

Straddling the Line

by

Janelle K. Karas

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

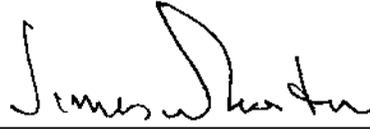
Master of Arts

April 25th 2007

Straddling the Line

by Janelle K. Karas

Approved:



Director

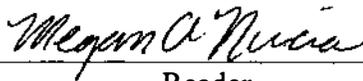
May 8, 2007

Date



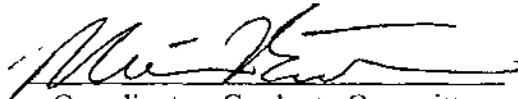
Reader

May 9 2007



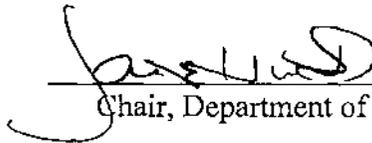
Reader

5-27-07



Coordinator, Graduate Committee

5-21-07



Chair, Department of English

5-22-07

“Fear is the heart of love...”

-Death Cab for a Cutie

Dedicated to my Mom and Dad
for their never-ending support,
for their always reading eyes,
and for their beautiful hearts.

Dedicated to my Sisters
for giving me inspiration and drive.

Dedicated to Josh
for loving me throughout it all.

Table of Contents

Introduction: What is the difference between fiction and nonfiction?...	1
Bench Warmers...	13
Just Visiting...	21
One Cent Loss...	29
Green Lipstick and a Red Rose...	45
A Long, Straight Road...	56
How the Dexys Midnight Runners Brought a Couple Back Together...	65
Works Cited...	77

Straddling the Line

A thin line separates fiction and nonfiction. Readers tend to have preconceived notions about the contents of these two specific genres before delving into a text. In a lecture, Margaret Atwood stated, "...if you write a work of fiction, everyone assumes that the people and events in it are disguised as biography—but if you write biography, it's equally assumed you're lying your head off" ("On Writing Poetry"). These presumptions are both unfair and unjust for a writer. When writing in a particular category (fiction or nonfiction) the writer may start to feel pressured to conform to certain "rules." What does a nonfiction memoir *have* to include? Do writers *have* to stay within certain boundaries in order to make their readers "happy" or to come closer to a universal truth—a truth that all of his readers will understand or connect with? V.S. Pritchett coined a term known as "my truth." Bret Lott defined "my truth" in his piece "Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction" as "recognizing that this is the deepest truth we can hope to attain on our own: quotation marks, calling it our own. Only when we have scoured as clean as possible by self-inquiry, even interrogation, what we perceive, can we approach calling it *truth*..." (Lott 364-365). I translate this statement into meaning that as long as it is my truth (as the writer) it is truth, regardless of the reader's perceptions and doubts.

This leads to questions about the genres themselves and what it means to be labeled as "fiction" or "nonfiction." I learned in second grade (and maybe it wasn't second grade, it may have been first or even third) that fiction is false and made up, while nonfiction is actual truth. Using these instilled definitions, there is no visible gray area;

there is no place where the two might blend together creating ambiguity. In actuality, though, that is exactly what happens. Because of these instilled definitions, a reader can only see a piece of writing for what it is *supposed* to be, rather than for what it is or what it could be or what it craves to be. There is an assumption that there is no fiction in nonfiction and vice versa. Because of this assumption, some readers run into brick walls while reading, refusing to continue if they have discovered a falsity in the text. Should we stop reading just because we read something that may not be completely true? Should it hinder our perceptions of the text as a whole?

We can take the James Frey book, *A Million Little Pieces*, for an example here. This book is listed as “Memoir/Literature: Frey’s account of his six weeks in rehab” (back cover). Many readers of this memoir finished the book with a sense of pride, amazement, and hope. They were hopeful that maybe after reading his account, they too could surpass their addictions and obstacles. Once news broke about the alleged false claims, however, Frey’s memoir was shunned and regarded as disgraceful in the world of literature and nonfiction. Does the confession of subtle falsities change the meaning of the book, or more importantly, does the confession of subtle falsities change how it affected its readers?

Maybe there is a way for everyone to be happy. Let’s take a look at the term “creative nonfiction.” This genre is hiding in the gray area between the other two and allows for the best parts of both to define it. Bret Lott writes, “Creative nonfiction is, in one form or another, for better and worse, in triumph and failure, the attempt to keep from passing altogether away the lives we have lived” (Root 359). The fact that maybe Frey was indeed *not* telling his story so much as inventing it is where the objection stems

from. Maybe in terms of creative nonfiction, more falsities can pop up alongside the idea of my truth. How much will a reader be able to withstand before closing the book and refusing to read any further? This is where it becomes up to the writer's discretion. A writer can sense when what he is writing is coming across as fake, so it is completely up to him to decide if that matters to his text.

