drank a lot of fortified wines, colloquially known as “bum wines.” Such notorious vintages as Night Train, Thunderbird, Cisco, and Mad Dog 20/20 were popular among my peers. When I recall that period of my life, I can't understand why I felt such pure, undiluted bliss. It's the opposite of nostalgia, where one glorifies one's memories, viewing banal experiences through warm, fuzzy filter. My time as a Mad Dog drunk was filled with an indescribable fleeting joy, but I find it difficult to explain why, even to myself. My experience with bum wines began on the streets of Minneapolis, where my friends and I spent our adolescence drinking on the railroad tracks with homeless Vietnam vets. It ended in New Orleans during my own homeless experience as a gutter punk.

In the late 1990s, my friends and I slept in abandoned shotgun house full of bullet holes and cockroaches in the ninth ward—a squalid ghetto in the days before the big hurricane. Each morning, we'd pool our spare change to go to the corner bodega. We could buy a pint of Mad Dog 20/20—always “Red Grape” flavor, which had a higher alcohol content than the fruitier flavors like “Banana Red”—for two bucks, an order of cheese fries for a dollar, and a couple of single cigarettes for a quarter. Sometimes we could have bought many pints of Mad Dog at once, but we didn't. There was something

almost religious or ritualistic to the repeated lazy saunter to the bodega, counting out change on the counter, bestowing a smarmy smile at the scowling old Asian woman at the cash register, and cracking open the paper bag-sheathed bottle on the way out the door.

Nobody drinks bum wines because they taste good. They're a quick and dirty way to get wasted. They're rarely advertised in the conventional fashion. New devotees of bum wines are led to them through the epic tales spun by neighborhood vagrants. In fact, Thunderbird and Night Train, both bottled by Ernest and Julio Gallo Winery, aren't even listed on the company's website. Some of them have notorious reputations: Cisco is reputed to have been outlawed for mysterious reasons; some say it contained a secret ingredient that caused a kind of amphetamine psychosis. Wild Irish Rose is rumored to be the product of a Republican conspiracy to kill off the homeless. Mad Dog 20/20 enjoys a peerless personality, like an affable old hobo. I was dumbfounded when I recently learned that "Mad Dog" is *not* the given name of the drink, and is in fact not printed anywhere on the label and never has been. Its official name is MD 20/20. Since I learned it, I have relayed this fact to other Mad Dog drinkers who were equally astounded. No one in the history of Mad Dog has ever called it anything else.

New Orleans was the perfect place to be a Mad Dog drunk, and the perfect setting in which to be a gutter punk. Large swaths of New Orleans—even during my time there, before Hurricane Katrina—are crooked, sloppy, literally sinking into the swamps. Much of the city rests below sea level at the bottom of a geological bowl. Solid foundations are impossible, as evidenced by the cemeteries, where the dead must be encased in above ground tombs so as not to gradually float up from their graves each time the city floods,

which is often. Right angles are difficult to find there, as most of the man-made structures and infrastructures are tilted, rotting, crumbling, and half-eaten by an especially destructive species of termite.

The legendary reek of the gutter punk fits nowhere better than in New Orleans. The wet nature of the city gives it a complex, pungent smell like no other. The natural, earthy scent of rotting vegetation combines with the living, cold, somehow animal smell of the Mississippi river. Gutter punks are a filthy people; they sleep in squats without running water or electricity, so bathing isn't a priority even though their lifestyle is dirtier than most. Body odor combines with the smells of their daily activities: alcohol spilled on clothing, the more intimate bum-smell of alcohol emitted through pores, the tang of fevered boots-on sex, urine accidentally dribbled on a combat boot while leaning against a wall to piss, the scalp odor of dirty hair. A disdain for the perfumed products that normal people use to combat these smells is usual. After a while a gutter punk will begin to take on a smell that is more animal than man, a powerful miasma that, when one is acclimated to it, is neither pleasant nor repellant, at once more urban than farm animals and more wild than beasts.

There were a lot of squatters in New Orleans then. We were an orphan parade of runaways and dropouts with a thousand variations of partially shaved heads, shitty tattoos, and filthy clothing all faded and stained to a uniform shade of gray. We all looked different but the same, like the Confederate Army in their makeshift uniforms. In the evenings we would walk to the French Quarter to bum change and restaurant leftovers from the tourists. We never knew where our next meal was coming from, but we ate like

royalty: crawfish ettooufee or seafood gumbo from gourmet restaurants, coffee and beignets from Cafe Du Monde, surf and turf from any number of fine steakhouses. We ate so well, we even turned some meals down, like the brick-like, meat-heavy muffaletta sandwiches, a favorite of the tourists.

It alarms me now to realize that most of us were late-stage alcoholics, waking up each morning with DT's, also known as "the shakes." Almost all of us were under the age of twenty-five, but there were a few aging hangers-on, people who'd had mohawks in the 1980s and never grew up, people who had stayed out there so long that there was no way back. A cute nineteen-year-old with rings in her face and no resume can still taper off drinking hard liquor before noon, find work as a barista or a telemarketer or go to art school on Pell grants, and make a place for herself in normal society, but after a certain age, a person needs to have a past and a clean shirt to get by in the real world. An old friend of mine recently went back to New Orleans. She reported seeing several of our old cohorts, who even back then were approaching thirty, who had never left. They'd become leathery from age and exposure and spent their days wandering the streets in tattered rags, begging tourists for change, living out their days like feral dogs, their only comforts the old punk rock songs they hum to themselves in nostalgic desperation and the dependable constancy of their favorite bum wines.

The blog *Bumwine.com* honors fortified wines in all their notorious, disgusting, filthy glory. The section on Cisco reports, "Strawberry Cisco has a bouquet similar to that of Frankenberry cereal fermented in wine cooler with an added sprinkle of brandy for presentation. The sticky, sickingly [sic] sweet taste with a hint of antifreeze really comes

through in the repellant taste of Cisco.”

After about five years of squatting, the allure of gutter punk life wore off for me. Today, I prefer middle-shelf pinot noirs or the occasional gourmet martini. I enjoy watching PBS and eating steamed vegetables, and I can't stand to sleep anywhere but my own bed. I disdain loud drunks more than almost anything else. My partner, who I met back then in a New Orleans squat, is more nostalgic about those days than I am. He blasts old angry punk rock while he cleans the house, and I often can't figure out why I ever liked it. He still enjoys the occasional rip-roaring alcohol binge. I can't join him, but I understand the appeal. Our time as squatters and Mad Dog drunks was a rare experience. We were too young to feel the physical pain of alcohol dependence, sleeping on the ground, and fortified wine-induced gut rot, and we were too naive to be worried about long-term consequences. The danger, sex, and freedom made the lifestyle glamorous.

To be a Mad Dog drunk is to have no regard for the past or the future. Though alcohol normally dulls the senses, bum wine makes one feel alive. There's something almost luxurious the absolute freedom, the utter filth, and the riotous instability one feels on a bum wine binge. It's a fleeting, almost magical sensation that I don't expect to ever feel again. Sitting on a curb, drinking from a pint of Mad Dog wrapped in a paper bag, joyfully smashing the empty bottles in the gutter with no regard for law and order, having rough sex with dirty boys in semi-public places: these are experiences that I do not regret, yet do not wish to revisit. I hoped back then to never lose that ability to live fully for the moment, but I knew it wouldn't last. And thank god for that. If it had, I'd be dead by now.

Daily Grind

I tumble into the dressing room of the strip club bundled up to the chin against the February cold, lungs burning from puffing a smoke in below-zero air on my way to work. The club is tropical by comparison. I tear off my scarf, mittens, coat, and hand-me-down men's snow boots. My socks are mismatched and crusty, my hair is stringy, my armpits are sweaty.

I like to think I don't quite fit in here like the other girls do. I was twenty-five when I started stripping, unlike most of the girls, who were eighteen, sometimes younger. With half a bachelor's degree, I'm relatively educated. I vote. I read books for pleasure. I wasn't sexually abused as a child. I'm a feminist (in theory if not in practice; this job is a temporary fluke). I don't come from a trailer park.

I am, however, here for the easy money, like everyone else. One day, when I've hung up my stripper shoes and moved on to a clothed career, I'll realize that I'm not superior to the natural born strippers. I'm worse. I'm a heroin addict. I'm so desperate for money, my core values and convictions have gone soft, but my perception of myself hasn't caught up with my reality yet. Most of my coworkers are more genuine than that. They know who they are, what they do, and they *own* it. I'm only a stripper when I'm here, when I'm in (or out of) costume and people call me by my stage name, Entropy. When I'm off the clock, I still call myself a student even though I dropped out of college

two years ago. I call myself a writer even though I pawned my computer and lost all my files. I don't even keep a journal. I tell people I work as a cocktail waitress. My actual work duties are an intangible concept, a morbid shame.

One of my colleagues, Sparkle, clops out of the dressing room toilet stall on her six-inch, red plastic platform stiletto heels. She turns her back to the full-length mirror, bends at the waist, and spreads her bronzed ass cheeks apart. "Can you see my tampon string?" she asks. Her body is strangely un-mammalian; every inch of her smooth, plasticky skin is the same Malibu Barbie shade of beige as the little glass bottle of foundation makeup on the counter next to her purse. Her vulva is only slightly more detailed than that of an actual Barbie doll: devoid of hair follicles, all the intricate inner parts neatly hidden by the peachlike cleft of her labia majora, one end of which is punctuated by a clean pink pucker.. It's difficult to imagine that her vagina belongs to a living organism at all, that it smells like anything other than a new My Little Pony doll or a box of crayons, that it is, in fact, even an orifice, much less that it requires a tampon.

"Nope. You're good," I say, wiping the thaw-snot from my still-red nose. I imagine that Sparkle should have seams where her legs attach, that I could pop them off to find not bones and ligaments, but injection-molded little knobs that fit into her hollow pelvis. Sparkle and I exist on opposite ends of the spectrum of sex-kittenness. None of our colleagues are quite as airbrushed as she is, neither are they quite as awkward, knobby, scarred, or sweaty as I am.

The throbbing techno bass of Sparkle's song, "Smack My Bitch Up," rises from the stage below. For good measure, she spritzes herself with coconut body spray and

scampers down the spiral stairs to the stage.

It's six o'clock on a Tuesday. The dressing room is littered with the trappings of false beauty: curling irons and flat irons and push-up bras and thong panties; makeup cases overflowing with hundreds of garish, glittery lipsticks and eyeshadows; a dozen brands of a dozen shades of industrial-strength concealers; satin bustiers and spandex tube dresses; wigs and extensions farmed from poor Hindu girls on the other side of the world; designer-knockoff purses and faux-fur coats slung over the backs of chairs. The smell of Aqua Net, Marlboros, and Bacardi poorly mask the digestive stink of thirty girls who eat nothing but cheap takeout.

I prepare for my first stage set. Five days a week, I sit in this dressing room and wish I could snap my fingers and be done with the hair, makeup, and costumes. It's exhausting. My first week here, the mid-spectrum girls (the only-slightly-airbrushed ones), saw me struggling with my limp hair, barebones makeup routine, and banal underwear, and they made me over—not out of camaraderie or goodwill, but out of pity and boredom. I was so pathetic, I posed no threat to them, even after they tarted me up with hair extensions and cat eyes. They didn't realize I'd keep coming back, that the ever-present specter of opiate withdrawal would prompt me to learn to hustle like a pro in a matter of weeks.

I strip off my jeans, tee shirt, and crusty socks. I rip a brush through my hair, which is still stringy from the cycle of sweating, freezing, and thawing under layers of wool during my commute through the snow. I swipe on eyeliner and comb mascara through my lashes. I accidentally blink, depositing a line of mascara dots under my eye. I

curse and wipe it off, which smudges the eyeliner so I have to start all over again. This is a nearly daily routine. I dig in my locker for the cleanest g-string I can find and scrub it out in the sink, hang it on a chair and point Sparkle's hair dryer at it. While it dries I put on lipstick the color of Sriracha sauce; it looks perfect until I smoke a cigarette, then it gets everywhere—on my teeth, on my fingers, in my hair. This is why I wear black (well, that, and because it softens the angle of my weird square hips). Over the still-damp g-string, I throw on a pair of black lace cheekies and a tiny black tank top that says “Bob's Java Hut” on the front. I sip from the discreet half-pint of gin in my locker and pull on fishnet sleeves to cover my track marks.

I still look like myself, mostly (well, maybe like myself trying to look like I did at age sixteen, lying under the covers of my boyfriend's single mattress on the floor of his mother's basement while I wait for him to swipe some rubbers from his big sister's purse), until I slip on my eight-inch pink platform stripper shoes. The shoes are the most important part of the costume, the part that transforms a normal woman into a commodity, into walking sex. When I put on the shoes, the rectangular column of my boylike frame is suddenly forced into feminine curves. The body undergoes an instantaneous chain reaction in high heels: the leg muscles are pulled taut, tugging on the connective tissue of the pelvic bone, which tilts the hips down and the ass up, which causes the spine to arch, which forces the shoulders to seek balance by adjusting back and down, which pushes the tits out, causing their fatty tissue to strain against the acetate bra cups and spill over the top in a fabulous display of cleavage. I am instant porn.

Before necessity prompted me to take this job, I could never imagine myself

doing it. I've always been awkward, self-conscious, graceless, and oddly masculine. I was painfully introverted, especially when it came to physical appearance. I could barely wear lipstick or a skirt. I certainly couldn't dance—not even a little. I'd analyze every social interaction, every implicit gesture, because I was convinced I was freakishly defective, both inside and out, and I had to keep up the facade of normalcy. But I took to this job with surprising alacrity. Years later, I'll wonder if I could have picked it up so effortlessly if I hadn't needed the money so badly. I'll tell myself it wasn't just the fear of withdrawal, that it was years of repressed sexual energy being unleashed at once, or that it was the freedom of having permission to turn off my brain and live in my body. But I'll always wonder if I could have done it if I didn't have to get good at it to prevent bone-crushing, skin-crawling, puking, shitting, bedridden withdrawal.

We each have our thing: Lacy, two-time regional champion of Pole-lympics, is the undefeated pole-trick master among us. Jasmine is the white girl with a black girl's butt. LaMay is known for her vintage pubic hair; most of the girls tease her, but she's got the market for full bush cornered. Summer, at forty-two years old, is the seasoned pro. I'm the tall girl. Most tall women, both in and out of strip clubs, prefer low heels, but I wear the tallest. In them, I'm almost six-and-a-half feet tall. I command attention in the simplest way, in the way I have since third grade: by sticking up higher, like a mutant corn stalk or a lightning rod. During my first two weeks here, I hobbled around on these shoes like a crippled giraffe, but now I can run, skip, and jump in them. The skinny stiletto heel is an extension of my tibia and fibula; the impossibly small sole is the ball of my own foot, balanced by my own metatarsals. The slope of the insole is so steep, my

stripper footprint is a mere five inches long, about half the length of my actual size-ten.

Sparkle's stage set is over. The raspy, classic-rock radio voice of the deejay announces Entropy on stage next. I run down the stairs, sneaking a quick whiff of my armpits on the way (a little ripe, but nothing I can do about it now). Only one customer sits at the counter in front of the brass pole, a guy from India with a neat little stack of ones and a compulsory nine-dollar Coke. I clop across the stage (the plastic platforms of stripper shoes are hollow, so they make a distinctly horselike sound on hard surfaces), taking measured, long steps that make my hips switch theatrically. I don't dance—I never have and I never will; in fact, stripping has nothing to do with dancing. I do a few lazy pole tricks and slip off my top. I step off the stage onto the floor and slide the customer's coke over. This one's classy—he doesn't flinch protectively when I move his stack of ones, like I'm going to snatch his ten bucks in ones without earning it. I climb over the counter, straddle his chair, and press his face into my chest. He smells like caraway seeds and dandruff shampoo.

Some of the girls do well with the young obnoxious guys, the ones who come late on Saturday nights for bachelor parties, who “make it rain” dollar bills so they can pretend they're in a rap video. My bread-and-butter customers are the quiet guys, the ones who come alone and sober straight from the office. They hand out dollar bills to the girls on stage only because it's proper strip club etiquette, a dollar at a time. Unlike the bachelor party boys, though, they discretely spend hundreds of dollars on private dances and hope no one finds out.

I climb the pole and hang upside down, held up only by the friction of my skin on

the brass. Other than the spotlight disco ball over the stage, which I could touch with my toe from this position, the club is lit only with red and black lights. The lighting is part of the deception; it obscures flaws that makeup, wigs, and spandex can't hide, like the leathery texture of Summer's compulsively-tanned skin; the glue that holds Cinnamon's weave on; Diamond's perpetual bruises, courtesy of her "boyfriend" (pimp); Lacy's still-healing breast implant incisions; and the vein-shaped scars that radiate from the crooks of my elbows. It's as dead as it always is at dinner hour on a Tuesday. On the couches in the VIP area, one girl naps, another reads a tabloid, and a third eats a gyro. A customer at a table in back pays no attention to anything but his cell phone. Still here after the day shift, Felony collects her fee from her weekly regular.

The manager counts the till at the bar and barks orders at the fat waitress. Like our state governor, Jesse Ventura, he spent his glory days as a pro wrestler. It makes sense that he'd end up here; pro wrestling is to violence what stripping is to sex: staged, melodramatic, spandex-clad, and pure fantasy. It's not hard to picture him then, flexing his once-sculpted torso and yelling theatrically into a microphone about how he'll tear his opponent apart. Now, in his forties, he's balding, overweight, and barrel-chested, but, also like our state governor, he still has the pro-wrestler demeanor: loud and coarse with a hint of blue-collar "Minne-*soh*-dah." He routinely says things that would get him sued in any other profession, things like, "Damn, girl. You need to lay off the Krispy Kremes!" He teases the black girls: "What's your man's name again, Coco? Devandre? Jerome? Davarius? You know you're my favorite nappy-headed ho." But he has a preternatural charisma that disarms people when they should be offended. He gets away with it

because he's real; he's exactly what he appears to be. The black girls return his remarks with winks and smiles. The insults and sexist quips are met with giggles and kisses on the cheek, or return insults, which he absorbs with something akin to grace. He appears briefly in a chapter of Diablo Cody's stripping memoir, *Candy Girl*, which one of my coworkers showed him shortly after it was published. He was visibly hurt by Cody's description of him as a racist on the verge of a heart attack. The book, for which Cody claims to have stripped for a year at various clubs around Minneapolis purely for the sake of writing about it, put off a lot of sex workers. To us, she was an outsider, an amateur, and an exploiter. She infiltrated our world to mock us for the entertainment of her readers.

I gracefully fold myself down from my the pole and back to an upright position—a praying-mantislike move I won't even understand the mechanics of a decade from now—and slide off my g-string. The club enforces strict rules regarding nudity: we have to be on the stage and out of the customers' reach when we take our bottoms off, but it's mandatory to take them off—all the way off, not just pulled down to the knees—during every stage set, without exception. The manager always says, “These people pay to see *pussy*.”

I see Chloe leading a customer out of a private booth by his tie. Chloe is sexy, but not pretty. She's thirty-seven and has cartoonishly big tits, the kind that are meant to look fake. She bought them so long ago that the skin around the grotesque, hardened balls looks webbed. Her mouth is ringed by scowl lines, which match her tough-bitch stage persona. Everyone says she gives hand jobs in the private booths (that's *her* thing), and

that's why she routinely makes five times more money than the rest of us. Hand jobs are illegal, of course (the law says we're not allowed to make contact with the customers at all in the private booths), but so is the standard private dance we give here, which basically amounts to dry-humping.

Inexplicably, there are two kinds of customers who like me: Engineers and computer programmers and . A disproportionate number of them are from India. According to one guy, it's because I resemble a certain Bollywood star. As my set ends, I climb down into the customer's lap. "So, are you a computer programmer?" I say.

"Software engineer," he says, confused.

"Let's go have some fun." I take him by the hand and bring him to a private booth. I make him show me his credit card. It's important to make sure the customer has money before giving him a private lap dance. As independent contractors, we're responsible for the club's portion—one third of the lap dance fees, plus a flat fee per shift—whether or not we collect our money from the customers. Contrary to popular opinion, private dances comprise ninety-nine percent of our earnings; the money we collect on stage is negligible. The manager always says, "Get your money *before* you ride cock." But nothing kills a boner like a trip to the ATM, so I prefer to use my best judgment and collect later. Software engineers are relatively honest, anyway, and they always seem to have an accurate idea of their bank account balances.

Like Chloe with her hand jobs, we all have secret techniques in the private booths. Sparkle, for example, is so small she climbs up their chests and straddles their necks. Mandy puts her head in their laps and blows warm breath through their pants. My

secret technique is kissing. I kiss almost every customer. Full-on on the mouth, with tongue. Apparently, kissing is a rarity in the sex-work industry. Aspiring sex workers see sullen hookers in movies and TV saying, "I do *anything* . . . except kiss," and they think that's how it's supposed to be. But I don't care. Because I'm in constant denial about my reality, I won't admit that I do it, even to myself, until years later. It's not that the act of kissing is distasteful to me; I've never been the type who reserves kisses for that special someone (that's what blow jobs are for). I like kissing, and I'm good at it. I'm not grossed out by onion breath or bad teeth or chapped lips. But something about kissing customers offends my cognitively-dissonant sense of values, so I never speak of it. It makes me uneasy to acknowledge it, so every time, the moment I step out of the booth, I forget it happened. It's not strictly legal, but that doesn't bother me as much as knowing that my partner would be heartbroken, my family would be appalled, and my coworkers would hiss behind my back about my violation of the rules, like they do to Chloe. They hiss even though nearly all of them violate the rules in some way, so I'll wonder one day whether cognitive dissonance is the default mechanism for sex workers.