In a fiction piece I wrote, I used a completely nonfictional character. He was an elderly man I had met just weeks prior to writing, and I had known instantly that he had to go into a story. He was quirky and sweet and wore two pair of glasses on top of his head, held tightly with elastic bands. He showed me a magic trick within two minutes of meeting me, in which he lost the object that was supposed to reappear in a new spot. He sang along to a Frank Sinatra CD and wore a sweater with vibrant teal and pink stripes on a black background. He was a living character. So I used him, and actual events from that one-hour meeting, in my fictional story. Does this make my story nonfiction? I used this man that I knew for a short period of time and expanded on him to create an even more vivid and lively gentleman. I think it would be an amazing feat for a writer to go through a fiction piece and not find one bit of fact. In "The Other Creative Writing," Michael Pearson asks the question, "Where do we place this 'other fiction'?" "Other" in this case refer to the nonfiction that I have described: the nonfiction that subtly jumps into a realm of fiction. Pearson answers his own questions with: "The answer is in the work itself: we enjoy it as literature, we place it alongside any other literature, any writing that has found what George Orwell described as a language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree, whether it is poetry or nonfiction or drama" (Root 370).

Augusten Burroughs is very conscious of the believability, or maybe non-existent believability, of the content of *Running with Scissors*. During a conversation between Augusten and Natalie, Natalie states, “You really should write all this stuff down.” Burroughs responds with, “Even if I did, no one would believe it” (Burroughs 173). The question here is, regardless of the fact that he did indeed write down the events that happened to him in his childhood, does it matter whether it is believable to the reader? Does it change our perception of a text if it is labeled as nonfiction but perceived to be fictional in some areas? Maybe Burroughs has also been accused of embellishing this story and others that he has written. He doesn’t feel the need to make his text more believable just so people will consider his book as truth.

During a fiction workshop I took, a fellow graduate student had written in her piece that the main character, Emily, had been ordering tonic and limes at a bar all night, until she noticed that she was becoming “tipsy.” It turned out that the bartender had mistakenly been giving her gin and tonics. Well, other students got into a huge debate during the critique that *anyone would be able to taste the gin and certainly would not be able to drink enough of it to get drunk without knowing it*. The writer of the story confided in us later that the actual scene had happened not long ago to her. Regardless, half the class needed her to change the drink to an alcohol that is less potent or with a less strong flavor, so that they could all believe it. But, if it really happened, why should it be altered? Would it be worth it, to the writer, to change the content of her piece simply to appease a few people who needed to believe in or relate to every word of the story? How conscious do we have to be, as writers, to the believability factors of our stories? I think a writer has to be extremely conscious of the believability and of the “my truth” that may

or may not exist. Once that is established, a writer needs to decide whether or not having embellishments in his story will hinder someone's reading of it. Even after that, the writer needs to decide if he *cares* that someone's reading will be hindered. Regarding "my truth" it is up to the writer and how he perceives his own work and how he wants that work to be perceived by his readers.

Dave Eggers, in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, on the other hand, does not seem even remotely conscious of how believable his story is to his readers, nor does he attempt to make excuses for his memoir. At one point he states, "I half expect to find anything now—guns, drugs, gold bullion. This is fiction now, it's fucking fiction" (Eggers 264). The issue of credibility comes in to play here. Is the reader to take Eggers literally? Or to simply address these two lines as creative license? If literally, then how does the reader define or determine how much of the rest of the memoir is fiction? And if it is creative license in effect here, does he take it too far? It appears that Eggers is stepping over the line between fiction and nonfiction with one foot on one side, the other foot on the other, and does not bother to justify the straddle. The main question to pose then is whether the reader can still respect the memoir as it is, regardless of the questions of reliability. Eggers addresses the reader in a section before the preface stating his opinion on various sections of the memoir:

3. You can also skip the table of contents, if you're short of time.
4. Actually, many of you might want to skip much of the middle, namely pages 239-351...
5. Matter of fact, the first three or four chapters are all some of you might want to bother with. That gets you to page 123 or so, which is a nice

length, a nice novella sort of length. Those first four chapters stick to one general subject, something manageable, which is more than what can be said for the book thereafter.

6. The book thereafter is kind of uneven. (foreword)

These notes from the author served as a means for him to express his feelings about the contents of the memoir, which is unusual. I have never seen it done before. Rarely does a reader get the chance to read what the author thinks of his own piece. And equally as rare is a writer admitting that he has doubts himself about the book.

What must be done with memoir is to enjoy it as is, without question, without doubt, and without the need to know the “truth.” Memory blends and reshapes within a mind and at the time of writing, that same mind merges everything that it can into some sort of coherent “truth.” I do not speak of belief here, or the fact that a reader might believe a word or a memory, but I speak of conscious decision, as a reader, to simply read the memoir as is, truth and fact set aside.

In “The Whole Truth,” Peter M. Ives writes, “It has been my experience that we do not perceive or write about things as they are, but rather, we perceive or write about them as *we* are...between what we remember and what really happened are the shadows from which the truth will ultimately reassert itself” (Root 328). So it is up to the reader to discover for himself the truth that lies behind the words on the pages, and to pull the truths out from behind the shadows that Ives refers to. Annie Dillard, in “To Fashion a Text,” writes, “Memory is insubstantial. Things keep replacing it. Your batch of snapshots will both fix and ruin your memory of your travels, or your childhood, or your children’s childhood” (Root 293). Maybe Dillard speaks truthfully in her statement, if it

is referring to the stories written after digging around in one's mind and soul, digging far into the past to uncover some hidden truth, or some once known event. In that case, memory is undoubtedly unsubstantial. Without written documentation it is difficult to understand how so many memories could be dug up and pulled out of the cobwebs that lie in everyone's aging memory.