My deepest shame, though, is that I don't like to think of myself as the kind of person who enjoys kissing strangers for money, that I actually am good at this job, not because I need the money, but because I have no sense of sexual propriety. Deep inside, I worry that I *do* fit in here, that I'm no different from Chloe or Sparkle, that the manager's shockingly unfeminist remarks don't really bother me in this context. That Entropy isn't just a wholly manufactured persona, but a genuine part of me.

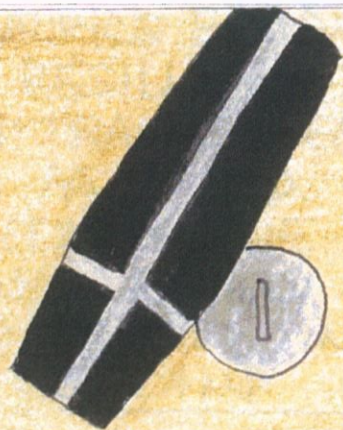
In the private booth, the software engineer kisses me back, at first inhaling the

kisses greedily, then later—when he realizes it's not an error in his favor, that he can have kisses on tap for as long as he can pay for them—he relaxes into it. He accepts the whole range of kiss varieties that I have in stock: whisper soft lip grazing, light tongue contact, wet smooches on his neck, ear lobe nibbles. Our foreheads touch while my lips hover millimeters from his, both of us breathing a little faster like we're enjoying it. I am. He definitely is. Two hundred dollars later, he has to cash out. I give him a hug and tell him to come see me again. I'm pretty sure I cleaned out his wallet until Chloe grabs him and whispers into his ear. He avoids looking at me and follows her back to the booths like a naughty puppy.

After the last customer leaves, I go up to the dressing room with my colleagues. We fling off our shoes, becoming instantly shorter and plainer, reverting back to our human forms (except for Sparkle, whose pedicured feet stay permanently arched, like Barbie's. I imagine that, instead of calling a cab and going home to an apartment after work, she is tucked back into a giant Matel box, her wrists and ankles anchored in their places with twist ties, where she looks unblinkingly through the plastic panel until her shift starts tomorrow). We wipe off our lipstick; the trash can looks like a hundred poppies growing from a dirty snowbank. We replace g-strings and garter belts with cotton briefs and gym socks. We remove wigs and fake eyelashes and don sweatpants and tee shirts. We burp and fart, and we let our tampon strings hang free, like they were meant to do. We unplug our curling irons, wash our faces, count money, and smoke. We slam our lockers and race down the spiral stairs to the stage, where the fluorescent overhead lights are on and the fat waitress wipes our sweat off brass pole with a bar towel and a spray

bottle of ammonia. We pull on mittens, gloves, and hats, and we wind scarves around our faces; there is a veritable mountain of crocheted wool between us. We tie the muddy laces on our waterproof, subzero boots while the manager waits to collect his share of our money. After we pay out, we tip him (and the waitress and the bartender and the bouncer) not because we appreciate their services—they make our jobs harder, not easier—but because they'll make our lives hell tomorrow if we don't. We wave goodbye to each other as we get into cabs and head back to our ghettos/trailer parks/cul-de-sacs/gated communities/condos—"later girl, be safe, take care"—though we don't really care. We don't even know each others' real names.

The ride home is a sort of identity purgatory between Entropy and the various facets of my "real" self. I coyly answer the Somali cab driver's curious questions about my job. I ask him about his homeland before the civil war—he was an engineer in Addis Ababa. He doesn't judge me when I have him go through the pharmacy drive-through window so I can buy syringes. I tip him extravagantly, then save the rest of my earnings for my dope dealer.



• Kids Need •



TRAUMA



AUG

10,000 lakes

83

A GRAPHIC
NARRATIVE

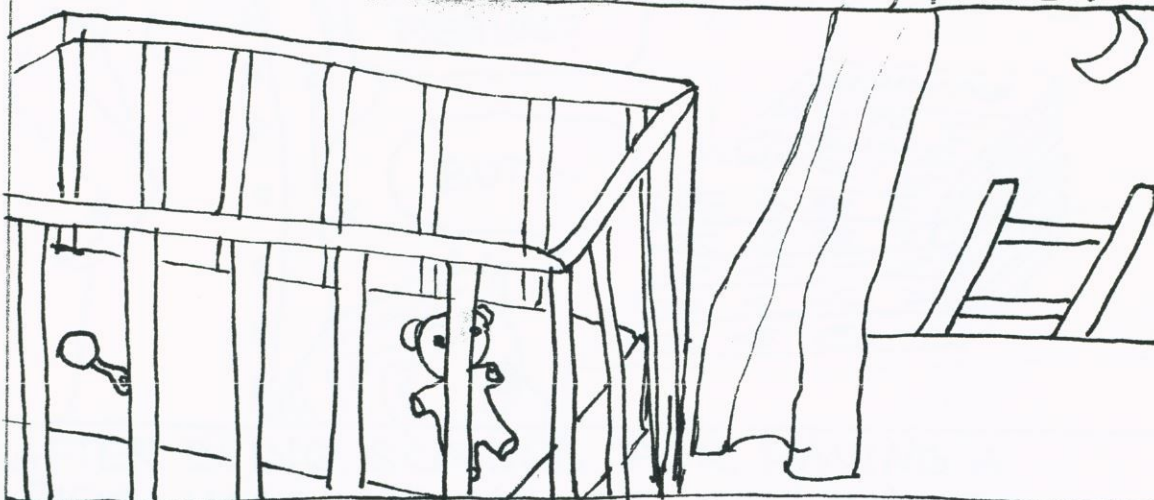
by Heidi Fuhr



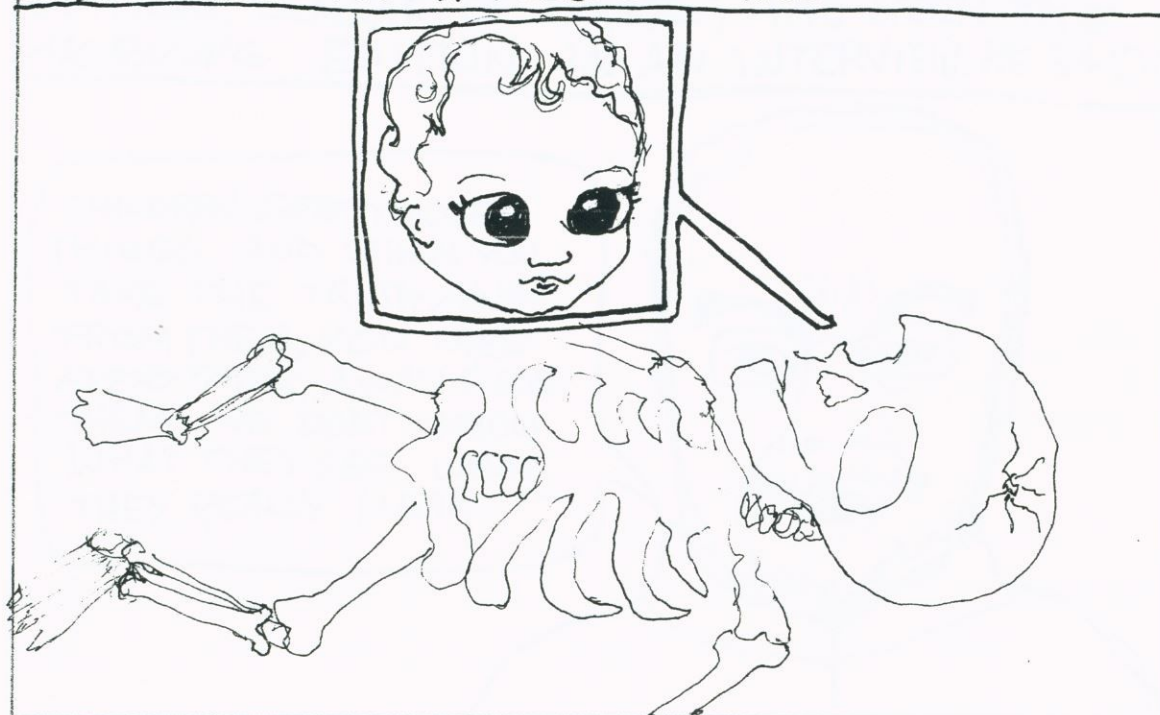
THE LATE MAURICE SENDAK OFTEN TALKED ABOUT THE RESILIENCE OF CHILDREN IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA. SENDAK HIMSELF WAS TRAUMATIZED AS A KID. ON THE DAY OF HIS BAR MITZVAH, HE LEARNED THAT HIS PATERNAL FAMILY IN EUROPE HAD ALL BEEN KILLED IN A NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMP



AS A SMALL CHILD, SENDAK WAS TERRIFIED BY THE NEWS OF THE LINDBERGH BABY KIDNAPPING. IF A GENTILE BABY COULD BE SNATCHED FROM ITS UPSCALE FAMILY HOME, WHAT CHANCE DID HE, A POOR JEWISH KID FROM BROOKLYN, HAVE?



AFTER THE LINDBERGH BABY'S CORPSE WAS FOUND, SENDAK WAS OUT SHOPPING WITH HIS MOTHER WHEN HE SAW THE HORRIFIC CRIME-SCENE PHOTO AT A NEWS STAND.

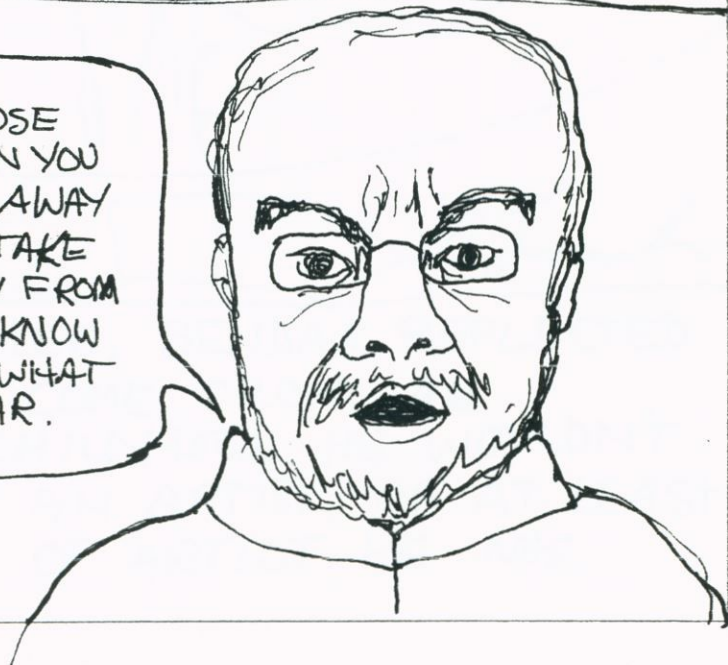


HE TRIED TO SHOW HIS MOTHER WHAT HE'D SEEN, BUT BY THE TIME SHE LOOKED, IT WAS GONE.

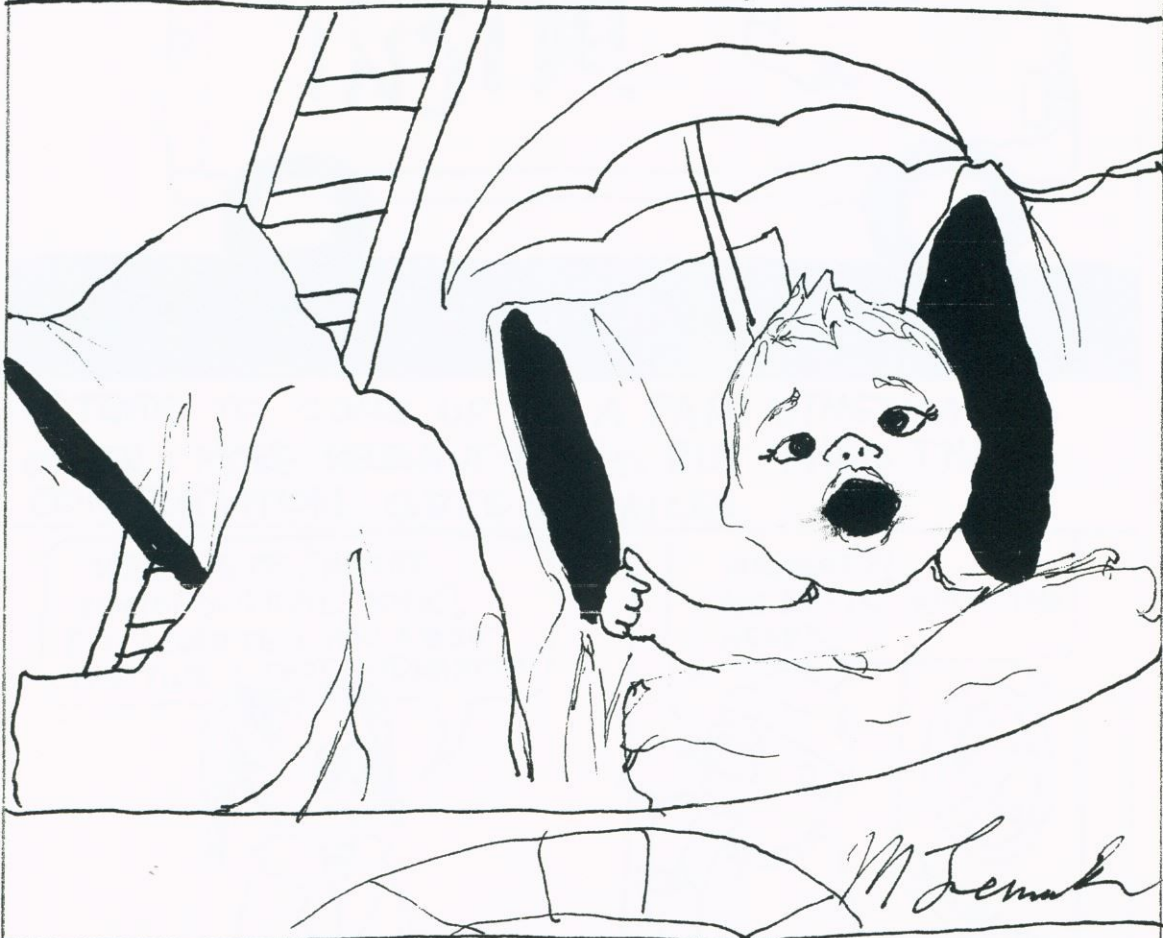


AFTER BEING SCOLDED FOR HAVING A SICK IMAGINATION, HE CONVINCED HIMSELF HE WAS CRAZY. MANY YEARS LATER, HE FOUND OUT THAT THE PHOTO HAD BEEN OMITTED FROM THE PAPER'S EVENING EDITION. SENDAK, OF COURSE, HAD SEEN THE MORNING EDITION. IN AN INTERVIEW, HE SAID:

CHILDREN SEE THOSE THINGS. AND WHEN YOU TAKE THE TRUTH AWAY FROM THEM, YOU TAKE EVERYTHING AWAY FROM THEM. WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY SEE WHAT THEY REALLY HEAR.



THE HORROR OF THE KIDNAPPING STAYED ETCHED IN SENDAK'S MEMORY FOR HIS WHOLE LIFE. IT INSPIRED ONE OF HIS BOOKS. OUTSIDE OVER THERE IS THE STORY OF A BABY WHO IS ABDUCTED BY NAMELESS, FACELESS GOBLINS. THE BOOK ENTHRALLED KIDS AND ADULTS ALIKE, WINNING A NATIONAL BOOK AWARD AND A CALDECOT MEDAL.



BEFORE HE DIED, SENDAK REFLECTED THAT IF HE'D COME FROM AN UNTRoubLED CHILDHOOD, HE WOULDN'T HAVE BECOME AN ARTIST, OR AT LEAST NOT THE KIND OF ARTIST HE WAS.

WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, I GOT KIDNAPPED BY A STRANGER. I DON'T THINK ABOUT IT MUCH AND I RARELY TALK ABOUT IT. WHEN I DO BRING IT UP, IT'S MORE OF A CURIOUS CONVERSATION PIECE THAN A TRAUMATIC CONFESSION.



IT TENDS TO COME UP AS A PARENTHETICAL TO OTHER, MORE RELEVANT TOPICS. BUT THEN THE CONVERSATION GETS DERAILED.

SPEAKING OF [INSERT SOCIOPOLITICAL TOPIC], DID I EVER TELL YOU ABOUT THE TIME I GOT KIDNAPPED?



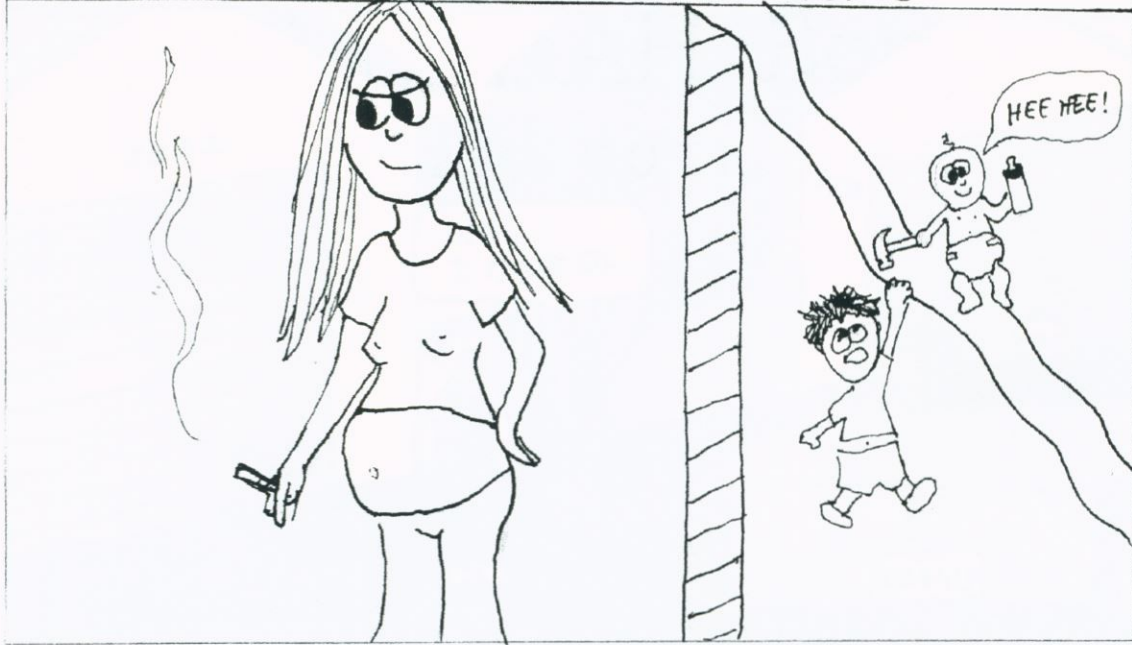
WHAAAT?! NO EFFIN' WAY, MAN! HEAVY.



HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED: IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1983. MY MOTHER HAD GONE TO THE GROCERY STORE AND I COULDN'T WAIT FOR HER TO RETURN WITH THE GOODIES. I WAITED FOR HER IN THE ALLEY BEHIND OUR HOUSE.



IT WASN'T UNUSUAL IN THOSE DAYS FOR SMALL CHILDREN TO GO UNSUPERVISED. EVERYONE WAS A LOT LESS HIGH-STRUNG THEN, ESPECIALLY PARENTS

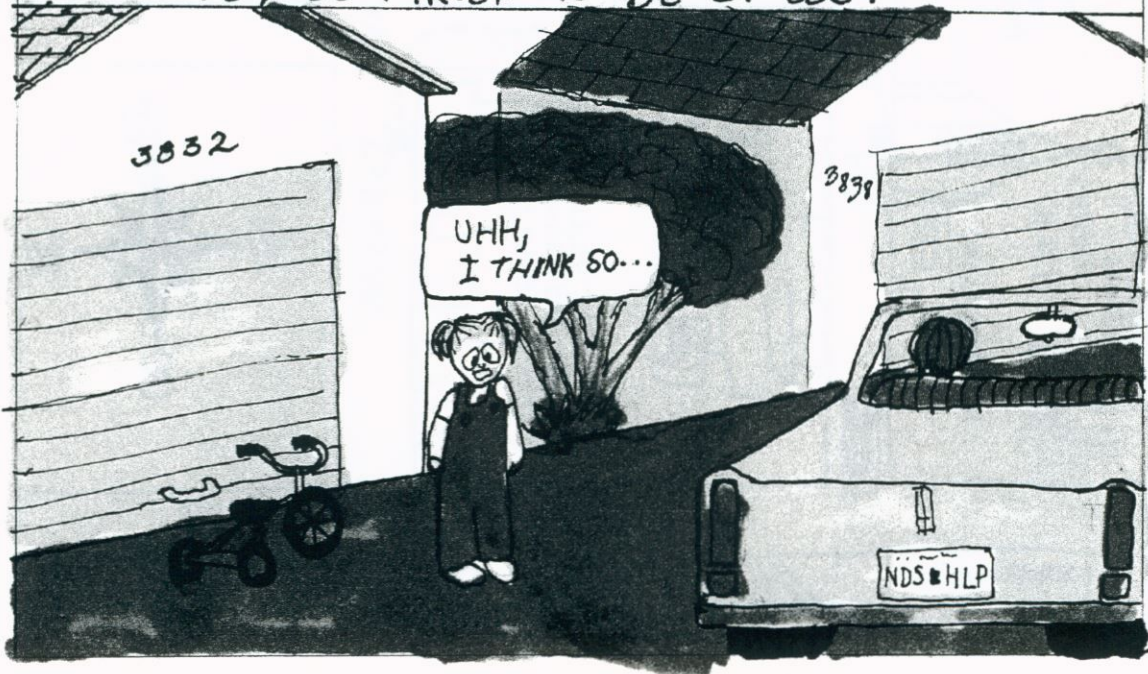


OKAY, SO MY KIDNAPPER WASN'T THE CLICHÉD CREEP-IN-A-VAN OFFERING FREE CANDY, BUT HE WAS PRETTY DAMN CLOSE. HE PULLED INTO THE ALLEY AND STOPPED TO ASK ME A QUESTION:

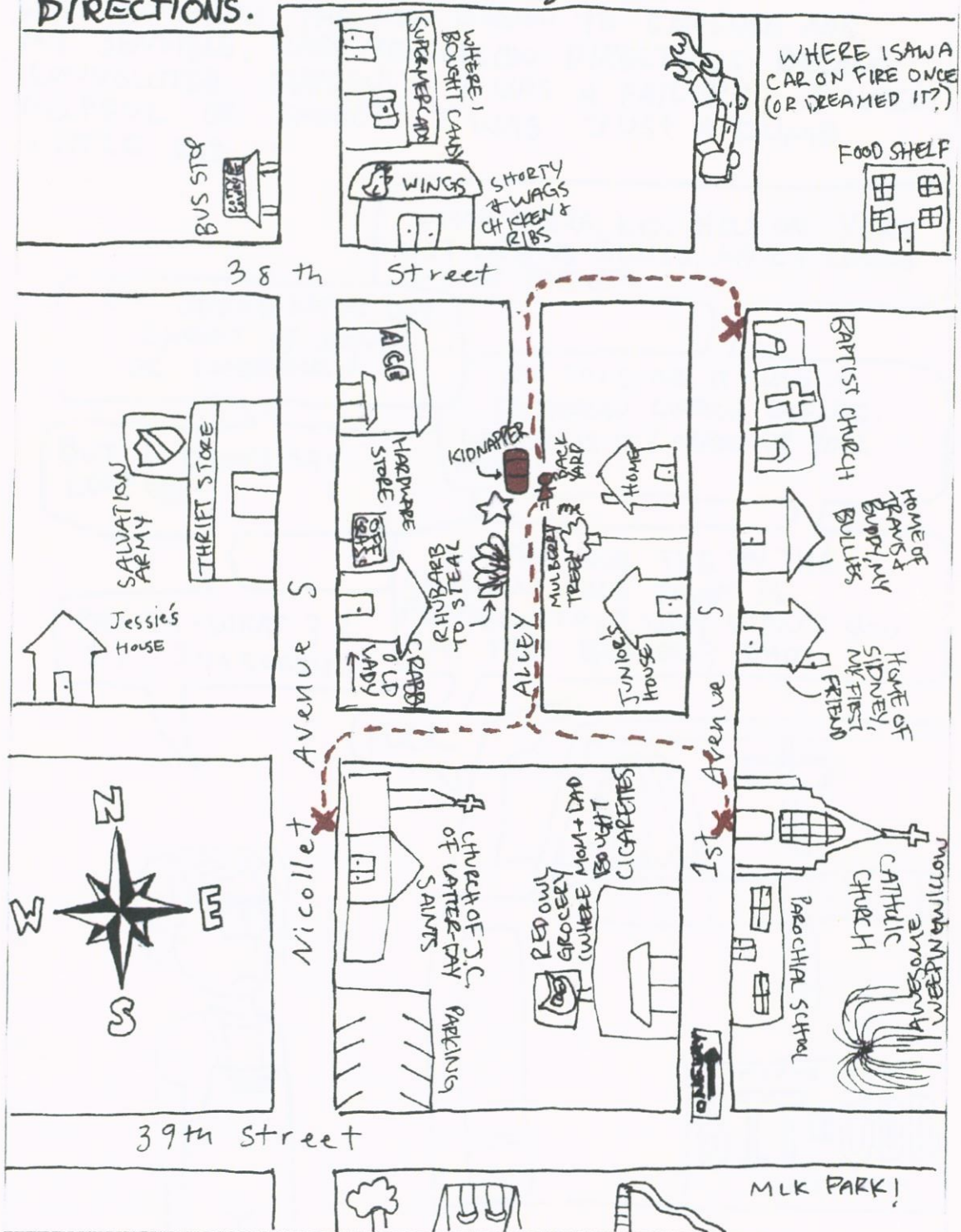
HEY, LITTLE GIRL.
WHERE'S THE NEAREST
CATHOLIC CHURCH?



OF COURSE, I DIDN'T KNOW FROM CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS WHEN I WAS FIVE. BUT, LIKE A TYPICAL SMALL CHILD, I WAS EAGER TO PLEASE ADULTS. I'M SURE HE KNEW AND COUNTED ON THAT. I CONSIDERED MYSELF TO BE A WORLDLY SOPHISTICATE OF SORTS, SO I TRIED TO BE OF USE.



IN THE 1980'S, CHILDREN EXPLORED THEIR SURROUNDINGS SO I DID KNOW WHERE SOME OF THE LANDMARKS WERE. I KNEW THAT MY NEIGHBORHOOD WAS LOUSY WITH CHURCHES, SO I TRIED TO GIVE DIRECTIONS.



THEN IT TURNED SCARY.

APPARENTLY, I WASN'T AS SOPHISTICATED AS I THOUGHT I WAS. SOMEHOW, THE MAN BEGAN TO CONFUSE ME. MY SENSIBLE, EASY-TO-FOLLOW DIRECTIONS BECAME CONVOLUTED. SUDDENLY, I WAS A FAILURE. I WASN'T HELPFUL OR SMART. I WAS JUST A DUMB LITTLE KID.

WHOA THERE, KID. HOLD ON. YOU'RE NOT MAKING SENSE. WHICH CHURCH IS OVER THERE?

UM... JESUS LATER DAY. CHRIST OF JANTA... OR SOMETHING?

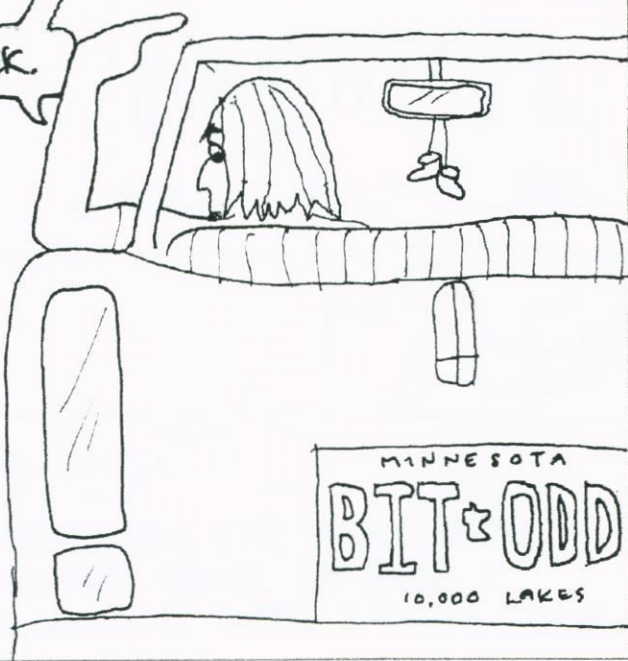
YOU TOLD ME IT WAS A LUTHERAN CHURCH BEFORE. WHICH IS IT? MAKE UP YOUR MIND!

BUT I DIDN'T SAY LOOFER-

SO THE ONE THE BY THE CHICKEN WING JOINT IS PENTECOSTAL? WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY THAT BEFORE? SHIT.

PENTA-WHAT?? I... I'M SORRY.

FUCK.



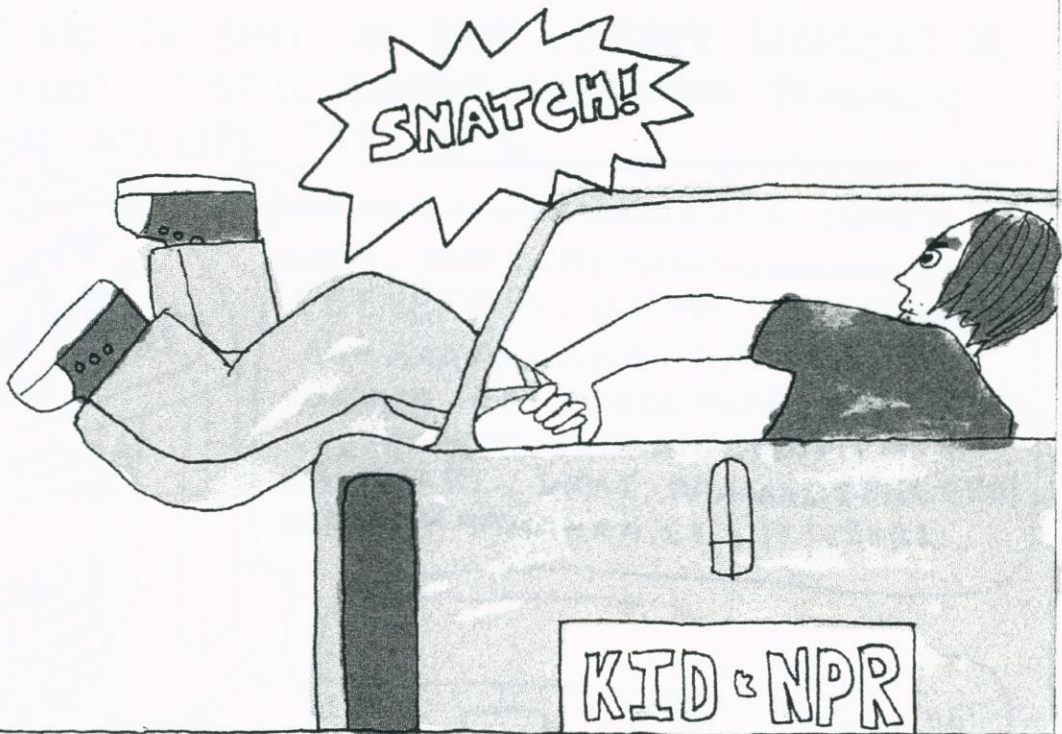
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT ENDED UP BEING MY GREATEST CHILDHOOD REGRET. IT WAS THE LAST MOMENT THAT I HAD A CHOICE ...

COME CLOSER.

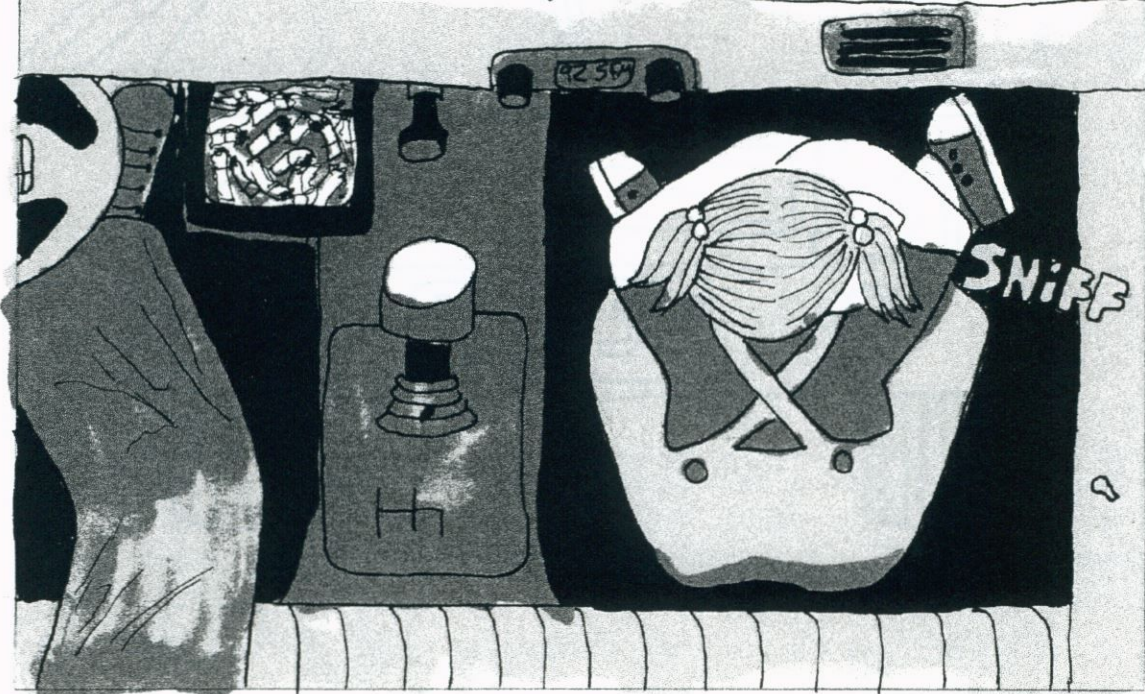


AND I CHOSE WRONG. I OBEYED HIM FOR YEARS AFTER, I DIDN'T ADMIT MY PART IN THE CRIME. IN FACT, I HAD NEVER TOLD ANYONE ABOUT IT UNTIL I WROTE THIS.

AFTER THAT, IT WAS MOSTLY A BLUR. THERE ARE A FEW THINGS I REMEMBER.



HE MADE ME GET DOWN ON THE PASSENGER'S SEAT FLOOR. I DON'T BELIEVE I HAD A CHOICE OF WHETHER OR NOT TO OBEY THIS TIME.



ALL I REMEMBER AFTER THAT IS LOOKING AT THE FLOOR MAT AND SCREAMING. HE TRIED TO GET ME TO SHUT UP, BUT I EITHER WOULDN'T OR COULDN'T. I STILL BELIEVE SCREAMING PROBABLY SAVED MY LIFE THAT DAY.



WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA H! I.. GULP...
WANT... SNIFF... MY MOMMMMMMMME -
EEEEEEEEEE! LET ME GOOO! WAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH! I
WANNA GO HOOOOOME! MOM... MA
... MOM CHOKED ME EEEEE! I...
WA.. GULP... WANT... DAAAADEEEEEEE!
NOOOO! HAAAAAAAA LLLP! SOB...

SHHH!
KNOCK THAT
OFF!

MON & STR

N.R.A.
♥

OSTENSIBLY, MY SCREAMING THREATENED TO GET HIM BUSTED. HE ASKED ME WHAT MY ADDRESS WAS (THANKFULLY, I KNEW IT) AND DROPPED ME OFF IN THE PARKING LOT OF THE RED OWL GROCERY STORE,* BY THE DUMPSTERS. IT DIDN'T OCCUR TO ME TO GET HELP FROM THE NEAREST ADULT; THE STORE WAS A BLOCK AWAY FROM HOME, SO I WALKED, ACCORDING TO MY MOTHER (MY OWN MEMORY OF GETTING HOME IS BLANK).



* THE RED OWL WAS FAMILIAR TERRITORY. MY PARENTS USED TO SEND ME AND MY BIG BROTHER, WHO WAS SEVEN, TO THE RED OWL TO BUY THEIR CIGARETTES. THIS WAS ALSO NOT UNUSUAL THEN, AT LEAST AMONGST THE LOWER-MIDDLE CLASS. THE CASHIERS WOULD TAKE A NOTE IN PLACE OF PHOTO I.D.

ACCORDING TO MY FEEBLE, PRECOGNITIVE CONCEPT OF TIME, I'D ONLY BEEN GONE FOR ABOUT TWENTY MINUTES, BUT MY PARENTS CLAIM I HAD BEEN MISSING FOR HOURS. I DO CLEARLY REMEMBER EXPLAINING WHERE I'D BEEN. AT FIRST, I TRIED TO LIE. I RECALL AN INTENSE FEELING OF SHAME AND COMPLICITY.

HEIDI ANN! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

UM, I WAS AT SYDNEY'S?

DON'T LIE TO ME! I CHECKED SYDNEY'S, AND THE PARK, AND I DROVE AROUND THE WHOLE NEIGHBORHOOD!

I... UM... ~~SNIFFS~~...
MOMMA, A MAN TOOK ME! ~~SOBS~~

WHAAT?!?
I'M CALLING THE POLICE!



* YES, MY DAD HAD AN Afro.
HIS NATURAL HAIR WAS STRAIGHT,
BUT HE'D GOTTEN A PERM. (IN THE
LATE 1970S, HE'D ALSO OWNED
A VAN WITH A BLACK POWER
FIST PAINTED ON THE SIDE).

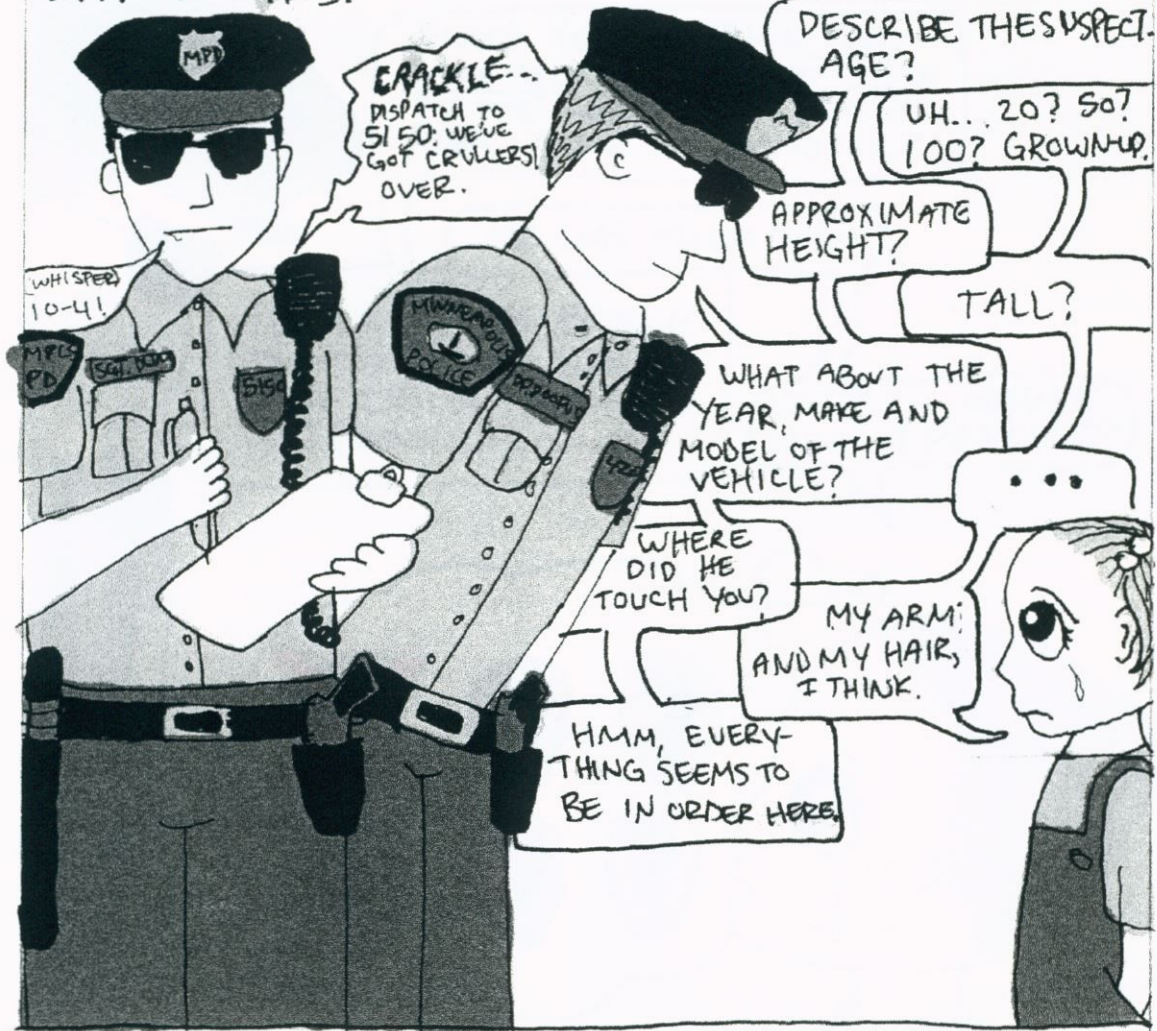
THE POLICE INVESTIGATION WAS NOTHING LIKE YOU'D IMAGINE FROM WATCHING LAW AND ORDER: SVU.

DUN-DUN!