Eggers's memoir can read as unbelievable not because of characters or plot, but because of the actual memories that he recalls. For instance, is the reader supposed to believe that Eggers could remember, word for word, the exact questions and answers that he and the interviewer for "The Real World," Laura, went through? He captures the interview from pages 184-237, verbatim, as if he tape-recorded it and transcribed it for the purposes of this book. How seriously should the reader take this 53-page conversation? Maybe the question should really be: Should the reader even take this 53-page conversation seriously? I took my doubts in stride and chose to enjoy the book as a piece of literature, not solely as nonfiction. In the same essay, Ives writes, "These are vivid, honest memories. But I would never swear to them as facts. They are honest and true only in that this is how I remember them...within each of these memories is a story loaded with details, dialogue, and imagery" (Root 323). Maybe this is all we should hope for and expect from our writers: to have solidly written language, perfected images, and fresh, imaginative ideas that are able to wrap themselves around and comfort a reader. This statement, however, can only be justified when discussing or thinking about fiction or nonfiction or creative nonfiction. Journalism, historical nonfiction, historical fiction, textbooks, research-based essays: all of these must hold true and be based upon fact, where there is no debate over "my truth." In these types of writing, the truth must be the

foundation for the text because it is a function of the text's purpose and how it will be consumed.

Form is a major participant in this search for truth. Authors use different means of manipulating form in order to stress their personal truths. Patricia Foster, in her essay "The Intelligent Heart," writes:

I briefly worry that my writing is irrelevant, old-fashioned, tied too fervently to fury, to self-obsession, to the complicated issues of class...perhaps the old way of storytelling in the essay is dead. Now it's time to be experimental, sexy, to jump on the bandwagon of the new, new thing, those essays that intimidate and confuse, essays that defy the rest of us to see them with uncritical awe... 'It's better if it's a little more obscure (Root 303).

I don't feel as though my writing is obscure necessarily. I used to have a tendency to keep a lot of information from my readers and to ensure that in order for them to understand the piece they would have to really search and dig through the text. During a workshop I took last semester, though, I learned that keeping things hidden from my readers is not always the best thing to do. One of my professors posed the question: "What do you gain from making your readers search?" I thought about his question for a long time and read quite a few novels simultaneously until I came to my answer. Nothing. Readers gain nothing from being kept in the dark, aside from discouragement. I realized that when I read something I don't want to have to dig; I want to read for language and scene and plot, not for uncovering a mystery.

Memoirs that I have read, such as *Running with Scissors*, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and *My Brother*, can and do straddle the line between fiction and nonfiction. Moreover, they experiment with nontraditional means of writing in order to speak their truth, and tell their story. Jocelyn Bartkevicius, in “The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction,” attempts to define the growing possibilities of writing nonfiction: “I’m interested in the genre’s possibility, a possibility not just theoretical but practical—that is, involving practice. Rather than map out territory (and thus limit it) I mean to expand it. Rather than build fences, knock them down” (Root 279). By knocking the traditional writing fences down, writers are able to open the world up to their truths. They make a point to not let their lives slip through the cracks that exist within memory.

There are several authors whose writing I admire and attempt to model my writing after. I really admire J.D. Salinger’s use of voice. His characters come alive on the pages and have such distinct voices. His writing is also very visual: “Stopping only to sink a foot in a soggy, collapsed castle... The young man started, his right hand going to the lapels of his terry-cloth robe. He turned over on his stomach, letting a sausaged towel fall away from his eyes” (Salinger 11). He also uses a traditional style of fiction that reads like nonfiction. In most of his short stories, the characters who have been in and are now home from war, read as true accounts.

Maya Angelou’s writing impresses me because of her use of rich, deep language. She vividly creates scenes within her pieces and opens the text up with her images. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* the line “He smelled like a vinegar barrel or a sour angel” is just so beautiful to me (Angelou 23). In her poem “Still I Rise”, the stanza:

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

shows a richness of voice and attitude that I admire in Angelou. Angelou's nonfiction is very real and raw and has been in the center of controversy for those two reasons. She found her niche where she was able to write her truth using description and detail.

The book *Weetzie Bat* by Francesca Lia Block is bursting with image and characterization. The narrator in this book tells the readers everything that crosses through the head of the main character, Weetzie, and I love Block's ingenuity. I think her language is really descriptive and her ideas cross into the idea of "the other fiction" beautifully. By this I mean that she has completely written in an original form, steering away from traditional writing and dialogue, and has created something modern and well crafted:

Dirk taught Weetzie to surf. It was her lifelong dream to surf—along with playing the drums in front of a stadium of adoring fans while wearing gorgeous pajamas. Dirk and Weetzie got tan and ate cheese-and-avocado sandwiches on whole-wheat bread and slept on the beach. Sometimes they skated on the boardwalk. Slinkster Dog went with them wherever they went (Block 5).

The first story in my thesis is a creative nonfiction piece, "Bench Warmers."

Stylistically, this essay is written in traditional form in the present tense, with several

flashbacks. It explores the sense of scent in a young woman's life as a way of grappling with the world around her. She dissects the relationship she has with her mother, religion, and the idea of being "an insider and an outsider" in the world, and how she is in limbo between the two. This essay uses the sense of smell to take the narrator back in time to places and people that have made her who she is today.