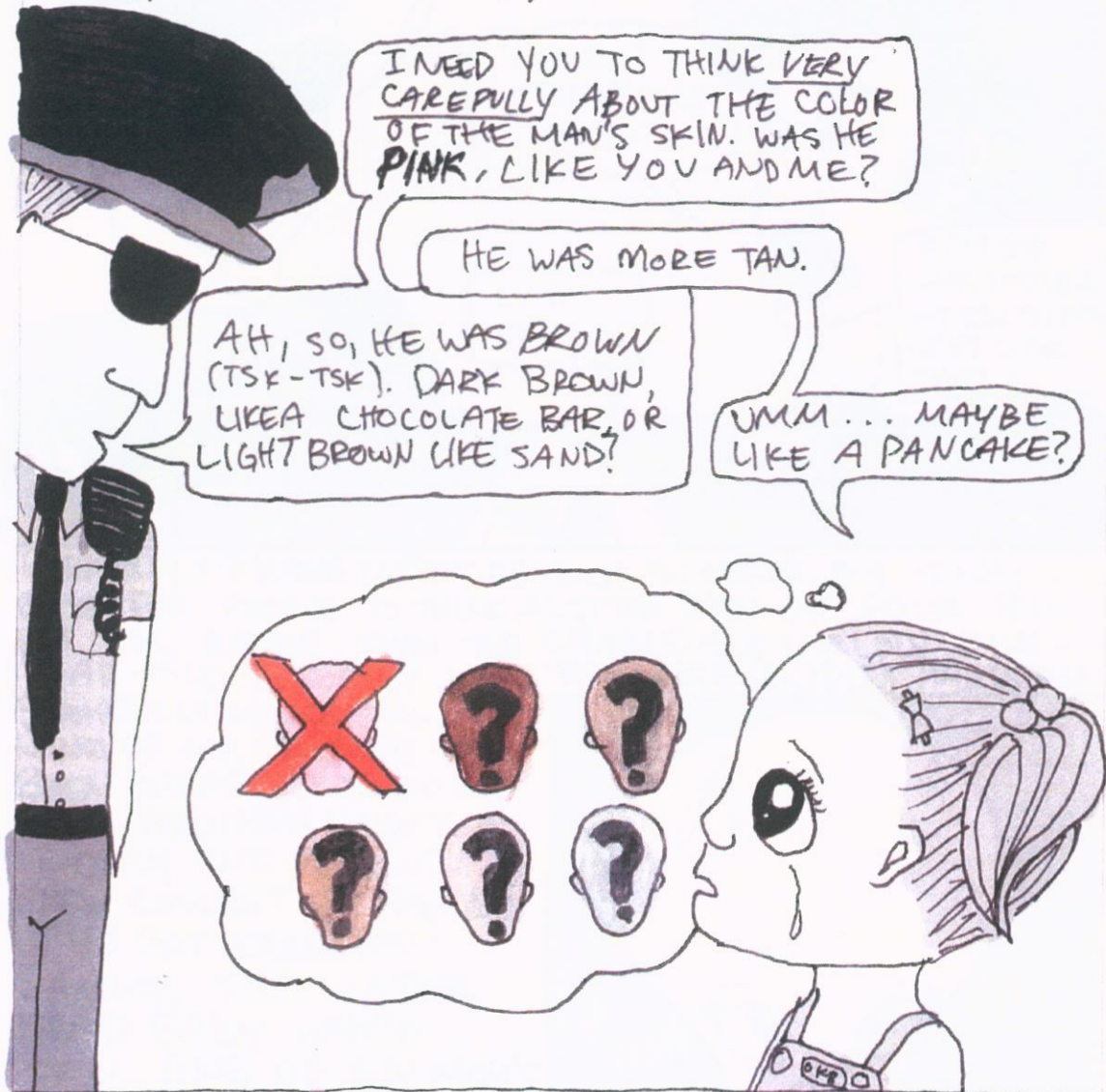
* I REALIZE YOUNGER READERS MAY MISTAKE THIS FOR A RACIST JAB. IRONICALLY, BEFORE HE PLAYED A DETECTIVE ON TV, ICE-T AUTHORED AND PERFORMED THE SONG "COP KILLER," WHICH INCLUDES THE REFRAIN, "FU~~CK~~ THA POLICE!"

LET'S JUST SAY THE COPS WHO RESPONDED TO THE CALL WERE NO BENSON AND STABLER. NO PHYSICAL EVIDENCE WAS COLLECTED. NOBODY ADMINISTERED A RAPE KIT OR EVEN EXAMINED ME. AND THERE WAS NO SENSITIVE B. D. WONG-LIKE CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST. THE COPS WERE SHIT AT TALKING TO LITTLE KIDS.



EVERY DETAIL OF MY MEMORY CRUMBLLED UNDER SCRUTINY. I DON'T THINK THEY GOT ANY USEFUL INFORMATION. RECENTLY, I TRIED TO GET A THE POLICE REPORT FROM THE CITY RECORDS OFFICE, WHICH GO BACK 200 YEARS. THEY TOLD ME THERE'S NO RECORD AT ALL. IT'S LIKE IT NEVER HAPPENED.

THE WORST PART IS THAT THEY PRESUMED THE KIDNAPPER WAS BLACK. THE ONE DETAIL I'M 100% SURE OF IS THAT HE WAS WHITE. THEY TRIPPED ME UP WITH DUMBED-DOWN SEMANTICS. IF THEY'D HAVE SIMPLY ASKED IF HE WAS A BLACK GUY, I'D HAVE KNOWN WHAT THEY MEANT. I DID GROW UP RIGHT BY MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. PARK, AFTER ALL.



I WAS UTTERLY CONFUSED. FOR ONE THING, MY SKIN WAS OBJECTIVELY NOT PINK, ESPECIALLY IN THE SUMMER. MANY YEARS LATER, I FOUND OUT THAT ALL THE ADULTS - MY PARENTS, THE COPS - NEVER KNEW HE WAS ACTUALLY WHITE. THEY NEVER HAD A CHANCE OF FINDING HIM.

I FELT SMALL AND STUPID AND USELESS. I SENSED MY PARENTS' FRUSTRATION AND THE COPS' ANNOYANCE AND I FELT CULPABLE FOR IT.



NORMALLY, I'D HAVE CORRECTED SUCH AN ERROR, BUT IT WAS BETTER FOR PEOPLE TO THINK A LITTLE BABY OF FOUR FELL FOR THIS, RATHER THAN THE CAPABLE AND WORLDLY FIVE-YEAR-OLD I REALLY WAS. THE WHOLE INCIDENT HAD BEEN SHAMEFULLY ABNORMAL.

NONE OF MY FRIENDS HAD BEEN KIDNAPPED. EVEN MY BABY BROTHER HADN'T.

ONLY ONE PERSON I KNEW COULDN'T BE FAULTED IF HE GOT KIDNAPPED: SAMMY, THE WATER HEAD BABY WHO'D BEEN ONE OF MY MOM'S HOME-DAYCARE KIDS.

FOR A MOMENT, I WISHED I WAS A WATER HEAD BABY.

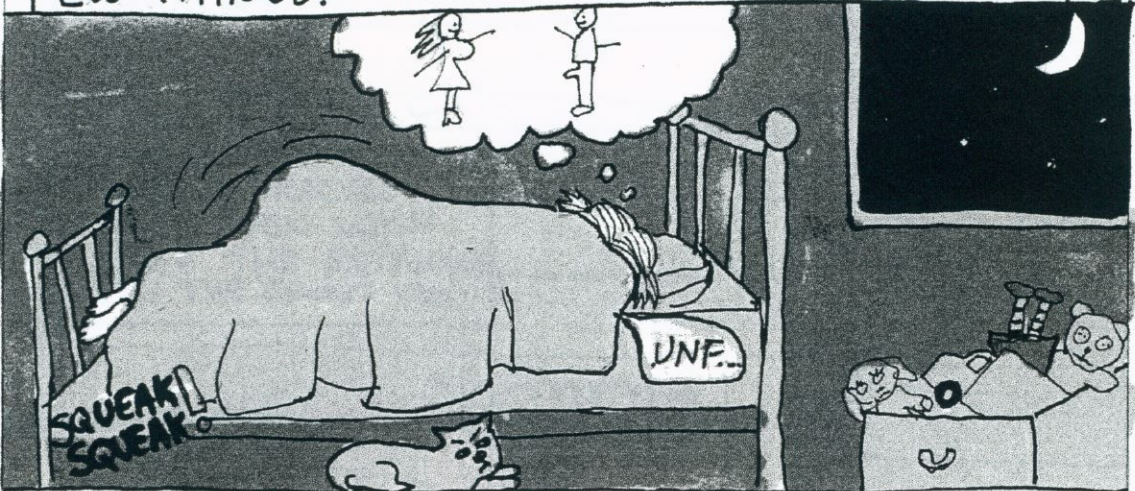


UNTIL RECENTLY I HAD FIRMLY BELIEVED THAT THE MAN HAD DONE NOTHING MORE THAN DRIVE AROUND WHILE I SCREAMED. THE POLICE AND MY PARENTS TOOK ME AT MY WORD THAT NOTHING ELSE WENT DOWN. OVER THE FOLLOWING YEARS, IT WAS EASIER FOR EVERYONE, INCLUDING MYSELF, TO LET IT BE, TO NOT ANALYZE IT TOO MUCH. BUT NOW IVE STARTED TO WONDER...



WHAT OF THE TIME DISCREPANCY? IS IT LIKELY THAT HE JUST DROVE AROUND FOR HOURS? WHY DO I HAVE ZERO RECOLLECTION OF THE RED OWL DUMPSTERS? COULD HE HAVE PARKED BACK THERE TO DISCRETELY MOLEST ME—OR WORSE—IN HIS CAR? WHY DID I FEEL WHAT I ASSUME IS THE SAME SENSE OF SHAME AND COMPLICITY AS MANY CHILD VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE DO?

I WONDER IF BEING KIDNAPPED AT SUCH A FORMATIVE AGE HAD ANY LASTING EFFECT ON MY IDENTITY OR BEHAVIORS. IF HE DID SEXUALLY ASSAULT ME, IT MIGHT EXPLAIN A FEW THINGS.



FOR EXAMPLE, I DISCOVERED MASTURBATION AND RUDIMENTARY SEXUAL FANTASY RIGHT AROUND THAT TIME. AND FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, MY DEEPEST, DARKEST SEXUAL DESIRES HAVE INVOLVED AN UNBALANCED POWER DYNAMIC...



OF COURSE, THESE THINGS MIGHT BE ENTIRELY NORMAL.

DO I BLAME MY ABDUCTION ON THE LAISSEZ-FAIRE PARENTING OF THE 1980S? ABSOLUTELY NOT. I WOULDN'T CHANGE A THING ABOUT MY CHILDHOOD. YES, I GOT KIDNAPPED. YES, OTHER BAD THINGS HAPPENED:



AT FOUR, I CRACKED MY HEAD OPEN WHEN I FELL OFF THE RETAINING WALL IN THE FRONT YARD



AGE THREE: I ATE ENOUGH LEAD PAINT FOR MY DOCTOR TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT MY COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT



* PERHAPS NOT COINCIDENTALLY, I NOW SUFFER FROM A.D.P.



AGE TEN: I CAUGHT AN EYEFUL FROM A CLASSIC, TRENCHCOAT-WEARING FLASHER. I RAN LIKE HELL THIS TIME.

AGE FOURTEEN: I WATCHED MY BEST FRIEND GET SHOT TO DEATH BY A NEIGHBOR KID WHO WAS PLAYING WITH A HAND GUN HE'D SWIPED FROM AN ADULT. SHE DIED INSTANTLY ON HER KITCHEN FLOOR.

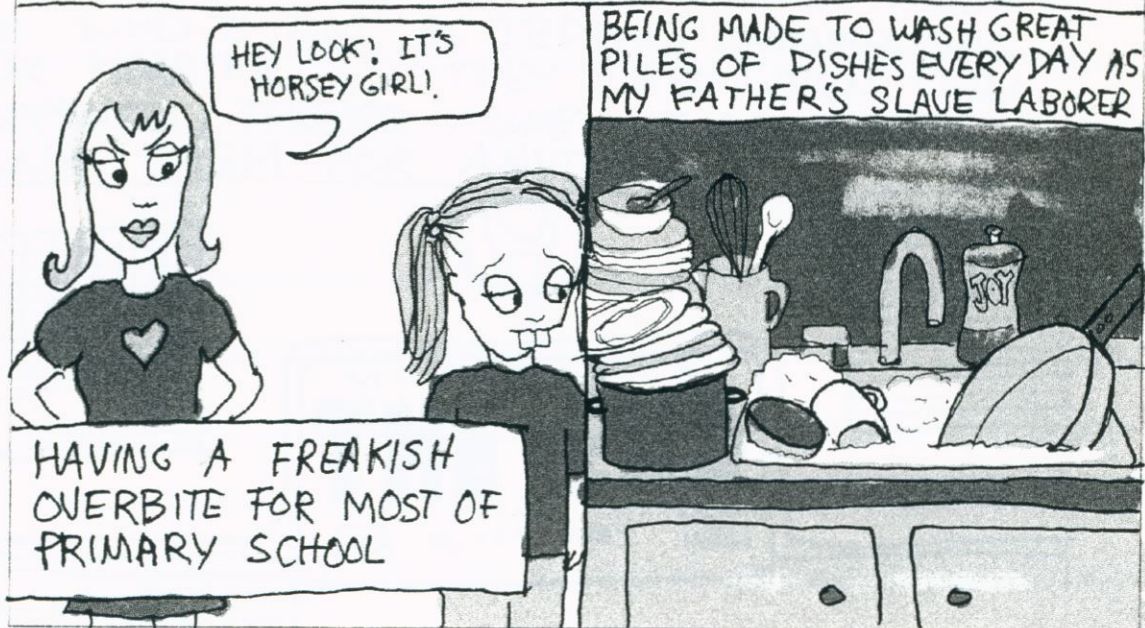


IN THAT ONE MOMENT, MY CHILDHOOD EFFECTIVELY ENDED. SO DID BRIDGET'S AND JOSH'S. OF COURSE.

TOMI UNGERER, THE RENOWNED CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR, ILLUSTRATOR, AND CREATOR OF DELIGHTFULLY DISTURBING EROTIC ART SAID:



CERTAINLY, TRAUMA HELPED SHAPE WHO I AM. BUT BIG TRAUMAS OFTEN HAPPEN IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, THEN GET DISTORTED AND OBSCURED BY MEMORY. IT'S THE LITTLE, MUNDANE THINGS, THE ONES THAT TRAUMATIZE A LITTLE BIT EVERY DAY, THAT SEEM TO DRAW THE BROAD STROKES OF IDENTITY. FOR EXAMPLE:



HAVING A DAD WHO DELIGHTED IN EMBARRASSING ME



(F♥ MATT GROENING)

AFTER HIS PERM GREW OUT, MY DAD'S HAIR LOOKED LIKE ANDREW JACKSON'S ON THE \$20 BILL. HE TOOK TO WEARING WACKY BOW TIES ALONG WITH AN EXPOSED GUT AND A PRONOUNCED PLUMBER'S CRACK.

I'M DEFINITELY NOT COMPLAINING. ALL THESE TRAUMAS, BIG AND SMALL MADE ME WHO I AM. AS TEDIOUS, EMBARRASSING OR HORRIFIC AS THEY FELT WHEN THEY HAPPENED, THEY'RE MINE. I WOULDN'T TRADE THEM FOR ANYTHING.



Wellstone!

Selfies@Funerals

The advent of the selfie has pervaded every corner of our culture. Compared to friends my own age—or, increasingly, even compared those a whole generation older—I'm largely technophobic (a “dead-ass-last adapter,” according to my programmer little brother), and I've never been skilled at presenting myself in public in quite the right way for a given situation. For a long time, I didn't understand the impulse of my younger friends to share their posed, primed, self-snapped photos on Facebook or Instagram. It seemed to show an ugly side of them, a tendency toward vanity that they normally kept well-hidden. But then I realized that the selfie is just the latest vehicle for a behavior that has always been fundamentally human: manufacturing identity. Everyone is composed of different layers of identity. We're constantly moving back and forth on a spectrum: on one end is the interior private self, and on the other is the exterior public self. Or, in the parlance of our high-tech time, on one end is the the self, and on the other is the selfie.

When I'm at home in my holey pajamas, sitting in the apocalyptic mess that is my bedroom, hunched over my laptop and furiously typing long emails I'll never send, or griping about stupid TV shows but being unable to look away, or farting out loud and picking my nose, or doing any number of other slightly shameful, but entirely genuine things, I'm absolutely unfit for public interaction. I modify some of those behaviors when I'm around my significant other, and a few more when I'm around my kids, a few more

than that around my parents. Every day when I leave the house to go to work or be around friends, I have to put on different personas like I put on clothes (and often, the transformation involves changing actual clothes). This, I assume, is something we all have to do. We obscure parts of our genuine interior selves with a contrived exterior layer. This got me thinking: Are selfies any more false or vain than wearing makeup or censoring your curse words for a job interview?

Over the last decade, Generation Y teen girls have perfected the art of the flawless online persona through the phenomenon of the selfie. Through (short) lifetimes of trial and error—manipulating their faces and bodies, experimenting with lighting and angles, amassing all the skills of a professional stylist, mastering Photoshop—they have unlocked the alchemy of the public self. The selfie, however, is no longer the exclusive domain of teenagers.

Are selfies inherently self-promoting, though? Are the parts of our identity that we deliberately reveal in public necessarily likable ones? Most people wouldn't choose to post a selfie unless it reflected the way they wanted people to see them, but a selfie can backfire when it escapes the subject's direct control. In 2013, President Obama's selfie at Nelson Mandela's memorial service resulted in public outrage. In the incriminating meta-photo taken by a journalist, the president poses cheek-to-cheek with a foreign diplomat for his own smartphone. First Lady Michelle perches on the edge of her chair, limbs pulled defensively close, leaning slightly away from the visual plane of her husband's camera as she stares solemnly ahead. She accidentally projects humility and seriousness while her husband attempts to capture a glimpse of his identity that he ostensibly feels

good about, if only for a moment.

Is the selfie capable of capturing not only the manufactured public self, but also the flawed private self? How much control do we have over our public personas? Is it even *possible* to project a perfectly airbrushed self, or do we have blind spots with regard to certain shameful character defects? Is there a difference between our deepest, darkest, secret shames—the ones we *never* show—and the flaws we accidentally expose once in a while?

The president was neither the first nor the last fall into the trap of the self-damning selfie. The photo blog *Selfies at Funerals* compiles page after page of selfies that make Obama's look dignified. Every one of the site's subjects, excepting the president—who holds the blog's top position—is an American Millennial. All are thin and conventionally beautiful, most are female, and only a few aren't white. Each selfie and its corresponding hashtag-ridden Twitter post is more loathsome than the last. In one, four adolescent girls give their best spring break smiles, their arms around each other, fingers forming the peace or bunny ears signals, for a pink iPhone in front of a mirror. The accompanying Tweet reads, “Were those awkward people who takes a picture smiling at a funeral!! <3 ;) #FuneralSelfies #BestFriends.” In another, soft ringlets frame the face of a beautiful young woman with glowing skin. The picture of earnestness, youth, and purity, she's almost inherently lovable. Until you read her post: “Love my hair today. Hate why I'm dressed up #funeral.” A third shows a pair of prepubescent girls in black miniskirts and tight tops posing in a bathroom mirror; small, conservative purses and pouty, porn star lips are the finishing touches on their grown-up facade. The attached

disclaimer screams false modesty: “Cried all my makeup off so ew. But funeral.” Another doesn't even show the mourner's face: the svelte young woman poses in the mirror, obscuring her head with her smartphone. She's standing in the waist-slimming pose touted by fashion magazines: hips perpendicular to the camera, torso turned ninety-degrees to face forward. “Funeral dress from today,” she writes. “Goodbye Uncle John! We will never forget you! <3 #family #mom #dad #TagsForLikes #brother #sister #brothers #sisters #bro #sis #siblings #love #instagood #father #mother #related.” Her self-promoting hashtagging only earns her a paltry twenty-five “likes.”

Some of the of the *Selfies at Funerals* subjects go for a more somber tone, but they fail spectacularly, affecting the same cartoonlike faces they might use when confronted with an injured puppy or kitten: bottom lip suck out, the tight downward arc of a frowny face emoticon, the glistening eyes and wounded eyebrows of a baby chimpanzee. You can almost hear the “awwww?!” that often accompanies such a face, with its squeaky, rising inflection. At first glance, its difficult to tell which is more disturbing: the ones with socially inappropriate but relatively honest expressions of vanity/allure/silliness, or these. The photos in the latter category are somewhere in the vicinity of the appropriate emotion for a funeral, but they seem incapable of even a cursory level of authenticity. Sociopaths are infamous for their ability to mimic genuine human emotion where they have none; this category of selfie takers attempt to do that, but they're terrible at it. Maybe they're an entirely new kind of -path, suffering from a disorder unique to their generation that's characterized by only being able to display flat, feelings-chart emotions.

At first, I found it frightening to consider such a void of interior identity. What's to blame for the apparent vacuous holes where their genuine selves should be? Internet culture? Is it just a symptom of their generation? Are they like the title character of *The Truman Show*, only they knew all along that they were being admired and judged by captivated strangers since the day they were born? Maybe they came into the world with their public identities already fully formed after their sonogram pictures were disseminated in Christmas cards, their every movement *in utero* imbued with false character in their expectant parents' pregnancy blog posts, their first sticky black meconium shits and Apgar scores recorded and posted on Instagram. Maybe the opalescent blackness of a camera lens is more comforting and familiar than their mothers' eyes. Perhaps they're the unfortunate first lab rats of the "lifetime selfie" experiment, providing the data that will one day give rise to empirical evidence that the self and the selfie behave like matter and antimatter, canceling each other out in equal portions until only the more prevalent identity remains. Now they have to make due with the few scraps of public identity that were left after the annihilation. Maybe. More likely, they're just misunderstood.

Public shaming blogs like *Selfies at Funerals* are borne of the same malignant thirst for moral judgment as the "exploitainment" genre of turn-of-the-millennium daytime TV. The tragic subjects of *Selfies at Funerals*—and most of their persecutors, no doubt—grew up to the jeering, whooping crowds of *The Jerry Springer Show*, and later *Maury*, the paternity-busting forum where an endless parade of poverty-class men—the urban black and the rural white—fell apart to Maury Povich's damning

pronouncement, “You *are* the father!”

I began to wonder: what's the opposite of a selfie? A lesser known, but far more sinister iteration of the public scorn genre is the twice-monthly tabloid paper, *Busted!*, found only in the ghettos of fifteen major US cities. Each local edition of *Busted!* prints, ranks, and captions the most humiliating mugshots of recently arrested citizens of the surrounding counties. Since its 2010 inception, demand for *Busted!* has been so high that print copies, a dollar each, are routinely sold out within days of release. The Minnesota edition compiles mugshots from three Twin Cities counties, sorting them into cruel categories like “Meth Mouths,” “Solicitation Skanks,” “B&E Boneheads,” and “Holding Cell Hotties.” The most outrageous mugshots—the ones with exaggerated expressions of rage/confusion/inexplicable joy/insanity/anguish; or the ones who were arrested in unusual outfits, like football fan body paint or a satin ballgown; or ones with wildly unkempt hair, makeup, or clothes; or the ones who are just objectively ugly—are given a place of honor on the front page with their own special captions. Unlike *Selfies and Funerals* or *Jerry Springer*, *Busted!* uses subjects who never intended their images to be disseminated publicly.

If the selfie is the photograph's answer to the manufactured public self, the mugshot is its polar opposite. The moment a mugshot is captured is involuntary, uncontrived, and intensely private. Being booked into jail is one of the worst possible moments to pose for a picture. The mugshot reflects the intense humiliations of arrest: the violation of privacy, the spectacle of being handcuffed and frisked. It often captures arrestees at their physical worst: eyes are often puffy from crying, hair is disheveled from

being manhandled by police or from lying on the cinder block bench of the intake cell. Seething outrage is the default emotion, so it's not unusual to appear emotionally cracked or crazily defiant, like a mental patient. The subjects of *Busted!* almost uniformly despise the publication, which its creator Ron Chief insists is the point—as though deterring recidivism is its main purpose, rather than exploiting easy targets. Not everyone who makes it into *Busted!* is shamed, though. Chief, in a *Pioneer Press* article, is quoted as saying, “If you have some jerk who is a gang-banger criminal, he would see [appearing in *Busted!*] as a badge of honor.” The racist subtext of Chief's comment aside, turning a mugshot into a selfie—or, in more general terms, turning a private moment into part of one's public identity—may be more common than we think.

One of the strangest entertainment genres to emerge in recent years is the homemade autodocumentary, in which selfie expression is taken to extremes in the form of high quality photo spreads and videos that are designed to be seen not only by friends and family, but by the adoring public, too. The most successful of these self-styled celebrities are known among fans as “Tumblr girls.” One of these pseudo-stars, a fifteen-year-old girl from California who goes by the name Acacia Brinley, has over two million followers on Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and other social media sites. On Brinley's YouTube channel, fans can watch videos like “Acacia's Daily Makeup Routine,” “Random Junk #1,” “Getting my hair did” “Updated Makeup Routine!!” and “F@#k You!” Most of the videos show Brinley in scripted, rehearsed versions of her most mundane daily routines set to pop music.

In “Getting Ready With Cacia :),” there is no sound other than two upbeat

bubblegum pop songs, but first-person captions narrate the action and point out Brinley's quirks (like going back to sleep instead of getting up when she's supposed to, being obsessed with her phone, and being "weird"). Before she rises from bed, hair perfectly mussed and carefully draped over her face, she's shown engrossed in her phone for a full minute, tapping and swiping its touch screen in a variety of playfully cut-together positions (elbows propped on pillow, sitting cross-legged, head hanging off foot of bed) to suggest the passage of time. Finally, she "falls" out of bed, then treats viewers to sped-up footage of the day's possible clothing choices being tossed onto the bed from an out-of-frame closet. It goes on, every fast-forwarded scene peppered with a series of practiced facial expressions and quirks, like asymmetrical lip-biting, pouting, hair-twirling, crossed eyes and peace sign, fish lips, or tongue sticking out (the most common facial expression, though, seems to be one she's not aware of: her slack-jawed dimwitted stare as she plays with her smartphone). Over the next four minutes, we see the minutiae of Brinley's morning: Cutely eating McDonalds while standing up. More phone absorption. Careful face washing and hair brushing. Twelve more seconds of phone time. Playing "supermodel" in the wind of the hair dryer. Saying good morning to her mother ("mommy," according to the captions), who pops into the frame for a few seconds, also on her phone. Making a crocodile mouth with the flat iron, complete with exaggerated "rwaar" expressions. More slack-jawed phone time. An interminable session of applying makeup to every inch of her face (although there's discernible difference between her "before" and "after" faces). Winking in the mirror as she finishes applying lip gloss. Putting on her boots and coat. First-person video footage of walking to the mailbox

(Uggs walking on the sidewalk) and opening it (“NO MAIL :,,,)”)). Then there are five seconds of her sitting at her desk “Doing some school work,” two seconds of which consist of her looking at a document (for the other three seconds, she's drinking, eating, and checking her phone again).

A few of her videos stray from the formula. “Words Hurt” begins with a black screen with the caption, “I’ve been called . . .”. It fades to a sepia-toned shot of Brinley in a plain black sweatshirt sitting on her bed. “Screw up,” she says. The video filter effect changes to black-and-white before she continues, “Slut.” Fuzzy filter: “Whore.” Stark low-color-saturation filter: “Ugly.” High-contrast filter: “Bitch.” It goes on. Scored by an emotional pop slow jam, she orates a string of words and phrases she's been called, each one with its own special video effect. After she says, “I'm nothing,” in black-and-white, she stands up and walks out of the frame. The emo music stops, and after a few seconds of silence, we hear a gun shot. The filter changes back to color and she returns. “What if I didn't come back?” she says, before an uplifting acoustic guitar pop song begins and a series of captions on a black screen read, “Thankfully . . . I did come back.” It continues this way, with a series of platitudes (each followed by an ellipsis) fade in and out over clips of a playful Brinley with her friends. Even this video, which ostensibly attempts to broach the serious topic of teen suicide, fails to show genuine humanness. Like the funeral selfies with pouty grief faces, it tries to tap real human emotion by imitating the shallow approximations of sadness that are marketed to teens on TV.

Brinley's' fame is utterly baffling to me, and I assume, to most people. Who *is* this girl, and why has her inane make-up video been watched over 200,000 times? The

“About” tab of her YouTube profile fails to answer those questions; in its entirety, it reads: “Hi! I’m Acacia Brinley. I’m really weird, watch my videos and you’ll see!” Brinley seems to fancy herself a maverick, a real character, but she doesn’t present a single particle of uniqueness, or even genuine humanness, on YouTube. I was so dumbfounded by this kind of fame, I tried to do some light research on Brinley. I found out that the only way to do that is to read the comments left by her subscribers or seek out the scores of other YouTube profiles dedicated to either worshipping her or despising her. She has millions of fans, but she’s not notable enough to be listed even on Wikipedia, perhaps because she doesn’t *do* anything.

We live in a culture in which teenage girls who do nothing of note have millions of fans. This is the world of the selfie, a shallow, a plastic place where people are nothing but caricatures of the most vapid pop-culture cliches, where young people deem themselves weird, quirky, and interesting, but (outwardly, at least), they’re completely unoriginal and purely aesthetic. One can only assume they’re idolized by masses of equally empty souls. Her fans love her because she’s the perfect amalgam of every young female star from the last decade of reality TV, Nickelodeon, beauty industry advertising, and MTV.

To be fair, Brinley is, in a way, doing what teens have been compelled to do for generations. Imitation is the default identity of adolescence. But how does that square with the recently-maligned broken record of Generation Y child development: “You Are Special!”?

Forced self-esteem feeding began to take root in the late 1970s, according to Jean

Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, a best selling book that backs up its astute criticism of Generation Y with hard evidence. Brinley wasn't born until 1997, long after self-esteem curriculum had been fully implemented in American schools and parenting philosophies. Turn-of-the-millennium parents—myself included—were told by preschool teachers and pediatricians alike that our children shouldn't be praised when they show aptitude for a task or good behavior, they should be praised *all the time*, for no reason, even if they're complete assholes. We don't want to attach their self-worth to actual *skill*, they said, we want them to know in the cores of their very beings that they're singularly great—that they're entitled to being treasured for being just the way they are. The youngest of us late-nineties parents took this edict as a fundamental truth; after all, we underwent similar indoctrination in toddlerhood by the likes of Mister Rogers. We were the original disciples of the self-esteem cult. Maybe Acacia Brinley, and other selfie culture figures, are the apocalyptic endgame of the “You Are Special” movement—the spectacular self-destructing of a generation raised by parents who drank the undeserved-self-esteem Kool-Aid long before they developed child development philosophies of their own.

In an extreme selfie culture, a fully-contrived public identity is more desirable than one that allows the genuine, human interior self to show through. Of course, those of us who are new to the practice of taking selfies tend to fumble it (like fellow oldster President Obama). Even Generation Y people are hapless, at times, as evidenced by “Selfies at Funerals,” or any number of other tragic young victims, such as Breanna Mitchell who posted a bubbly vacation selfie at the worst possible moment (“Selfie from Auschwitz Concentration Camp ;”).

The implications of this are frightening for Generation X, who will soon be forced to interact with the young people who “get it” whether we like it or not. First we will serve as their authority figures: we’ll be their instructors in college, we’ll be their superiors (if only for a short time) in the workplace, and the unluckiest of us may even find ourselves parenting one. Eventually, we’ll be forced to compete with them for jobs. We may even end up being interviewed by them someday. And if pure selfie culture—all manufactured public identity, no genuine private identity—is what they value, where does that leave us? If their Kardashianesque aesthetic is what passes for valuable, interesting, and unique, our smelly brands of individualism will be well outside the regimented zone of acceptable public self expression. Depth of character won’t even be perceived in this two-dimensional world. We’ll be irrelevant, then extinct.

If Tumblr Girls are pure selfie—existing *only* in relation to the public, devoid of genuine interior self—what’s at the other end of the self/selfie spectrum? Autism? Solitary-confinement-induced madness? Or is it something more insidious and more common? Technology has allowed people like Acacia Brinley to broadcast their identities worldwide to anyone who’ll click on their profiles, but it has also made it possible to isolate oneself almost entirely. Picture a shut-in, someone who’s completely inept to deal with social situations. Thanks to the internet, from the comfort of his own home, he can shop, pay bills, work, and even have a semblance of a sex life without ever leaving his keyboard. He need never have to actually speak to another human, to look people in the eyes. It’s easy to imagine him there, sitting in his desk chair wearing nothing but boxer shorts, his hair and beard wild from neglect, surrounded by heaps of Fed-Ex boxes,

delivered food, and sticky tissues from his last online porn binge. Clearly, this guy isn't any healthier or better adjusted than a Tumblr Girl.

Like wolves, bees, penguins, and bonobos, humans are social creatures. Perhaps somewhere far below us on the evolutionary tree, extinct iterations of our distant ancestors failed to play the game of being liked. The ones who survived learned that we can't be all "self" and we can't be all "selfie." Survival depends on being part of the community, even if we have to modify our identities to be accepted. Existing in relation to others is so fundamental to being human, we don't fare well without it. I hope the opposite is also true—that we need private selves, too, that we need shame, grief, and unique, freakish flaws. And I hope these interior parts aren't only meant to be private, because sometimes it's hard to keep them from showing. And even if I could disguise my interior self as a slick, TV commercial star, I wouldn't want to.

Progress Valley

I went to rehab in my late-twenties for heroin addiction. Figuring out how to be sober without giving up my identity was one of the hardest things I ever tried to do. Even though I was facing devastating consequences—namely, losing custody of my children—I didn't succeed until several years later. It's not that I wasn't motivated. I was prepared to do anything for my kids. I failed because the recovery industry was broken and vile in ways that are counter to my most deeply held values. The system dictates that there's only one true way to successfully recover from addiction, and if you can't assimilate into that system, you're fucked.

After twenty-eight days of rehab, I was sent to Progress Valley, a halfway house where I was to spend the next three-to-six months. It was located in the suburbs, in an old building that had once been a convent. The day the hospital dropped me off there, I signed some forms and the counselor showed me to my room, which I'd be sharing with another woman. That first afternoon, I was allowed to lay in bed and cry—my emotions were raw like they'd been shredded with a cheese grater—but I was told that daytime napping was usually strictly prohibited. Rehab had been a kind of sanctuary for me where I could pretend I didn't live in the real world, but here at the halfway house, I would have to find a job, deal with the court system, and be an active member of the Progress Valley community.

Each month, the residents participated in a weekend of sober “fun” activities. It made every cell in my body want to scream with disgust when I found out it was called “Fun and Frolics” weekend, but none of the other girls seemed to mind. I decided to try to be a good sport, if only to impress the staff, who had the power to decide when I’d be discharged. The December “Fun and Frolics,” which was reputed to be the best one of the year, began the day after I arrived.

As I was banned from lying in bed and crying, I watched as the whole house was whipped up in a frenzy of glitter and ribbons, a Martha Stewart-inspired extravaganza of garish Christmas Joy. I’d never subscribed to the Christmas spirit. Something about it had always felt artificial to me. There were craft projects to be done in the art room. At least they had an art room, I thought. The prospect of making art sounded appealing, possibly even therapeutic. When I got there, I found that the mandatory craft was painting plaster figurines of Santa Claus, snowmen, candy canes, and other secular seasonal icons. I chose a cherub and painted it black with red eyes. We could also make cards for our families. The clean, white pieces of cardstock were far more appealing to me than the cheesy figurines. My son’s fifth birthday was in a couple of days, so I made him a card with a car jumping through a ring of fire on the front.

To my surprise, I was called into the counselor’s office and reprimanded for defiance. My caustic attitude was threatening the sobriety of the other girls, my counselor said. I would not achieve serenity until I could selflessly contribute to group spirit. I was incensed. How dare they censor my creativity? I thought. The counselor must have read the distress on my face. She came around the desk and sat next to me, then

sympathetically explained that what drove me to do things like I did in the art room was my ego. I was used to doing whatever I wanted. It was a symptom of the disease. I had to let go of my ego, drop the attitude, and learn to fit in. Otherwise, I'd never figure out how to be sober. I reflected on my actions. Sure, the evil cherub may have been a bit of a "fuck you" gesture, but the card for my son was completely sincere. And speaking of sincerity, was I supposed to become someone I wasn't? Was it really necessary to become a Santa-happy crafter? I told my counselor I would give Fun and Frolics a genuine shot, but inside, I was baffled and worried for my future. When I returned to the craft room, my artwork was gone.

That evening we loaded into the Progress Valley van for a surprise activity. The girls guessed at the fun places we might be headed while singing along to Britney Spears on the radio: Ice skating? A movie? The Cheesecake Factory, maybe? In the parking lot of a nursing home, the house manager gave us sheets of Christmas carol lyrics. Some of the girls uttered squeaky "Awws," with a rising tone at the end, but behind their toothy smiles the disappointment was palpable.

The air in the nursing home was thick with the stink of shit and cafeteria food, a hot, meaty miasma cut with the acrid vapor of industrial ammonia. Our group walked slowly through the halls singing "Jingle Bells" and "Oh Christmas Tree" in meek voices, a sharp contrast to their pop-song belting in the van. I lingered in the back, breathing as slow and shallow as possible through my mouth until the house manager grabbed me by the arm and whispered, "Your counselor asked me to report on your attitude this weekend. You have to sing."

I mouthed the words to "Here Comes Santa Claus" as we made the rounds. One ancient woman with a crooked, bright red wig clapped and smiled in her wheel chair, but most of the other residents looked depressed, pained, confused, or angry. One old man in his bed looked as embarrassed as I felt. I imagined being in his position, not being able to make obtrusive carolers get out of your bedroom as you lay supine and helpless with Jello stains on your pajamas, wanting only to return to the episode of *Matlock* you're watching.

As we rounded a corner we passed a cart bearing little paper cups filled with pills. I was sure that, mixed in with the laxatives and Parkinson's medications, there were opiates and benzodiazepines. I hadn't wanted to get high so bad since I'd finished withdrawing from heroin in the hospital, but I didn't dare. When the house manager noticed the cart, she swiftly herded us down the hall.

Outside of the nursing home I gulped fresh air. Back in the van, the girls sang along with the radio with renewed vigor. Back at Progress Valley we began the next Fun and Frolics activity, a pajama party with movies and Mountain Dew and pizza. It seemed to be either an apology or a reward for tricking us into caroling for geriatrics. Though a room in the basement was outfitted with a giant TV, we weren't normally allowed to watch it, so the girls excitedly piled their sleeping bags and pillows on the floor. I could handle this, I thought. The escapism of film was a welcoming thought. We watched awful romantic comedies starring Jennifer Aniston and Meg Ryan. The pajama-clad girls crowded around a pizza box on the floor and giggled and did each other's hair and nails.

I sat in the corner with the newest resident, Natalie, a black woman in her forties

who'd moved in while the rest of us were at the nursing home. She sat quietly next to me looking stunned and sad and intimidated, exactly as I had during my first days here. I talked to her a little. Like me, the courts had sent her here after rehab as a condition of maintaining custody of her children. Her drug-of-choice was crack, and she was determined to get clean this time. We guessed we were the only residents over the age of twenty-two. We both felt like we didn't belong.

The last movie was the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*. As I watched the other girls laugh and gossip, I wondered what happened to *their* sadness. Natalie's eyes were still puffy from crying, and I was barely holding it together. Nobody ends up in a halfway house without losing almost everything. It seemed wrong to be happy here, and impossible. My guilt and shame would not allow it. I *knew* there was something about Progress Valley that was fundamentally wrong. I wanted to do something about it, but I was helpless. It occurred to me that I was also probably wrong. The hospital's rehab program wouldn't have sent me here if they didn't know what they were doing. Maybe I would be a giggly, serene person if I tried hard enough. Maybe my ego *was* preventing me from recovering.

The next morning was the weekly house meeting. I looked forward to it, thinking it would be like an AA meeting, which would have been a healthy departure from my Progress Valley experience so far. We gathered in the TV room and sat in a circle. Recovery-related meetings are generally confidential, so I had to change some of the particulars, but it went something like this:

The house manager opened. "Does anyone want to start? Remember to use 'I'

statements.”

Stephanie, the most senior resident, said, “I saw Ashley go down to the kitchen last night after lights out to get cookies. Twice. *I* think she has an eating disorder and *I* feel like my sobriety is being threatened by it.”

“Ashley?” said the house manager, recording the accusation in her notebook. “Do you have an eating disorder?”

“No,” Ashley said, glaring at Stephanie. “Anyway, Stephanie has hairspray in her room. The kind with alcohol in it.”

“I statements only, please.”

“Oh. I mean, *I* saw contraband hairspray in Stephanie's room.”

“Good,” said the house manager. “Stephanie, would you like to respond to that?”

The girls went around the room complaining and accusing each other of petty rule violations and personal affronts while the house manager bastardized the concept of the therapeutic “I” statement. I watched silently, slack-jawed in disbelief.

The worst part was when Natalie's roommate accused her of threatening her sobriety. Natalie hadn't broken any rules, exactly, it was that her attitude was abrasive. The young white girl couldn't articulate what it was about Natalie that made her uncomfortable, other than the smell of her hair products and that she sang along to Luther Vandross while she did her chores. But she was sure it was harming her recovery process.

I knew how to explain it. Natalie was a low-income urban black woman, and her roommate probably lay awake all night thinking about getting stabbed. The manager compelled Natalie to defend herself.

In her thick, Chicago-style Black Vernacular, Natalie expressed her outrage at being called out in public rather than being confronted privately by her roommate. When the house manager asked her to lower her voice and be rational, Natalie started crying, which made her even angrier. She cursed her roommate, then walked out and went to bed.

Every part of the house meeting was counter to what I learned in rehab. We were supposed to be finally dealing with our *own* problems, not shifting the focus onto the faults of others. This meeting was pure, distilled codependency at its ugliest. The house manager, who oversaw the place on nights and weekends and probably had an associate's degree in social work, was a complete moron. The senior residents had figured out that the phrase "I feel like she's threatening my sobriety" was a magical incantation that would automatically warrant a serious hearing from the night manager, and possibly even earn them points for taking the program seriously. I felt vindicated in my suspicion that Progress Valley was not helping me, and further, I knew in the deepest recesses of my heart that this place was actually toxic. It was so outrageously wrong, I thought that no chemical dependency professional would even believe it unless they saw it firsthand.

The next day, after Morning Affirmations, Natalie was called into the counselor's office. She came out in tears and went up to her room. Concerned and curious, I went after her. She was sobbing and packing her belongings in her plastic Barbie-pink suitcase. They had kicked her out even though she hadn't broken any of the rules. After the meeting, several of the other girls had come to the manager and supported the roommate's ambiguous claim of "threatening behavior." The counselor had told Natalie that she'd tried to find her a bed at another halfway house, but there were none available unless she

wanted to go to one that didn't accept state funding, which was, of course, impossible for her. Natalie would have to go to her next court date having violated her court order. She would never get her children back.