"Just Visiting" is a fiction piece about a father and son whose lives are flipped around when their wife/mother passes away. In this piece I tried to capture how both of these men's lives are crumbling apart and neither has a sane moment of thought anymore. I used the aspect of delusion with the father character, and fantasy with the son as a means of portraying the absolute breakdown of their reality.

"One Cent Loss" is a piece about a young man whose uneventful job and life make him wonder about his purpose. He wonders this until he meets an old man in the park one day, and every day after that, who speaks to him in a way in which no one else ever has. The old man opens up the young man's eyes to things he has never thought of before. I challenged myself in this piece by never revealing any of the characters names. This forced me to be more accurate and descriptive with my characters and settings so the readers will be able to completely visualize the story.

"Green Lipstick and a Red Rose" is a fictional piece based on the life of a closet clown. It explores his obsession with clowns, his childhood, and his relationship with his mother. This piece was fun to write because of the overlying topic, but underneath the layers it was sad to write because of the main character's need for attention and control over his life. Being a clown is the one aspect of his life that he can control and maintain, and through being a clown he is able to find an escape.

“A Long, Straight Road” explores a woman’s life through her sexual relationships and disappointments. She is struggling with her father’s death, his discovered affair, and the pain her mother is going through. The main character Grace uses her sexuality as an escape and uses sex to cover up her emotional pain.

“How the Dexys Midnight Runners Brought a Couple Back Together” is about a man named Nick who has been kicked out of his house by his fiancé Eileen. He decides to camp out on his front porch until she lets him back in. The story explores a two-day period in which he doesn’t leave the porch. Eileen finally gives a little when Nick begins to sing a familiar song.

Writing this thesis was extremely beneficial to me as a writer. I learned so much about revision and editing. I learned that in order for a piece to be whole, it might have to get ripped apart, literally, maybe only keeping one sentence.

Bench Warmers

My mom has what I call “church smell.” I have been asked on several occasions to describe the smell. I have been told that saying church smell is too vague, that I need to narrow in on the actuality of it. Is it like old person smell? Or age old bible smell? Or the wood of the pew and benches? Her smell, however, is completely indescribable. I noticed it when I was younger and went to church with her and felt pretty in my Sunday church dress or black velvet skirt. Her church smell lies mostly in her fingernails. I would reach down and pull her hand into mine, feeling how fragile her bones were and how soft her skin was. The skin on her hands was so thin that I could see every one of the river veins that ran underneath, just below the surface. My pointer finger would always find its way to the vein that ran right across the top of her hand, and I would poke it down and watch it pop back up. Down and up, down and up, as if playing peek-a-boo with me. Then I would pluck her skin and pull it upward, watching it stretch to see how far it would go and always hoping it would pause in the air like a teepee made of skin. But the smell. The smell is what I can remember most. Lifting her fingernails up to my nose, I would inhale the aroma of her fingers. I would breathe in so deeply that her smell would completely invade my body. Then I would watch her mouth move with the words of the pastor as she recited The Lord’s Prayer.

I have often wondered *why* my mom has this church smell. Granted she has other smells. “You smell like work today. Like Kodak,” I told her the other day after hugging her and kissing her cheek.

“Oh, great,” she replied. “Now what does *that* smell like?” She looked at me quizzically.

“I don’t know. Kodak. It’s how you always used to smell when you got home from work.” I tell her that her smells aren’t bad. I tell her that they don’t make me gag or scrunch my nose up in disgust. Instead, her smells are like snapshots. Every time I inhale her I think of a different memory.

Just last spring, when I told her about her church smell, her eyes popped open and she sat erect in the recliner in her living room. “I do?!” she screeched.

“You just have this certain smell that you get but it’s only at church. Nowhere else. It’s just you,” I replied nonchalantly. She sat back and seemed confused with my explanation. “Everyone has smells, Mom,” I tried to elaborate. “Dad’s hands smell so powerfully of sawdust and cigarettes that he can’t even wash it off anymore. Haven’t you ever noticed that?”

“No, I don’t think so.” And that was that. That was the day my mom learned about her church smell.

I used to go to church a lot when I was younger and in high school, and then it kind of dwindled down to Christmas Eve service and Easter. I always felt like an intruder when I was in church. Like I was the pesky neighbor who would never go home. It was my impression that regular “church goers” could sense a “non-church goer” and therefore I would be shunned. I could imagine their whispers: “She wasn’t here last week! The nerve...” and “She’s not even singing the right words!” which would of course be followed by endless muffled snickering.

But, for a period of about a year during my junior year of college, I went to church almost every Sunday. That was the year Father Simon was the pastor of our church. He was from England and had a twin brother, and for the Christmas service that year he wore an Elvis wig and talked with his lip curled up. The first time I went to church in that year was the same Sunday that Father Simon started. I thought it was *a sign*. That was the first weekend I had been single in three years. My boyfriend had broken up with me that Friday via telephone wires from Buffalo State to Fredonia. After being stuck to someone for the first two years of my college career I felt like I was suddenly thrown out into traffic. I had, if I recall correctly, three friends to my name, or maybe they were acquaintances. I sped to my parents' house that weekend and took solace in my mom and dad. When I pulled in the driveway, I sulked out of my car and wrapped my arms around my sheepdog, Colby, and we sank together to the ground.