On the final night of Fun and Frolics, we were made to attend the Hollydazzle Parade downtown, a vile corporate X-mas fest where costumed characters rode parade floats covered Christmas-tree lights down the main retail drag and threw Macy's coupons and promotional materials to the freezing onlookers. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather be doing less, but I tried to "fake it 'til I make it," as a popular twelve-step mantra recommends. I had no choice. I couldn't get kicked out of the program and fail to meet the demands of my court order over a stupid parade.

The other girls, now empowered by their role in freeing the house of any aggressive blacks, chattered excitedly on the train ride downtown. Many of them had never been into the "big city" before, and they were excited by the warm fuzziness of the Christmas parade. The two most senior girls had been working on a surprise for us all day, and they couldn't wait to show it to us. The train was so packed with park-and-ride suburban parade goers, most of us couldn't sit down. Everyone stared at us when the house manager yelled out for us to listen up. She gave the floor to Stephanie, who, with great ceremony, produced a black garbage bag full of tee-shirts. As they were passed around, the girls squealed with joy. The oversized tee-shirts were decorated with glittery puffy paint that declared in bubbly, feminine script, "Progress Valley Fun and Frolics!!" The effect was completed with hearts and squiggles. "We should wear them over our coats!" someone yelled. The house manager elbowed her way through the car to make

sure everyone complied. When she narrowed her eyes at me, I slipped the shirt over my head and produced a wooden smile.

I tried to tell our group that we needed to get off when we reached our stop. It was right on the parade route, but nobody would listen to me. The house manager heard me, but insisted we had several stops to go. I knew that the next stop was the end of the line. It also happened to be directly in front of the strip club where I'd worked until I went to rehab. It was eight on a Sunday night. We piled out of the train car, all in matching puffy paint shirts. I saw a few of my old coworkers in front of the club smoking, designer-knockoff winter coats hiding their skimpy costumes, standing tall on their plastic stripper shoes. They didn't recognize me, but they did laugh at our unsophisticated, overexcited group of bumpkins. I probably would have laughed at us too, or at least rolled my eyes.

A week later, the first day I'd been granted job-hunting privileges, I sat in front of the bartender in one of those suburban chain-sports bars where the walls are festooned with trendy garage sale crap, where office people go for jumbo margaritas and jalapeno poppers after work. The bar was nestled in among other identical bars on the top floor of the Mall of America, where I had to transfer buses in order to make the six-thirty curfew at Progress Valley.

Since Natalie had been kicked out, I'd been reprimanded again by my counselor after the house manager snitched on me for inappropriate behavior the previous night. We'd been getting ready to leave for an AA meeting, which I was actually looking forward to. As we were getting in the van, the house manager told me to go change my clothes, which were inappropriate for a meeting where there would be men. I was

wearing a short black babydoll dress, but my legs were covered by a pair of winter-weight striped tights and men's motorcycle boots. My choice of clothing had nothing to do with going to a coed meeting; I wore this kind of thing all the time. In the wake of Natalie's heartbreaking situation, I lost my composure a bit. My outfit wasn't any more revealing than Amber's skin-tight Lycra pants, I argued. She just didn't like my style. She was trying to make me be someone I wasn't. The next morning, in my counselor's office, I was told that this would be my last warning.

I sipped a gin and soda, breaking the fragile china tea cup of my sobriety, but I didn't care. It was a kitschy, stupid thing that didn't go with anything else in the kitchen of my life. Progress Valley was an infomercial trying to get me to buy the whole matching set of sobriety china and I knew I needed it, but I resented it. I *had* to have this gin and soda. It was my one little private rebellion against the crushing oppression of the halfway house.

I spit out a huge wad of gum before I walked in the door of Progress Valley an hour later. The house manager took one look at me and asked to smell my breath. The scent of gum was probably more incriminating than the scent of drink would have been. She asked me to blow into a breathalyzer. Somehow, it read only .006, less than ten percent of the legal driving limit, but it was enough to get me kicked out on the spot. Because I'd clearly broken the rules, they didn't even try to find me a bed at another halfway house.

A month later, already too late to appease the courts, I tried another halfway house in the city. I only lasted three days there, but it felt like an eternity. The despair was so

thick, I went back to my dope dealer for a complete relapse. My kids moved in with my mother. It took me another two years to figure out that there were other ways to get sober, not that it would have mattered; the court system wouldn't have approved anything other than Progress Valley. Through the methadone program—a mostly-flawed model, but it works for some—and by writing and making art on a daily basis, I was able to start living a stable life without chemicals. I didn't even have to learn to decorate Christmas trees.

From Autobots with Love

If you were born after the advent of Sesame Street and you went to public school, Valentine's Day probably first meant giving obligatory cards with Snoopies or My Little Ponies or G.I Joes on them to every kid in your class. Your grade school probably had a rather communist policy around the giving of valentines: from each according to his ability to, well, everyone, whether you liked them or not.

Your mother would buy the cards at K-Mart, usually at the last minute when all they had left on the shelf were the Barbie ones and the Transformer ones. She may have gotten you the Transformer ones because she knew you hated Barbie. She knew you well. And she would sit you down at the dinner table and make you write your classmates' names on them (To: Brian). If Brian was an insolent slob who everyone hated (he was), you might try to get away with transposing the *i* and the *a*, spelling "Brain." If you came from a two-income family (you didn't), or if your mother wasn't on welfare (she was), you might also tape a tube of Smarties to some cards, but not others, giving you another opportunity to subtly alienate the mean, ugly, or weird.

In your third-grade classroom, half an afternoon the day before Valentines Day would have been dedicated to the festooning of small brown paper bags with construction paper hearts; you could even jazz your bag up with some glitter if you were girly (you weren't). And probably Brian didn't even try, his crumpled bag bare except for his name

and an anarchy symbol sloppily rendered in black Sharpie. If you were a budding nonconformist (you were), maybe you harbored a secret, dirty fascination with his defiance. Perhaps you thought it was fun to watch him work the already tightly-wound teacher into fits of hysteria. You experienced an unspoken, unspeakable feeling of solidarity every time she sent him to the principal's office. But you'd never admit it. Well, someday you would, but not in the third grade.

If there was a boy that you liked, you could surreptitiously toss an extra piece of candy in his valentine bag. Or you could choose for him, from the three or four different perforated sheets of Transformers cards, the most romantic one. Not the one with Megatron on it that said "have a robot Valentine's Day, friend," but the one with Optimus Prime that said "this valentine means more than meets the eye," or "Our love could destroy the evil forces of the Decepticons."

And even if you weren't girly, you might have secretly been a romantic. You could sort through your bag later, in your bedroom, and search for those nearly imperceptible clues that someone might love you—*want* you even—ascribing meaning to the lame pre-printed messages on the cheap perforated cards, analyzing signatures and salutations, pondering the source of the more significant pieces of candy. The full-sized Snickers bar, you're certain, had to be from Wendy Pappcrab, who transferred from Breck Academy, whose parents drive her to school from the suburbs in a shiny new minivan. Perhaps then, at the nadir of your disappointment, you find a single chalky pastel heart, one that says KISS ME, floating around loose in the bottom of your bag. Did it merely fall out of a box full of other chalky hearts that say HELLO, COOL, and #1 FAN? You examine the

half-dozen tiny boxes of them for structural weakness.

Many years later you might find out that Brian has been madly in love with you since the third grade. He might admit this to you one night, when your boyfriend is out of town, over a half-gallon of Kamchatka Vodka. You might find that knowing you've been secretly admired for fifteen years—lusted after, pined over, even—makes you feel powerful and sexy. And in a vodka-induced stupor, you might even find him irresistible with his mohawk and his manly gutter-punk stink.

And you might wake up the next morning on a dumpster-dived futon on the floor of Brian's one-room apartment, Kamchatka vapors escaping from your pores, and experience violent memory flashes of the urgent, boots-on fuck you gratefully received from him. Where was that, anyway, a doorway? A flight of stairs? Maybe a bathtub? Somewhere with fluorescent lights, anyway. And after that you might sneak to the bathroom on tiptoe so as not to wake Brian. And as you wash your crusty face, you might see, taped to the back of the bathroom door, in the midst of a collage of punk show flyers and old photos marked with coffee rings, that Megatron card, the one you wrote "Brain" on. And your heart might break for him and for yourself as you sneak out the door, wishing you'd saved the valentine he gave you.

XX

I was born with two X chromosomes and all the standard-issue parts that go with them, but I've never felt adequately feminine. Let me clarify: I don't suffer from gender identity disorder; I'm sure I'm *supposed* to be female, but I've never felt very good at it. I don't feel as feminine as I imagine most women feel.

When I try to explain this problem to other women, I get a lot of skepticism and confusion. When I list the criteria I didn't feel like I met, some women are incensed. "Who says those things are the measure of femininity?" they ask. "That's not what femininity means to *me*." I understand that reaction. It's not fun to think about what "womanlike qualities" are (which is how the Oxford English Dictionary defines femininity). Of course, it's important to note that "female" refers to *sex* and "femininity" refers to *gender*. They're not the same thing. Sex is purely biological: chromosomes, reproductive organs, endocrine systems, pelvic bone shapes.

So then what is gender? When you think about it, it's not a real thing. It's purely a social construct. We learn what the rules are for looking, behaving, and communicating like a woman by reading the cultural script. The Script doesn't change, as much as we'd like it to, or as irrelevant as it often seems to us. I'd like to believe I'm free to completely make up my own rules, but when it comes down to actually living by them, there are consequences to be suffered for not following the script. I'm sure at times I even play a

part in *enforcing* the script's rules on other women.

What are those rules? How does the cultural script define femininity? In Western culture, the script hasn't changed much over time. According to Wikipedia, some of the most common feminine traits include "gentleness, empathy, sensitivity, caring, sweetness, compassion, tolerance, nurturance, deference, and succorance," along with sexual desirability and sexual passivity.

The script tells women that we're supposed to be natural caretakers, but also dependent on men. We're supposed to be submissive, forgiving, and apologetic. We're supposed to be sexy, but not sexual. When we defy these expectations, we hear about, even from well-meaning friends. For example, friends and colleagues have sometimes told me that I have a strong, outspoken, and personality. If I were a man, the same demeanor would be unremarkable. When I think of it that way, "strong, outspoken, and assertive" sounds like it really means "domineering, opinionated, and obnoxious," at least when compared to the way women *should* behave.

My inadequate femininity isn't just a figment of my imagination. I've been diagnosed by professional psychotherapists. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, or MMPI, is one of the most widely used diagnostic tools in Western psychology. Somehow, by requiring subjects to answer over five hundred seemingly innocuous true-or-false questions, the MMPI is able to produce a personality profile that many agree is remarkably accurate. When I took it, the resulting profile was so dead-on, it was almost frightening. It was like the test could see into my soul. One of the things I remember most is that it told me that I responded similarly to people who are more

masculine than feminine.

I lost my MMPI result, unfortunately, but I did look into how it works. There are ten variables that the MMPI measures; the fifth on the list is masculinity/femininity. Apparently, I scored high on this scale, which indicates that I do not conform to a stereotypically feminine personality. What I couldn't find out is why gender is so important that measuring it is a major component in the most popular personality test in modern psychology. The other nine scales on the MMPI—things like depression, hysteria, hypomania, psychopathic deviate, and paranoia—seem to distinct diagnostic value. Scoring high on one of those would clearly indicate abnormality. It reinforces my fear that inability to conform to my gender makes me a freak.

My mother has eight brothers and six sisters, all of them named after saints. In the 1960s, her three older sisters had each in consecutive years ridden on their suburb's parade float dressed in gowns, tiaras, and sashes announcing their reign as the annual Raspberry Princess (Hopkins is the raspberry capitol of Minnesota). I imagine my aunts as having been true girl's girls when they were growing up: setting each other's hair in pink rollers on Sunday nights, giggling and whispering when one of them got pinned by a dreamy boy at the inter-district Catholic school dance.

It makes sense. My aunts are the kind of women who know all the intricacies of female etiquette: bringing “hostess gifts” of scented candles or bath salts to dinner parties; stocking their bathrooms with decorative soaps and color-coordinated hand

towels when they entertain; choosing the appropriate gifts from registries, based on their relationship to the bride or expectant mother and her status in the pecking order, then keeping lists of each gift and its giver at her wedding/baby shower to facilitate the sending of prompt thank-you cards, then writing those thank-you cards with messages that are neither cold nor personal; organizing and setting the rules for secret Santa exchanges; organizing which sister/aunt/niece/sister-in-law/gay-male relative/new fiancée brings the deviled eggs/cocktail wieners/ambrosia salad/cold cuts/pies to each Christmas/Easter/Thanksgiving/ funeral/shower, then making sure the appropriate person is lent the samovar/tiered cake plate/deviled egg tray/industrial-sized crockpot in time for the event, and enforcing the return of it, clean and undamaged, in a timely fashion afterward. They're the keepers of the ancient female wisdom of wives' tales, accurately predicting the genders of the hundreds of babies born to their siblings and their siblings' children and grandchildren.

My mother might have been the rightful heir to the Raspberry Princess throne, the next in the dynasty of matriarchal event-organizers and task-delegators, the keeper of the samovar, the one who never gets stuck making the deviled eggs. But something happened to her. She never learned how to set hair in pink rollers, never giggled and whispered about dreamy boys, never gained position in the pecking order.

As a small child, I intuited from my mother that femininity was vain, decadent, and maybe even sinful. My mother's weird puritanical guilt with regard to overt female sexuality was easily disguised as feminism then, in a post-disco, shoulder-padded world of unisex hairstyles. The women's fashions were at once relaxed and uptight with their

figure-obscuring drapes, soft fabrics, fussy menswear detailing, and buttoned-up stiffness.

I was baptized in the sounds of *Free to Be . . . You and Me* (“a doll, a doll, William wants a doll!”), and I appeared to be a model gender-neutral child. I eschewed dolls and dress-up in favor of crayons and Play-Doh. I wore elastic-waisted corduroy pants, turtlenecks, and the last remnants of the bell-bottomed, doubleknit-polyester toddlerwear of a bygone era. I'd have been perfectly suited to walk amongst the multiracial urban kids in the opening credits of *Sesame Street* in its classic, pre-Elmo salad days.

My mother was strictly pragmatic with regard to “feminine” things like fashion, cosmetics, even her own anatomy (without batting an eye, she voluntarily had her healthy uterus removed after my brother was born; her doctor had generously declared her hysterectomy “medically necessary” because her insurance wouldn't cover tubal ligation).

She ran a daycare until I was four years old, and later worked full-time in a factory, so she didn't have to play the beauty game. That she came of age in the era of bra burning and Gloria Steinem was a convenient justification that meant she didn't have to defend her refusal to care about her appearance. She only owned one pair of shoes without graying laces: worn white sandals leftover from her days in the church where she and my father met in the 70's, when people were “finding themselves.” Their church was less Christian sect than benign cult that just so happened to follow a certain iteration of Jesus—not the suffering messiah on the cross, but the peace-loving, besandaled hippie

with outstretched arms popular on inner-city murals then.

When I was five, I was secretly fascinated with the synthetic hair and seductive clothes, the long plastic limbs and nipple-less curves of a Barbie doll. In kindergarten, I had a casual friend with whom I had nothing in common but my first name. It was thrilling, even cathartic to play at her house, where, from under her bed, she'd pull shoe boxes and Tupperware containers that overflowed with pink plastic bodies, flaxen waves of Rapunzel-length blonde hair, miniature garments for every unpractical occasion, and an assortment of tiny molded plastic shoes—every one of them high-heeled to suit Barbie's perpetually arched feet. My friend owned a half dozen Barbies, plus all the lesser characters in the Barbie family: Skipper, the prepubescent little sister; Madge, the unpopular brunette friend; and Ken, the male counterpart with a conspicuous, smooth bulge between his slightly muscled legs.

In my friend's room, as in many other little girls' rooms around the country, Barbie's supporting players each had a dysfunctional role to play: Skipper, with her too-familiar uncurvy shape, was largely ignored; there was no fantasy in playing with a doll who was neither a baby nor an adult. Madge was Barbie's emotional punching bag, used to act out the catty, girl-on-girl misogynies that we would either dish out or take down the road in high school. I always had to be Madge; I didn't have the confidence and malice to wield Barbie herself (little did I know that the roles we chose then would predict our high-school roles with uncanny precision). Ken only came out of the shoebox after the

clothes and hair got boring, after Barbie tired of hurling insults, in my playmate's pinched falsetto voice, at poor Madge, who was perpetually awed and cowed by Barbie's expertly bitchy tyranny. Ken had a limited wardrobe: one pair of khaki slacks and a lone casual deck shoe. His Polo shirt and neck scarf had long ago been lost to entropy and disinterest, but that was okay. Ken didn't need clothes. He was the one character who could tame Barbie's sadistic fury. Barbie would make satisfied, mouse-like squeaks of pleasure while their plastic bodies clacked against each other horizontally.

I was an ugly kid as I approached puberty. I only wore dresses on special occasions. The few dresses my mother bought for me were dated and conservative in pink or powder blue, with babyish embellishments like bows, ruffles, and eyelet lace. She picked the worst design elements for my body type: drop waists that made my long torso longer, puffed sleeves that broadened my already masculine shoulders, narrow skirts that caused my nonexistent hips to disappear (I inherited my father's "snake hips," as my mother called them). I was a full head taller than most of my peers, male or female. In a dress I felt hunched, oversized, gangly. I felt deformed, like my elbows and knees had been moved several inches to low or too high, like my shoulder bones were twice as big and blocky as those of a normal human. My boat-like feet were long and narrow, like schooners; they looked even more so in the narrow, prissy shoes I had to wear with dresses. I normally let my hair hang over my face, to curtain off my severe and horse-like overbite from prying eyes, but my mother often made me pin it back. Not for the

sake of appearance, but utility. "How can you even see like that?" she'd say. Despite my two X chromosomes, never once as a child did I feel pretty. Dressing "like a girl" underscored my inherent masculinity, a quality that felt congenital and insurmountable; like a birth defect, it was best to accept it and make do. I didn't have access to the mysterious and powerful allure of femininity, so, for a while, I convinced myself I didn't want it.

For my first bra, my mother dragged me into the Sears hosiery and lingerie section. It had become a necessity for my eleven-year-old body, which poked impolitely through the fabric of my shirts. My paternal genes dictated a stout, German *Hausfrau* figure: tall, broad, and top-heavy. In my subconscious, where my deep and morbid shame lived, I welcomed the early gift of breasts. But outwardly, I slouched to hide them. I was comfortable being invisible. And nobody told me there would be an awkward breaking-in period for boobs. They weren't the fleshy, round curves I'd seen and secretly admired on MTV, but square, low-rising pyramids capped with outward-pointing pencil erasers. They were convex dents from inside the plain rectangle of my body.

My first bra-shopping experience was excruciating. I followed close on my mother's heels through the circular racks of girdles and garter belts at Sears. We rushed past the wall of pantyhose encased in ostrich-sized eggs, past the rows of conical cups bigger than my head, past the rayon slips and half-slips of black, white, and beige. My mother was irritable, her humorless mouth pursed so tight that temporary wrinkles

formed around the edges of her lips. I imagine the task was as alien to her as it was to me. She owned one bra, a beige, soft-cupped one with triangular cups and a single hook-and-eye closure in back. She never wore it. She didn't have to. The women in her family were small-average in stature, slender, and flat-chested. She didn't see a first bra as rite-of-passage so much as an emergency engineering challenge: initial structural observation showed that the plane of my chest had suffered unexpected deposits of sedimentary material. The area would need to be graded out at the very least—it may even require some type of a retaining wall or levy. In any case, an expert would have to be consulted.

The expert turned out to be a white-haired old lady. In my mind, her Sears nametag read something crabby and desiccated like Mildred or Petunia. My mother flagged her down and told her I needed a bra, we didn't know what size, I hadn't worn one before. Petunia briefly recognized the rite-of-passage of the occasion with an “aww” and a wink, which I received with my typical goony self-consciousness (looking at my shoes). She brought us both into a fitting room and produced a measuring tape from around her wattled neck. Her precise surveyance of the infrastructure—thirty-inch band circumference, thirty-three-inch bust circumference, recommendation to fortify the retaining material with steel reinforcements, cost-to-benefit analysis, estimated final invoice—assured my mother that yes, the problem was significant and required the first in a series of costly structural interventions that would need to be upgraded continually over the coming years.

Petunia showed us the colorful, satiny, lacy inventory from Maidenform, Bali, and Warner's. My mother scowled with moral distaste. “Playtex,” my mother demanded.

“They come in boxes?”

Petunia informed her that those bras only come in soft cup styles, and my situation would surely require underwire. Something about the suggestion of big tits invoked fear and confusion in my mother. Neither she nor any of her seven sisters had needed underwire. How dare I waste good wholesome energy, which could have been used to clean my room or write letters to my grandparents, on growing boobs? Big breasts were for porn stars and fat people. No thank you. Soft cups would be sufficient.

At that, Petunia gave up on us and pointed us toward the boxed Playtex bras. They were the ugliest things I'd ever seen: dirty beige bullet-shaped cups that went up to my collar bones, wide elastic straps, wrinkles from being crammed into a box indelibly creased into the stiff, synthetic fabric. There was no negotiation, not even on the color, though they also came in white and black. Beige would be discrete with any shirt, my mother explained.

The summer I was thirteen, I wore cut-off shorts and tank tops. My skin turned the deep golden brown of Malibu Barbie. My lanky limbs—the elbows and knees in precisely the right places—had begun assume shapes that I'd recognize decades later, in my twelve-year-old daughter, as unsettlingly post-pubescent. I'd begun growing into my face, so my overbite was now merely moderate and rabbit-like rather than severe and horse-like. I stampeded through my best friend's house to the kitchen between rounds of four square and hacky sack, eager to get back out into the short-lived Minnesota summer.

Leaning into the fridge in search of a pitcher of Kool-Aid, I overheard my friend's big brother, as grown as any adult male I'd met with his ropy arms and thick chest, say to his guest, "That's sick, man. That's Sarah's little friend. She's like, twelve or something." And the responding, "Did you see those long ass legs, though? I'd hit that in a few years." Then laughing. The sensation of being seen, appraised, and desired—with no effort on my part—was powerful and narcotic. Being sexualized was as close as I'd ever felt to being adequately feminine. I realize now that my wires were crossed that way for most of my life. I wonder how much of it came from playing Madge or Ken to my kindergarten friend's abusive Barbie.

Later that summer I made out with one of the neighbor boys, Billy Wilson, in the industrial wasteland by the railroad tracks. My first kiss and my first dry-hump happened within moments of each other. The transition from awkward ineptitude to goddess-like confidence and expertise happened mere moments after our lips touched, then reverted moments after they parted. I had discovered a hidden super power that was so intense, I was afraid to use it again.

In ninth grade, I lost my virginity many times over, monotonously and unclimactically (literally) to my first boyfriend, an unpopular, uninteresting junior. He used hair products, owned a purple silk shirt, and dreamed of one day being promoted to shift manager at McDonalds. I was so unself-aware, it took me six months to figure out that he wasn't my type. We stayed in his twin bed for most of the six months we were

together. When we weren't eating breakfast cereal, watching cartoons, and smoking bales of impotent ditchweed, we were having hours upon hours of dry, latex-sheathed, perfunctory sex. I once stared at the ceiling for ten minutes, with the awkward tension normally reserved for pap smears, while he palpated my pubic bone and lower abdomen. He was searching for "this one spot that makes chicks go crazy," which he'd learned of during a long-distance phone call with his gay older sister. She'd had tried and failed to give him directions to the clitoris, but neither of us knew enough of the landmarks in the vicinity to navigate properly. We told each other "I love you"—whether it was a nod to decency or an unnecessary coercion, I don't know—but we functioned merely as sexual practice dummies for each other. The only thing of use I learned from him was how to be naked in front of someone with the lights on.

After that, I discovered that booze and pot equaled instant social ease and self-confidence in almost any situation. Substance abuse transformed me as effortlessly and dramatically as Billy Wilson's lips had. My default role among peers became *slut*. I'd strip off my ripped jeans and Slayer tee shirt at the crack-hiss of a beer tab for any boy or man who recognized that, under all that sullenness and cynicism, a vagina existed. Sex was the only function during which I felt unabashedly female.

When my mother started a corporate career in her mid-forties, she was forced to buy professional clothes and learn how to disguise her age with makeup. By that time, I had a little bit more facility with "dressing like a girl" than she did. I tried to help her, to

guide her toward femininity in a gentle way that suited her nature, but our aesthetics were too different. Everything she liked was ugly to me: churchy floral prints, matronly shapeless styles, narrow conservative shoes. Velour (need I say more?) She never did seem to get the hang of it.

As a grown woman, I make a good show of appearing to be feminine, but I'll never be a natural. I'll never adopt that social filter that tells a lady that it's not okay to burp in polite company. My fingernails will always return to their auto-mechanic state mere hours after a manicure. I'll always drop food into my décolletage and fail to launder my clothes properly. Every pair of pantyhose I'll ever own will run before I manage to pull them up even once. I'll never be capable of looking, sounding, or behaving in the clean, soft, and polished manner of a "real" girl. Other women will always see right though me at first glance. Except my mother, who'll marvel at my natural gait in high heels, my buxom Hausfrau chest, and my tolerance of pain in service of beauty.

A few years ago, my mother and I talked over beers and cigarettes on her front porch. She recounted a moment from her childhood in vivid detail, something she rarely does, and I caught a glimpse of the source of her damaged female psyche, which in turn, may have birthed my deformed one.

When she was ten years old she shared a small bedroom with her two little sisters, Margie and Theresa. Everything the three of them wore, every toy they played with, was a cast-off Genny's, Cathy's, or Mary's. The older girls shared the big room at the end of

the hall, a forbidden secret wonderland to my mother. She'd hear them in there laughing, grooming each other, and sharing secrets. When they were gone, she'd sneak in there and sort through each item on the dresser under the big mirror: the jewel-like fragrance bottles, the slick tubes of lipstick, the tiny bottles of creams and foundations, the little pots of shimmery colors, the powder puffs and tiny brushes. One afternoon when her sisters were out, she gave herself a makeover.

When she heard the front door open and close, she rushed to put everything away in case one of her sisters was home. When she ran downstairs to wash her face, she realized it wasn't one of her sisters, it was her father, just home from work.

I remember my maternal grandfather as a stern, stoic man. I was one of his forty-some grandchildren, so I doubt he even knew my name (not that I blame him; I doubt I could name even half my cousins). When he married my grandmother, he was thirty and she was sixteen, fresh off the farm where she and her fifteen siblings were raised. He worked manual labor, painting houses, to support his family, the size of which increased more than once a year at times. I imagine he behaved much like Donald Draper from *Mad Men* does around his children: distant, commanding, silent. The love, attention, and approval of a father like that, in a family that big, must have had to spread paper thin.

Her father caught her on her way to wash her face. "What have you done?" he said. "You look like a corpse. Go wash your face."

She must have been traumatized. She never did succeed to be crowned Raspberry Princess. She didn't even compete. The other sisters married football fans, bought new tract houses in the suburbs, and wore gold jewelry with various precious- and

semiprecious-stones around their soft, sweet-smelling necks and pretty, manicured fingers. They've remained in charge of the showers and holidays, granting or denying permission to those who deign to borrow the samovar. They birthed legions of daughters who also married football fans and bought suburban tract houses, who dutifully send me invitations to their showers and weddings (with tastefully subtle hints that they're registered at Macy's) and the occasional Christmas card with a fuzzy family portrait of everyone in sweaters.

My mother has been saddled with deviled-egg duty for over thirty years. They tell her it's because her deviled eggs are the best, but she knows better. They're standard Betty Crocker Cookbook eggs—anyone could make them, but they're a pain in the ass. If I happen to be there when my Aunt Genny descends on my mother's Minneapolis home like a tornado of talcum powder and cashmere, she coos at me kisses each of my cheeks with her tasteful mauve lips, and she speaks to me as though I were a simpleton or a spastic. That kind of encounter is one of the few things that still has the power to make me feel as deformed and awkward as I did as a little girl in an ugly dress.

One of my favorite memories from childhood is one that my mother denies ever happened. I was six, riding shotgun in my mom's massive green station wagon, my baby brother in the back. We pulled into an empty, snow-covered Sears parking lot. Completely out of character, My mother sped up turned hard to the right, and slammed on the brakes, sending the car spinning (a stunt known to us northerners as “whipping shitties”). Elliot and I squealed with glee as the angular momentum of the behemoth station wagon slammed our little bodies around. She laughed with us and spun a few

more shitties, in the middle of the city, in the broad daylight of a Saturday afternoon, until we got pulled over.

With the mock-contrition of a class clown being scolded by a nun, my mother stifled her giggling as the officer questioned her, then she did something I'd never seen her do before and never saw her do again: she flirted. The pitch of her voice raised half an octave. Her lips took on an unnatural pout, and there was a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. If I remembered exactly what she said, I'm sure I'd be able to read sexual subtext into it now, but even then, before I knew from subtext, I could sense the nature of her power. He let her go with a warning and a smile.

Trigger Happy

When my childhood best friend died, I was secretly relieved—not because she was suffering or for any other noble reason; she died the second the bullet entered her skull. I was relieved because deep down, I hated her. I'd actually fantasized about her dying. Maybe not in such a violent and senseless way, but by something else that happens quickly, maybe, like sudden end-stage cancer, or a tragic school bus accident. In my preadolescent mind, that was the only way our friendship could ever end.

I was fourteen when Bridget died. That day, we got off the school bus to find Josh waiting for us. He was the neighborhood delinquent who was always in trouble for skipping school, stealing, looking at porn, starting fires, or getting into other shenanigans. We'd all known each other since we were little. He was excited to show us his new toy, a semi-automatic nine-millimeter handgun he'd stolen from a neighbor's house. We went to Bridget's house because her mother was at work, as usual. She and I took turns holding the gun. *Ooh, it's heavy*, we said, as does everyone the first time they hold one, but we bored of it quickly.

A few hours later, I played Solitaire at the kitchen table. Bridget sat across from me, her hand in a box of Cheerios, an old, spiral-corded phone receiver wedged between her shoulder and ear as she began another hour of inane yet thrilling adolescent conversation with a boy she met at school whom she hoped would become her first

boyfriend. AC/DC played on a boom box on top of the fridge. Josh never tired of playing with the gun: taking the clip out, taking the rounds out of the clip, switching the safety off, slapping the clip back in, miming shooting the fridge, cocking back the action and ejecting each round from the chamber, reloading the clip, switching the safety back on. He struck action movie poses: wide stance, arms extended, serious eyebrows; back against wall, gun pointing up, looking stealthily around corner; pants sagged low on hips, one arm extended, gun held sideways; breathing hard, gun pointed at own head, theatrical primal yell. He didn't intend to hurt anyone. He was just a dumb kid with an irresistible toy.

I allowed myself to cheat on my Solitaire game and grabbed a handful of Cheerios. I gave the box back to Bridget, who told the boy on the phone what kind of toothpaste she likes; apparently he used a different brand and this caused her endless amusement and astonishment. I was losing Solitaire, but I had a rule not to cheat twice, so I shuffled and dealt another game. I promised myself that if Bridget didn't get off the phone before I finished this game, I was going home, for sure this time. I sung/mumbled to the AC/DC song under my breath, *she was the best damn woman that I evah seen, hmm hm hm shma schmahs, tellin me no lies, knockin me out with those American thighs.*

I looked up just as Josh placed the muzzle of the gun to Bridget's temple and pulled the trigger.

It was the loudest sound in the world. Everything turned black-and-white. Bridget's skin was white, her hair was black, the phone receiver was white, the thick runnels of blood coming from her temple, her eyes, her nose, her ears were black, the spreading puddle

head-blood on the floor is black blood with white Cheerios floating in it. I knew she was dead before she even fell because I could feel the life being sucked out of the room.

After we called 911, the police asked me if Josh was jealous of the boy on the phone, if he was angry, if he'd ever had sex with her, if he'd ever had sex with me, if I'd ever had sex with her. None of us had ever had sex with anyone, but rumors later went around the community about an imagined love triangle between Bridget, Josh, and the boy on the phone. Josh was too stupid to have intended this. I felt sorry for him. We were all stupid. It could have been any one of us who got shot, any one of use who did the shooting.

During our friendship, Bridget was mean, vain, and shallow. For seven years, I was her obedient sidekick. She chose what we did and where we went, what kind of music we listened to, which clothes and hairstyles were cool and which weren't. She'd become too large, a malevolent general I'd been conscripted to serve.

We met in the second grade. I was new to the school. My parents had just divorced, so my mother moved my brothers and me into an apartment. I'd been a social misfit my entire short life. I dreaded the shark tank of friend-making so much, I'd been faking illness to miss school on a regular basis since kindergarten. On countless weekday mornings, I'd squeeze the thermometer under my tongue, thinking the extra pressure just might cause the mercury to rise a little higher so I'd be allowed to stay home. Unfortunately for me, I was one of the healthiest kids alive. Before the divorce, my mother occasionally took pity on me and let me stay home anyway. I'd quietly color on

the living room floor and passively listen to the *The Young and the Restless* on TV, my mother's favorite daytime soap. After the divorce, my mother took on full-time semesters at the University of Minnesota and continued to work the second shift at a factory, so she stopped tolerating my fake illnesses.

During the first week at my new school, I became smitten with a girl who sat in the front of the class. Bridget was pretty with her blue eyes and freckles, and she was popular. She wrote with colorful glittered pens, her erasers were shaped like panda bears and unicorns, and she wore nail polish. Her penmanship was neat, feminine, and bubbly, where mine was messy, sharp, and jagged. She wore jean skirts and bright white Keds—the name brand ones, not generic. Her socks matched her shirts, and I just knew that the bottoms of them never got all gray and crusty like mine did. I deliberately set out to become her friend.

Our friendship developed quickly. I was surprised at her lack of resistance. It was almost too good to be true. We discovered that we lived two blocks apart, so we started walking home from school together. For the next seven years, I would be her handmaiden, her devotee. Indentured servitude was the cost of her easy friendship.

The power dynamic developed slowly. It seemed balanced at first. Even though she was better than me in a thousand ways, she didn't seem to notice. It didn't seem to matter that she was prettier than I was. She had true conventional beauty, where I had “character.” She had no obvious physical defects, like my horsey overbite or my gangly orangutan limbs. She was feminine in a way that I'd never quite mastered: she was clean and sweet-smelling, she didn't spit, burp, or fart, her knees weren't scabby, her feet were

small. I had always been—and forever would be—physically and socially awkward. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get my hair to look neat. I was hard on clothes and shoes, as though I lived feral in the woods. My jeans had holes, my shirts were stained, my shoes always seemed to stretch out and flop around on my already-enormous feet. I couldn't seem to master small tasks that other civilized humans could. When I ate, food went everywhere. Frequently, hours after a meal, I'd find marinara sauce on my knee, or peanut butter in my ear, or a crouton in my sock. I wiped my nose on my sleeve, went days without brushing my teeth, and wore dirty underwear. I picked wax out of my ear in public. I talked too loud. If I tried to wear a dress, I looked like a self-conscious praying mantis: freakish long limbs, ugly sharp angles, giant feet. Slouching was a defensive habit that I didn't lose until my early twenties, when I found the artificial confidence that comes with substance abuse; if I curled in on myself, less people would notice me.

Bridget's house wasn't at all what I expected. From the outside, it looked haunted. The foundation was crumbling, the front steps were rotting and slanted, the roof shingles were flaking off and flapping in the wind. All the windows were hung with mismatched bed linens and old towels. The grass grew wild, except for the bald patches of dirt that dotted a perfect circle around one of the laundry line poles, where the dog had shit within the limits of his chain. Bridget's German Shepherd, Spider, was chained to that pole every time I saw him. Six months after I met him, the city put him to sleep for biting a three-year-old neighbor. Bridget insisted that the girl had provoked Spider by poking him in the eye with a stick.

I didn't meet Bridget's mother, Barb, until after I'd been coming to her house for a

month. Barb was fifty, much older than any other parent I'd met, and she worked the graveyard shift at the V.A. Hospital, so she was always asleep in the daytime. The first time I had to use the bathroom there, I awkwardly walked through Barb's room. It disturbed me to see her, a large woman in a girdle and smeared lipstick, sprawled out on a bare twin mattress, snoring into her pillow. A small TV next to the bed played *The People's Court* at an alarming volume as I tiptoed through to the dark bathroom and frantically searched for the light switch so I could shut the door, hoping that wouldn't be the moment I had to meet her for the first time.

By comparison, my own home was stable, normal, and inviting. My mother worked and went to school, but at least she only slept when we did. Our windows had curtains, rather than bed sheets and blankets, and they were usually open in the daytime to let in the light. We ate meals at the dinner table, with the TV off, and we talked to each other. Maybe that's why Bridget considered me a worthy friend. Maybe to her, her own weirdness outweighed mine.

Sarah was our age and lived in our neighborhood. I liked her, but I'd only spent time with her without Bridget on a handful of occasions. Once, when the three of us had been planning a sleepover, Bridget got sick at the last minute. I spent the night at Sarah's house anyway, and we'd had more fun than either of us had ever had with Bridget. We could be ourselves without her. Each of us could talk about what we wanted to without Bridget stepping in to regain control and refocus the attention on herself. The only time

we talked about Bridget that night was in the early morning, as we were falling asleep.

“What should we tell Bridget tomorrow?” Sarah asked.

I knew what she meant. Bridget would have been furious to find out we'd had the sleepover without her. We decided to spare her feelings, and spare ourselves from her wrath, and tell her we both stayed at home. The next day, when Bridget called and asked what I did the night before, I lied and told her nothing. She had already found out from my little brother that I was at Sarah's. Bridget reasserted her power with a “divide and conquer” strategy. For the next two weeks, she shunned me, at home and at school, and doted on Sarah.

Bridget enforced a very specific, sometimes contradictory set of morals. When we started experimenting with alcohol, she'd make a great show of drinking more than me or Sarah, but if one of us wanted to drink the next day, she'd accuse us of being alcoholics. She'd scold us for missing homework assignments, but then she'd copy my answers on exam days. She was especially weird about sex and boys. They were only valid topics of conversation if she brought them up, but if Sarah or I did, we were boy-crazy. When she heard about Sarah getting punished for looking at her dad's *Playboys*, she was morally outraged, but she'd forgotten that the three of us had first discovered porn at her house, when she showed us the hardcore, full-penetration videotape that her grown-up sister had left years ago.

The day before Bridget's death, Sarah and I had finally rebelled against her. Bridget had been trash-talking Sarah for weeks because she'd gotten a boyfriend. Sarah was so enthralled with Marc, a seventeen-year old high-school dropout with his very own

Monte Carlo and manlike facial hair that she was no longer susceptible to Bridget's demands for attention. She'd been skipping school so she wasn't around us as much. After school the day before her death, Bridget had had enough with Sarah's choices. She called her and told her to meet us at the bus stop. Sarah looked nervous when we showed up. I tried to break the tension by being friendly to her, but then Bridget started yelling. She said things like, "I don't know what's happening to you, Sarah. You've changed. You're becoming a bad person. You're too young to be skipping school and spending all your time with boys." I just watched, mouth agape, and tried to give Sarah sympathetic looks. I suspected that Bridget was jealous. She'd been trying to get the attention of a boy at school for weeks, and she'd only just gotten his phone number.

Sarah tried to explain herself. She told us that she'd been distracted because she'd finally decided to have sex with Marc. She was the first of us to lose her virginity, so I was fascinated. I asked her questions and she blushed and filled me in on the details. Of course, the shift of attention onto Sarah pissed Bridget off more. She pronounced that Sarah was a slut and declared that our friendship with her was officially over. While Sarah cried, Bridget grabbed my arm and walked away. I don't know why I let her. On the walk home, as she spouted anti-Sarah sentiment, I silently looked at the ground. When she pressed me for agreement, I told her I was sick and had to go home.

The minute I got home, I called Sarah, who was sobbing. That night, I slept at her house and we spent the whole night finally sharing our years of frustration with Bridget's totalitarian regime. We plotted and schemed and tried to figure out a way to rid her from our lives for good. We couldn't imagine actually confronting her. We were sure that she'd

manipulate us into feeling sorry for her and forgiving her for being a bitch, then after we were back under her control, she'd find a way to punish us for our transgression. We planned to meet the next day after school, but when the time came, without Sarah's reinforcement, I caved in to Bridget's demands and went to her house.

At Bridget's funeral the cliquy girls from our high school hugged each other in groups and heaved theatrical sobs. Very few of them had known her, and none of them knew her well; it was only January of our freshman year. By the end of the school year, one of them wrote a saccharine, rhyming poem to go with a full-page photo of Bridget in the yearbook. Bridget *hated* that picture. None of the cliquy girls noticed me as I wandered around among the funeral sprays, puffy-faced and in shock, the punched-in-the-face kind of shock that only comes from staggering grief or heavy nicotine withdrawal. The girls didn't know that Bridget and I had been best friends since second grade, that I watched the blood run out of her. A month later, when they found out I was there when she died, they started whispering when I'd walk past them in the halls, on the few days I attended school instead of smoking pot in the alley.

Someone, maybe Bridget's mother, had gotten the idea that Bridget's favorite color was purple. There were lilies everywhere in lavender, mauve, periwinkle, and violet. The casket was open, but I couldn't go near it. Bridget's adult sister had told me that the nine-millimeter round had ricocheted around in her head, obliterating her brain and caving in her forehead, so the funeral director had had to pop it back out like a car dent—something having to do with cartilage. She told me that by the time the funeral director got to Bridget's body, her lips had curled up into a violent, macabre smile, so he'd

had to remold the structure of her face and stitch her lips together. *They did a nice job*, she said. She told me that the police generally don't clean up after a violent death, that she'd had to wipe the blood and bits of skull and brain off their mother's kitchen floor herself. Maybe she shouldn't have told me these things, but I imagine that she had to tell someone.

The service opened with a Whitney Houston song—*and aaaaahh-eeee-I, will always love you-hhOOOhoo*—a song that the mourners would be forced to associate with Bridget's death forever after. Bridget hated the song, but I supposed it was more appropriate than AC/DC would have been. I finally worked up the nerve to go see her in her lavender satin-lined casket. The overall effect was terrifying. She looked plastic, waxy. By necessity, her hair was combed in a style she would never have worn, to cover her popped-out forehead and the putty-filled hole in her temple. Someone put her in a matronly plum silk blouse buttoned up to her chin. Her skin was caked with powdery makeup many shades darker and far warmer than her ivory, freckled, Irish skin. I looked for evidence of the joker smile her sister had told me about. Her lips were thin and shriveled, almost purple, but at least the stitches were neatly hidden inside. They did a horrible job.

When they closed the casket, Bridget's mother began to moan and howl like an animal. The sound of her, the sound of a mother mourning her baby, the sound of pure, undiluted despair, made all the mourners cry involuntarily, even the cliquy girls from school.