That was the weekend I started going to church. I thought maybe it would get rid of that first love emptiness. Father Simon's first sermon was about being strong and overcoming obstacles in one's life. I thought he was looking right at me when he spoke. I came to know him better and he became familiar with our family as well. He baptized my niece and he sent my Mom emails to console her when my sister and nieces moved from Buffalo to Georgia. Simon explained things to us, to me, in ways I never thought of: he told me that their moving simply gave me another option for a vacation destination. After service ended every week Simon would walk down the aisle to the last row of benches, raise his arms, and say, "Go in Peace." My mom and I would gather our things, slip out of the pew, and walk toward Simon, ready to say goodbye until next Sunday. He would comment on how cute my voice was, like a breath of fresh air, or maybe an angel.

He was so completely atypical that it made me yearn to define myself as an independent body, to figure out who I was and why this half-stranger made me feel the need for that definition. I thought maybe I was religious after all. I thought maybe his sermons were speaking directly to me. For the first time in my life I felt like I belonged somewhere. For the first time in my life I thought that maybe there really was a God.

After being in our church for about a year, Father Simon suddenly disappeared. Rumors began spreading about a conflict he had with the church committee regarding a homosexual pastor who had allegedly “made a pass” at him. My mom and I never heard from him again.

When I went to church after Simon left, the rumors were very hush-hush and it seemed like no one was allowed to talk about this man who had come into our church and flipped things upside down for a year. He had drawn a younger crowd into the church and made the sermons more accessible to a generation that had been spiritually lost. The church seemed bigger after that. Maybe it was emptier. It felt colder and wider and so much more full of space. I remember there had been a few months’ gap between my church visits. When I went back one Sunday, the younger couple, the couple who wore matching leather jackets, the couple who barely said one word to anyone, came in with a newborn baby. I wondered if they were as reserved and remote with their baby as they were with everyone at church. I wondered if they had wanted Father Simon to baptize their baby. I wondered what they prayed for.

We attend St. James’ Episcopal Church in Batavia. This is the church where my mother had her first marriage. “I wish one of my girls would get married in my church,” she tells me. My mom grew up in this church. I had never been there until we moved to

the area five years ago, except for the one time we were in Batavia for a dentist appointment. We walked together (the church is next door to the dentist) across the lot and through the huge and heavy doors. There was a man inside sweeping who looked up when the door slammed behind us. "I just wanted to show my daughter my church," my mom said. Her voice echoed off the stained glass windows, thirteen of them, lining the two long walls of the church. He resumed his sweeping.

I feel like I disappointed my mom when I told her that I was pretty sure I was going to get married someday on the beach at Cape Cod. "But, I'll still be wearing your wedding dress," I'd added. When we sit side by side on the pew bench I catch myself wondering what my mom is praying for. I look around at the man who comes alone and sits two rows in front of us. He always looks "very handsome," as my grandmother would say, in his pressed slacks and his shiny white hair combed flat across his bald spot. I watch his head bob up and down with prayer and wonder what he pleads for. After we receive communion, this gentleman sneaks out the door and leaves before the last prayer has been recited and before we can all *thank thee for that thou dost feed us*.

I look at Russ, an older man who comes to church with his wife, Elly, who now walks with a cane. She sits in the very front of the church, near the flag that reads *In Hoc Signo Vinces*. I think she sits there because she knows what the phrase means and hopes it might help her conquer. Russ sits with her, except when he has usher duty. On those days he stays in the far back handing out programs and greeting everyone. This back section of the church is where I would rather be. I walked in one morning and since we were twenty minutes early we were the only ones in the church. I held my blue and green striped scarf close to the nape of my neck and stood on top of the grate for the radiator

that is built into the floor. There was no air coming through. The entire building was still and chilly. I found myself staring into the black-gray marble fountain where babies get baptized, and I thought about my niece Ella, who had that water slide over her head two years ago. I thought about how many babies must have been baptized from water in that one fountain. I think that was where I was baptized. Past the floor grate, past the fountain, is an archway leading to a smaller entrance. If I were to open these doors I would be looking out onto Main Street, exposing the insides of the church, leaving her naked to people who would look in without really caring.

During the Peace Offering, Elly always walks as far back as she has to in order to shake hands with everyone present. I watch as she slowly makes her way to the back of the church with her cane, smiling, always wearing her winter coat or a sweater because the church doesn't turn the heat on for the eight o'clock service. My mom always rushes up to meet her so she doesn't have to walk as far. I follow behind wondering what this couple prays for.

Chip and his wife (I can't remember her name, but she has red hair and a hearing aid in her left ear) don't usually sit together because she is up at the altar in her own pew. She reads the Prayers for the People and the gospel. He sits further back than my mom and I, and when we shake hands he grabs mine quickly and shakes hard, his hand engulfing mine, questioning me. "How's school? Where do you go, again?" And when I would come home for weekends, just to see my parents and go to church, he would say, "Came all the way from Fredonia in this?" commenting on the wintry weather.

The Hawleys hosted the annual Christmas party one year. It was the same year that I was a junior in college. My mom wanted to go and asked if I would go along with

her since she didn't want to show up alone. I felt like an outsider and an insider all at the same time. I was surrounded by loving, giving people, yet I did not know who any of them really were. My mom and I stuck together, she mingled a little (something she has gotten a lot better at over the years), and I sipped on punch and ate some crackers. I noticed their son, Cooper, who must have been in high school still. He was around but didn't necessarily *attend* the party. I watched from the window as he shoveled salt onto the walkway so no one would slip, and then he snuck upstairs to his bedroom. What was it like to have all of these strangers-yet-not-strangers in one's house? I wondered if he felt like an outsider and an insider all at the same time, too.

When the Prayers for the People are spoken, after *We pray for those who are suffering* is said, names of people suffering or sick can be shouted or whispered or muffled or spoken. I have never spoken someone's name out loud. I may have whispered it to myself, but not loudly. My mom has said names. *Denise. Torey. Gram.* Sometimes I imagine what she is praying for. I imagine that she prays for her daughters' health and happiness. And she prays that her grandchildren will always know how much she loves them. She prays for her mother and her husband and those she has lost: her grandmother and her father. She prays for her son-in-law, Christopher, who has recently enlisted in the Reserves. While my mom prays for others, I think about her prayers and I pray for her.

I haven't been to church in eight months. I'm trying to make it a point to get up in the morning and go with her. Since winter is coming it will be so cold in the morning that we will both leave our coats on. We will sit so close together that our jackets will meld into one another as we try to keep each other warm. I will sit and fidget, never able

to be still an itch, a nose blow, a quick pick at something underneath my fingernail. I will become distracted during the sermon and study the flags that hang along the two long walls. *For Where Your Treasure is There Will Your Heart Also Be. Come, Follow Me, and I Will Make You Fishers of Men.*

Last time we went to church I remember reaching over to grab her hand and hold it at the same moment she was going to grab mine. I don't remember what was said to compel us to hold onto each other. I don't remember what the sermon was about that morning, or what we were wearing. I don't remember being cold or not cold. I do remember that we smiled at one another and held hands for the rest of the service. At that moment, I wanted her church smell to rub off onto me, so I squeezed her hand even harder.

Just Visiting

Jonathan pulled the door to the funeral home open and stepped inside onto the welcome mat. The rain dripped from his hair which was falling into his eyes. He should have cut it at least two months ago but decided he was starting to like it longer. His striped button-down shirt was clinging to him like those airtight storage bags he had seen on an infomercial. He stood in the hallway and listened to a ceremony being performed in the room to his right. Jonathan heard sniffs and muffled sobs and not-so-muffled sobs escaping bodiless mouths. He heard the beginnings of a family member's speech and a giggle from a child as the speaker recollected a humorous moment about the newly deceased. He must have stood in that hallway for twenty-five minutes before he took a squishy step toward the entrance. I thought you were supposed to wear black to these things, he thought to himself as he scanned the audience of mourners. Pinks and blues, stripes and polka dots. He watched as a small child waited in line to view his grandfather, who lay with bifocals propped on top of his skinny nose and one hand clasped around a bible. When the boy reached the casket, he knelt on the maroon velour-covered bench and stared into his grandfather's closed eyes. With one hand, the boy propped the bifocals onto his grandfather's forehead and pushed open the right eye. He smiled as the lid stayed open like forming clay. Jonathan watched the boy look both of his eyes into his grandfather's one. Then the boy picked up the old man's hand, raised it to his nose, and inhaled the dead fingernail fragrance.

*

*

*

Jonathan's father, Edward, took the elevator up to the 5th floor, the intensive care unit. He thought about his son, who was presently preparing for the funeral. Edward had

nonverbally put Jonathan in charge of all the meticulous details that he couldn't bring himself to be a part of. He knew he'd regret it in a few months. When the elevator doors slid open, Edward leaned back against the railing that lined the insides of the elevator and breathed in the hospital smell. He thought it smelled like the inside of an old garage, musty and scary and familiar.

"Getting off, sir?" asked the voice of a young nurse, a clipboard held snug against her chest, her scrubs holding her together, helping her look strong and knowledgeable.

"Oh, not yet," Edward mumbled and moved aside to let the young nurse on. Her nametag read *MaryAnne*. "That's a nice name. *MaryAnne*." He let the words slide out of his mouth and bounce around the elevator walls.

"Visting?" The one word hung heavier than any other word he'd ever heard before. He stuffed his pudgy hands into the pockets of his gray pants. She said it again and this time Edward heard her even more clearly and watched her lips moving. He heard the small *ding ding ding* as the elevator reached each floor. He heard the gentle hum of the jazz radio station from the speaker above his head. He heard the young nurse's pager as it beeped from her belt buckle. He heard her eyelids opening and closing as she blinked, and the gentle rhythm of her breathing. He heard his response, his voice course, his lips dry and cracked, "Yes. Just visiting."

*

*

*

Jonathan snapped himself back into reality and forced himself to walk down the long corridor and through double doors marked *Private*. Through the doors was a staircase with no frills. There was no carpet running down the stairs, no bright paint on the surrounding walls, no family photos hanging to welcome visitors or bid them

goodbye. It was a staircase very unlike the one he'd grown up using. The third step down didn't have that once obnoxious creak, and the banister wasn't worn down in the spots where he would slide when he was home alone. Rather, it was just a simple staircase, wooden steps and an old wooden banister on one side to aid elderly as they made their way down into a cold, cement basement.