After the funeral, Sarah felt guilty. She seemed sure that we somehow caused

Bridget's death by betraying her. Strangely, I didn't. In fact, for many years after, I'd forgotten about the rebellion incident entirely. I don't know if it's because the trauma of watching her die overshadowed everything else, or because deep down, I felt like justice had been served. I do know that I don't regret that it happened. I do feel bad for her mother, and for Josh, who was tried as an adult and convicted with manslaughter. I'm angry at the adult neighbor who'd left a loaded gun in a shoebox to be stolen by a dumb kid. But I'm grateful for the opportunity Bridget's death provided me to start over and become my own person.

Entropy and ADD

While my father cooks dinner, I wreck things. Every weeknight, the blaring sound of *The MacNeil Lehrer News Hour* encompasses my entire four-year-old existence: in humorless monotone or cynical outrage, boring men discuss Reagan, Tehran, Manuel Noriega, something about Beirut. The words mean little to me but sound as familiar as “Big Bird” and “The Land of Make-Believe.” The TV’s relentless sound waves collide with violent photons from the dining room’s overhead light fixture and strike a precise, grating frequency—a rippling pattern of sine and cosine that compel me to foment chaos.

The News Hour begins with businesslike orchestral power music: a precise tenor horn bleats confidently while a neat assemblage of rushing, taut violins support it from both sides of the aisle, almost speaking the words “congressional sessions.” They’re interrupted by level-headed woodwinds before the orchestral delegates reach a melodic consensus. An authoritative bass drum’s three gavel clacks declare, “WASH-ING-TON,” ending the debate. If the ethos of Capitol Hill had a score, it would be this.

Absent minded and without malice, I destroy things my mother cares about. I drip wax onto the dinner table with a tapered candle. In a brief, soothing moment of quiet—as Jim Lehrer’s question travels to near-Earth orbit and bounces off a satellite on its way to a Moscow newsroom—the wax is pliable and warm. I examine its buttery opacity and probe its curves with my little fingers until it turns cold and brittle. It crumbles as the

Moscow correspondent responds. In trying to remove it with a butter knife, I mar the table's finish.

Dinner is cooking. Something with fried onions, by the smell and the hiss of the skillet. I envision a pile of slimy translucent fried onions, ribbed and purple-gray and tangled like earth worms. The back of my throat turns cavernous and watery. I gag. To stop thinking of onions/worms I tear bits of paper from the pages of *Atlas Shrugged*. I chew them to a uniform pulp. It tastes like libraries, not worms. I ponder the pronunciation of the name on the paperback cover: Ayn. Every time I see this book around the house it disturbs my sense of order. Ayn. Ane? Ein? Ah-*een*? I want to make it say *Ann*, to make it rhyme with the author's last name.

My ears are peppered with Kalashnikov fire and the practiced cadence of a British reporter in a war-torn country. I pave the library-flavored paste into the seam of the table leaf. I lay my baby-fat cheek on the cool wood as meaningless-but-familiar words ricochet between my temples: "freedom fighters . . . missile strikes . . . Soviet allies . . . infrastructure." I know the BBC correspondent's voice better than I know my mother's heartbeat.

My father appears from the kitchen with a spatula in hand. He wrecks things, too: his shirt is stained, his hair is wild. He lets ashes from the ever-present cigarette in the corner of his mouth fall where they may. He turns up the volume and retreats to the kitchen.

I chew the end of a pristine Bic pen, tenderizing and thinning the plastic with the crowns of my baby molars. I press the nib into the veneer of the table hard enough to

excavate grooves. When the ball point seizes up, I free it by tracing a line around the Belarus-shaped scab on my right knee, then drawing a stick-girl with a triangular dress on my right toe. Layer by layer, I gently deposit ink into the groove in the wood grain until I'm satisfied with the insectlike green-black iridescence of it.

“This program was brought to you by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and viewers like you.” There's nothing left to do but separate the conical pen tip from the shaft with incisors rounded like safety scissors, exposing the ink tube inside. I test its physical properties—tensile strength, density, inertia—until ink leaks onto my dimpled hands. I'm alarmed by how suddenly the ink spreads to my lips, my hair, my knees; it spreads *between* moments, insidiously, the way nightmares escalate. I wipe ink on the rough plywood underside of the table, freeing several of the papery boogers I left there during a different day's *News Hour*, a different day of waiting for dinner and, absent minded and without malice, wrecking things my mother cares about.

Sore Thumb

I've long been accustomed to not quite fitting in, as a person, but never have I felt so socially awkward as I have during grad school. It came as a shock to me that my age and socioeconomic background would make me stand out quite so obviously.

Somehow it always comes to this: I sit in one of eight chairs crowded around a tiny bar table and drink gin gimlets too fast in order to suppress my social anxiety. I want to go home and watch PBS. I want to take an Ambien and read National Geographic in the bathtub. I want to smoke, to chain smoke, without having to don five layers of jersey cotton—the standard uniform of the grad student—and a wool coat so I can smoke outside, alone, in the whipping wind and snow of the open prairie.

As I look around the table and try to decipher the inside joke they're all laughing at, I realize I'm sweating again. I catch a fleeting wisp of rank body odor and/or dead mouse and I know it's coming from me. I had to pull a shirt out of the dirty clothes this morning. I should have dug deeper. I also know the smell is mine because it couldn't possibly belong to one of the young, fresh-scrubbed, healthy pink faces around me. The jersey cotton garments *they* chose this morning were recently laundered, neatly folded, and stored in tidy square stacks in modern portable storage units (portable so they can take them “home,” whatever that means, somewhere a plane ride away, some residence that someone else pays for, for Christmas and spring break and summer, or even

Thanksgiving or Easter weekend).

I finally engage in small talk with the young woman next to me. Inevitably, some element of the conversation—a missed pop culture reference, my accidental mention of a year that might as well be prehistoric to her, a revealing personal detail—makes it necessary for me to reveal my age.

It's unsettling when my experience with major cultural events don't match up with theirs. For example, I was pregnant with my second child on the morning of September 11, 2001. It was a primary election day. I was getting ready to cast my vote at the neighborhood's elementary school. My two-year-old son toddled into the bedroom and said, "Mama, I want Sesame Street but there's only the buildings on fire."

My grad school peers remember it differently. They were in class, in fifth or sixth grade. They were sneaking paragraphs of Judy Blume during long division lessons when the somber principal came on the P.A. They remember their teachers crying. I saw my own fifth grade teacher cry after a PA announcement, too, when the Challenger space shuttle blew up on launch killed the entire crew long before my peers were born.

"No way," the young woman says, eyes wide, mouth agape, when I tell her my age. I nod and shrug—oh well, there you have it. Her bottom lip pouts in an expression of mock pity. Well, you don't *look* thirty-seven. I thought you were my age—or, not *my* age, obviously, but only a *little* older. You look like you're, like, twenty-eight," she consoles.

This is, of course, objectively false. I resent her for it, not because it's disingenuous (which it is), but because it implies that passing for twenty-eight would be my only saving grace. It's a half-assed consolation prize for my pitiable situation, one that

I should be grateful for. In fact, I don't *want* to look twenty-eight. I don't want to *be* twenty-eight. I want to be thirty-seven, but with other thirty-seven-year-old people to talk to.

It only takes ten years for every cell in the human body to die off and be replaced by a new one. That means every atom that composes you today wasn't there a decade ago, which in turn means you have no more in common with your younger self than you do with any other human alive. I'm at least ten years older than most of my peers. I think about how different I was a decade ago—whether I'd have fit in then. I wouldn't have. I might as well have been a different person entirely. I might have been the same age as my colleagues, but I would have stood out in other ways.

It's not only my age that sets me apart from my peers, it's also my generation. I'm a member of Generation X, but most of my peers are card-carrying Millennials. They're the generation from which the Brony phenomenon sprang (Bronies being adults—most notably young men—who adhere to the philosophies of the cartoon *My Little Ponies: Friendship is Magic*). When my fourteen-year-old son brought this trend to my attention, I thought, I get it: it's ironic, like when my generation wore tee shirts that said “D.A.R.E. to keep kids off drugs” while we smoked pot all day. That's not what it's about at all, actually. Bronies are a symptom of a Millennial philosophy of unflinching sincerity and optimism known as “New Sincerity,” a phrase coined by the late David Foster Wallace, a fellow Generation-X'er. Where Generation X gave birth to punk rock, gangsta rap, death

metal, zines, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the Millennials are responsible for Bronies, Miley Cyrus, *Glee*, and selfies. Among the general population of my university, the Millennials are largely apathetic to politics, they're content with the idea that racism no longer exists, they believe that equality for the LGBTQ community has been fully-achieved—and that they were somehow instrumental in establishing it—and they're comfortable with the rampant corporatization and homogenization of essentially everything.

I don't understand them. I don't understand their refusal to rebel against their parents. I don't understand their hesitance to grow up and get out of their parents' home, never to return. Most of the people I know who are my age couldn't wait to turn eighteen so they could move out, whether or not they had a job or an apartment or a campus to go to.

Before I came to grad school, I went to a low-cost, urban university that was known for serving “working adults.” There were no cliques there. There wasn't even a dominant demographic to fit into. There were immigrants, mothers, upwardly mobile secretaries, veterans, seniors, artists, nerds, freaks, and hood rats. There were no sports teams, no dorms, no frats. There was no mascot. Everyone had a life apart from school: a family (other than parents and siblings), one or more paying jobs, a home that was neither on campus nor at their parents' house, a full set of bills, a household full of accumulated stuff. I loved it there. When I finished, I thought the grad school student body—at least in the fine arts disciplines—would be similar: independent, diverse, experienced. A whole

program full of writers, I thought, especially at a low-cost state school, would be full of adults, cynics, smokers, oddballs. It's not.

I experienced a kind of culture shock when I was first exposed to traditional university life. Of course I'd seen the traditional college experience portrayed in a thousand movies and TV shows, but I'd always assumed it was a gross oversimplification and an overused cliché. Healthy young white people, dorm living, sports teams with cheerleading squads and mascots, frats and sororities, pledging and hazing, giant lecture halls headed by distinguished old academics in tweed jackets with patches on the elbows, cafeteria food, keg parties: this version of university life was familiar to me only through fiction. I had no idea a school could so perfectly fit the mold.

My first trip to campus was especially upsetting. I had just moved to town, having only communicated with the MFA faculty through email. A week before class started, I drove to campus to get my student ID card and buy my textbooks. As I climbed the hill that the university sits atop, the colors purple and gold began to dominate my field of view. People on the sidewalks of all ages were dressed in sweatshirts and baseball hats and visors and sunglasses with the Minnesota Vikings logo plastered all over them. They shielded their eyes from the sun and looked in one direction as though watching for a parade. It wasn't a parade they were looking at, though, or anything else that people should crowd around for. It was the university's football field, surrounded by a high chain-link fence with view-blocking banners tied to it. The banners announced, "Minnesota Vikings Training Camp." It was the middle of a Monday afternoon, and a bunch of tourists were salivating over catching the briefest of glimpses of jocks straight

out of college who just might become heroes of professional football. That so many people could willingly spend their time on such an activity pissed me off.

Sports culture comprises approximately ninety-five percent the of total culture to be found in Mankato, MN, as I'm sure it does in a thousand other small college towns. The town is teeming with cadres of fit young athletes in various uniforms. They roam like packs of feral dogs. They take over whole acres of the city every week, from Thursday through Sunday (the weekend starts on Thursday here—commonly known as “thirsty Thursday”). They drive drunk with impunity, because the town exists as their personal amusement park and they know it. They roam the residential blocks late at night, after bar close and howl for no known reason.

My social class isolates me from my peers as well, perhaps even more than my age and generation combined. These things aren't immediately apparent, not to me, anyway, but I feel ostracized and irrelevant in minute ways that accumulate over time. It wouldn't matter so much if I were still just another high school dropout, recovering junkie, telemarketer, cocktail waitress, stripper, or single mother. But I've somehow managed to sneak over to the better side of the tracks, to duck under the velvet rope into the VIP area that is the dominant culture.

I'm subconsciously drawn to the few classmates who I assume to be like me. Some little closet in the back of my mind stores tiny details, like the cars they drive (if it's

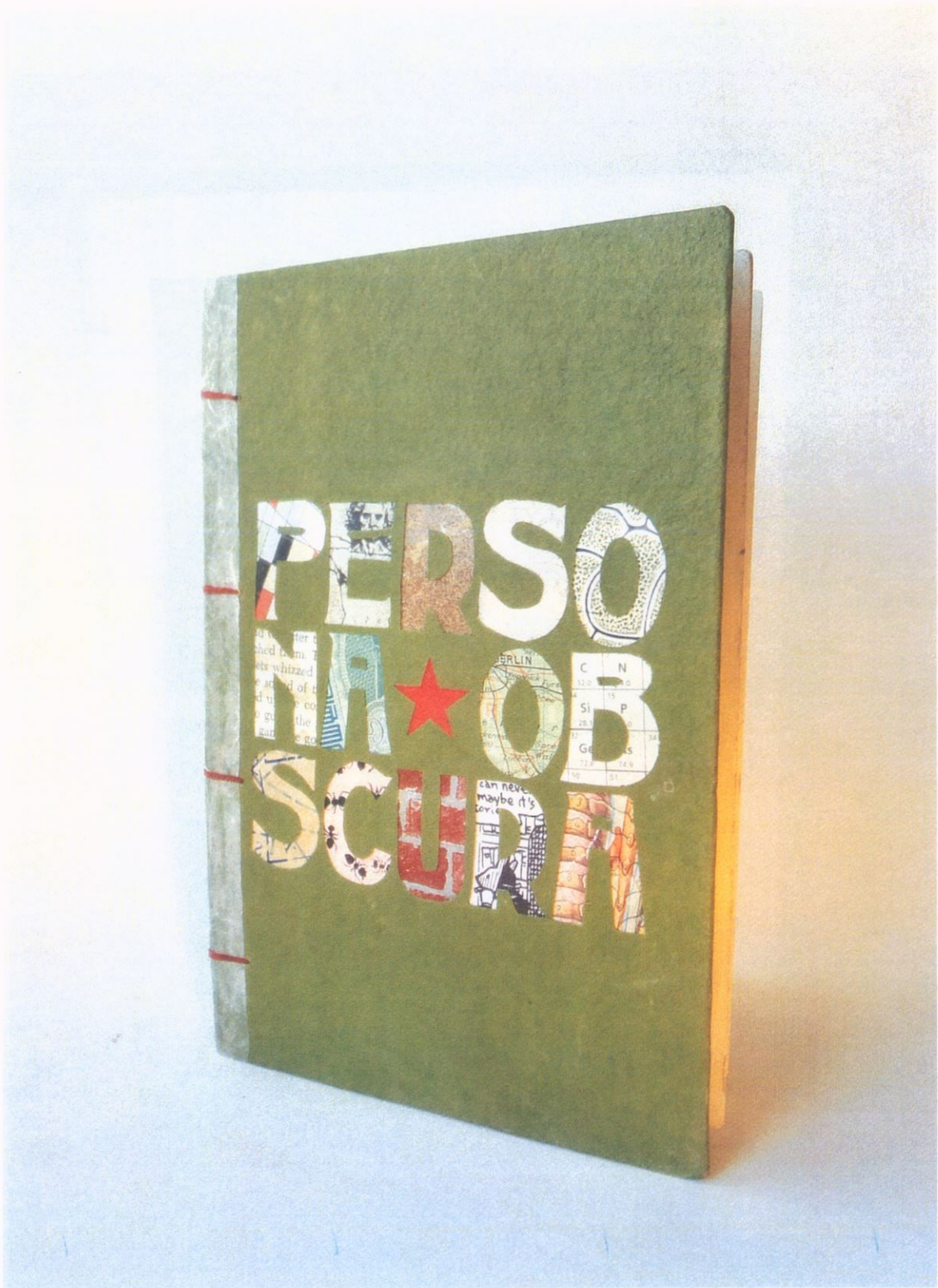
shitty like mine, there's no question they bought it themselves rather than receiving it as a gift from their parents), or their haircuts, or the number of cat hairs on their jersey cotton clothes, or the worry lines on their faces. I register the things they say and their reactions to small disasters. If a car accident is no big deal, it's a sure sign their parents pay for the full collision insurance package (maybe even with free rentals to cover the repair period). If their laptop breaks and their life isn't severely interrupted, they don't know what it is to live on slim margins.

I often feel like I'm not fully participating in the grad school experience. My classmates are often involved in unpaid extracurricular responsibilities. They're on the editorial staff of various literary journals, they volunteer to serve the community, they organize public readings and events.

Sure, we're all suffering from "grad student poverty," eating ramen noodles and taking advantage of free dryer night at the laundromat, but when you're not even sure how your tuition gets paid, how much your rent costs, or who gets your hospital bills, you're not a grown-up yet. If you can afford to take every unpaid internship or extracurricular opportunity that comes your way, you're most likely still dependent on your parents. If you have a campus meal plan, you probably haven't lived enough to acquire a kitchen full of utilitarian, boring, mismatched, but essential crap. If you only consider yourself "home" on school holidays (when you go to your parents' house to sleep in your childhood bedroom, which they keep for you because you haven't flown the nest yet), you're not quite living in the real world yet.

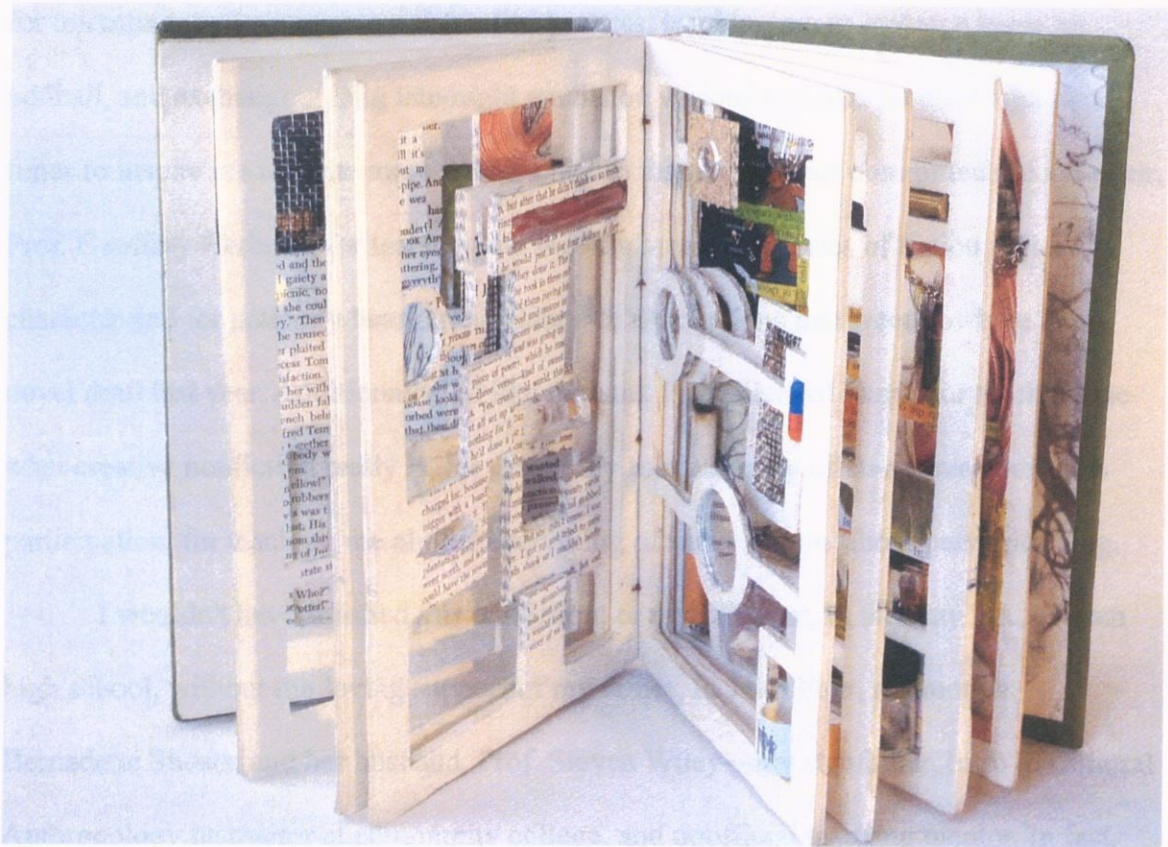
All this makes me sound like a self-pitying complainer. Maybe that's all I am. Maybe I envy the people who don't struggle with money, age, and social awkwardness. I must admit, if my parents wanted to pay my rent or car insurance premiums or credit card bills, I'd take it. I've been trying lately to be more aware of my resentment for people who are privileged in ways I'm not, to recognize how it manifests itself in my behavior. It seems so deeply rooted in my brain, though, this reverse classism. It's the last sanctioned form of discrimination. I have power now, over privileged people, namely my students. And I've noticed that I've shown favor to the less privileged among them—the poor, the social outcasts, the immigrants, the overweight, the ugly—and I've prejudged the ones I deemed the most privileged—the sports scholarship kids, the conventionally beautiful, the well-dressed, the arrogant.

Now that I've earned a master's degree, I suppose I'll have to get used to it. I'm upwardly mobile—one of them now. My kids will likely enjoy the same privileges that my peers do. They'll go to college, they'll be young, white and healthy. They'll come “home” on weekends and ask me for money. And hopefully I'll be able to give it to them.





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