"Hello?" he called, hearing his voice echo throughout the large, divided room.

"In here!" came the voice of a woman who had smoked too many cigarettes, a raspy cough following her words. Jonathan made his way into a room whose door read *A*. That was it. *A*. "Hello," she sang from behind a computer. The woman eased herself off of her swivel chair and made her way to Jonathan, her left hand outstretched for a friendly shake. "The name's Jennifer. Everyone calls me Jenna though." She had long jet-black hair. It reminded Jonathan of a horse's mane.

"You're the makeup artist?"

"Sure am! Did you bring the picture we talked about on the phone?" She chomped her gum loudly and for a minute he could picture himself as that wad of gooey pink slime inside her mouth, being sloshed around by her tongue and teeth, stretched apart and smashed back together again. He pulled an aged photograph out of his back pocket and noticed the right corner was bent. Jenna plucked the photograph out of Jonathan's hand with her black fingernails and brought it a mere three inches from her nose to inspect it. Her eyes opened up to the size of those plastic milk jug caps, or so they seemed to him, and one green cat eye and one brown eye were exposed. Brown like the dirt the casket was going to be lowered into. A single red rose had been permanently attached with ink to her thumb and its green stem snaked up her hand, wrapping itself

around her wrist. Jonathan wanted to reach out and touch the rose. Was it soft or prickly? he wondered even though he knew the answer. He wondered if she smelled like a rose, or if she smelled like incense or pot or cigarettes. He wanted so badly to lean into the groove of her neck and inhale.

“Oh gosh! She was gorgeous!” Her raspy voice interrupted his thoughts and he smelled the strawberry-kiwi bubblegum as she chomped and exhaled. She reached up and scratched the bridge of her nose. Her eyes crossed as she contemplated the photo.

“Sure was,” Jonathan responded as he thought about this new age punk makeup artist hovering on top of three-day-old dead bodies and trying to get the eye shadow just right. He could picture her sticking her tongue out between her top and bottom teeth, closing first her left eye, then her right, making sure the shadow was even on both eyes. Jonathan pictured himself as the dead body for a moment. He was lying on the sheet-covered cot in the middle of the room, and even though he would be dead, he would still be able to see and feel. He would watch as Jenna hiked her long, flowing, black skirt up to her knees, placed one bare foot onto the edge of the cot, and hoisted herself into a straddling position on top of Jonathan. He would feel her knees pressing the sides of his hips, and her strawberry kiwi breath would be hot as it hit his thick, yellowing skin. Jonathan would watch as Jenna applied cover up to the circles that made half moons underneath his eyes, and blush to awaken his cheekbones. He would watch her squint in concentration and stick her tongue out between her top and bottom teeth.

*

*

*

Edward sat calmly in room 547. He sat in the visitor's chair, his arms propped on the hard wooden armrests, his hands clasped together underneath his chin. From outside

in the hallway the nurses would stop and peek in, listening to him recall history: “Do you remember when you used to take long baths with hot water just inches below the rim of the bathtub, the porcelain claw feet gripping the tile floor, holding on to bear the weight? The sweet pea bubble bath would fill the room and mix with the steam, streaking the mirror like a ghost brushed by. You wouldn’t read or finish crossword puzzles or think about the day’s events.” Edward rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and continued, “After a while I’d come in. I’d lower the toilet seat cover, sit down and stare. I’d stare at the land of bubbles that would line your body, and watch your chest, delicately clothed in white, rise and fall. You would always blink over at me, a spiral of curl bouncing in front of your eyes, and ask *Is he down?* I would respond with a nod and unbutton my sweater vest, stripping my clothes off from my body. I would lower myself into the luke-warm water, letting my hands take over your body, letting you tremble beneath me.”

Each nurse would always make a slight clicking noise with her tongue, give a shake of her head, and turn ever so slowly out of 547, thinking about poor Edward. He sat oblivious to the nurses’ concerns, turning the TV on then off then on, flipping from station to station, trying to find her favorite shows for her, wondering when the doctor would come in to check on her IV, or when the physical therapist would come do exercises with her. He never closed the blinds because he knew she liked to let the sunshine in, and liked to feel its touch on her face and fingers. He would think about the stories she had told him about her childhood and the times when she loved running through fields of sunflowers. Not just a few sunflowers, but a field with so many sunflowers that they stretched beyond where her eyes could even see. A sea of

sunflowers. An ocean of yellow petals and brown eyes and long green stalks. She would run so fast that after a while all she could see were blurs of yellow and brown and green and could no longer see where she ended and where the sunflowers began. She would run as close to the middle of the field as she could and she would stand, barely breathing, find the sun, and angle her shoulders and face the same way the sunflowers were angled, begging for sunlight and growth. Begging for life.

*

*

*

At the funeral, Jonathan was responsible for greeting all of the relatives, thanking everyone for coming, and making sure everything was just right. The parlor was filled with vases and vases of sunflowers, and petals were scattered in her new bed, holding her in place. *Where's your father?* asked his Aunt Lucille, cousin Jimmy, Uncle Ted, childhood friends. *He couldn't make it*, Jonathan would reply each time, and they would stare questioningly into his lowered eyes, grab his hands and squeeze them together, kiss his cheeks and lips, and whisper into his ears.

Jonathan lined up behind all of the other guests who formed a procession to take one last look at Mrs. Edward Gardener. When it was his turn, he knelt down on the bench, lifted her right hand in his, and put her fingers up to his face. He breathed in the smell of her fingernails. He looked up to see Jenna watching him from the hallway, her black fingertips rubbing her soft bottom lip. He wished that it were his fingertips rubbing her soft bottom lip.

*

*

*

After the funeral, Jonathan made his way toward the Hospital. Instead of turning

out of the funeral parlor, however, he made a u-turn in the intersection and parked in the very spot he had just backed out of. He wiped his forehead with the handkerchief that was propped in his breast pocket, and noticed the perspiration swelling on his skin. He loosened his tie and glanced at himself in his rearview mirror.

Before he had time to open the door marked *Private*, Jenna had already opened it, her eyes wide and her smile large. "I had a feeling," she whispered, this time the faint scent of grapes escaping with her breath. She grabbed his suit jacket and led him down the stairway and into the basement. Once he had closed her office door he found it difficult to control his own hands and watched as his fingers shook when he unbuttoned her black blouse. He squeezed and groped and pulled and explored. He smelled and tasted and touched and felt. He looked into her eyes and watched her chest rise and fall with breath. He set his head onto her naked stomach, and wept until tears streamed down her body.

*

*

*

Jonathan made his way up the five flights of stairs and rounded the corner that had the mural painted on it of the children playing hopscotch. He wondered why those children were so happy playing hopscotch when everyone who looked at the mural was exactly the opposite. Both not playing hopscotch and not happy. "Good afternoon, Mr. Gardener. Looking for your dad?" His mother's doctor paused in the hallway and rested a hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

"Dr. Lawson, good to see you." Jonathan sighed and allowed his lips to form a slight smile.

She gestured toward the last room at the end of the hallway. Jonathan nodded a thank you. “You know how long he’s been in that room, don’t you, Mr. Gardener?” Her eyes looked tired and her mascara had worn off.

Jonathan straightened his shoulders, remarked, “I know,” and made his way down the hallway. He stood in the doorway and saw that all the bouquets of flowers had been removed, and the greeting cards were stacked neatly in a cardboard box on the visitor’s bed. The room felt bare to him and he could picture his mom in that bed just one week ago. Jonathan watched his dad run his coarse hands down the fleece blanket on the bed. He watched him set his head in the groove of the empty pillow, becoming his mother’s imprint.

One-Cent Loss

I'm about five days away from getting fired from my job. My boss came into my cubicle yesterday and I caught bits and pieces of what he said. The rest of the time I was watching a chunk of gray hairs descending from his nostril.

"...and I'm sorry but you're just not...and your performance has certainly decreased since...many times I have told you, you *must* follow company criterion, or...unacceptable and not up to the founders' standards by any...we hired you because you are creative and original, or so you appeared during your interview...good head on your shoulders!" He slammed a sheet of computer paper onto my desk, rattling the tin can with the pencils in it, his palm pounding the wooden surface below it. "You know what you have to do," he said, his fingers wandering upward, and for a slight moment I thought maybe he would brush a knuckle against his nose, but no, he simply scratched at the bald spot on top of his head "Now do it. We're giving you one more week. One more week to prove you can handle the requirements of the position. We've given you enough leeway the past few months." He stuck his hands in the pockets of his slacks and turned out on his heel.

A day later, that piece of computer paper hangs on the corkboard in front of my desk with two tacks placed evenly in the top and bottom. It sits just above the picture I have yet to take down from that same corkboard. She is in it, the green of her eyes barely visible she is squinting so much from laughing, or maybe from the sun, but I think from laughing. I think we were laughing. Her left hand is held up in peace sign fashion, and her right hand fits snug inside mine. I am standing slightly behind her, gazing not at the

photographer, but at her face. But I should not be staring into this picture, I should be studying the sheet of computer paper, studying the contents of it, although I already know the contents and have had them memorized for some time now. In 14-point font, Courier New, it states the criteria my bosses use to judge the output of fellow employees and myself:

- Use of new, colorful slogan that steers from past ideas
- Does not delve into deep, thought-provoking ideas or images
- Has a jingly rhyme-scheme or a sing-song quality that is difficult to forget
- Makes the buyer believe that s/he dually wants and needs the product
- Is non-threatening and non-offensive
- Speaks to the potential buyer in a suitable and relatable voice

The day I got the memo I highlighted each bullet wondering where exactly I was going wrong in my work. I touch a finger to my nostrils to make sure I didn't have any stray hair hanging down.

*

*

*

Our apartment is really my apartment now. When I'm in it I feel like the walls are closing in on me. I feel like the boxes that she has packed that she hasn't come to pick up yet are slowly moving in toward me, circling me, taunting me with their once shared contents. Instead of going home after work I decide to swing by Coughlin Park, the town park just a few blocks from my apartment. I had never been there before, though I had seen children walking down the sidewalk headed to the park with picnic baskets and red wagons and L.L.Bean bags filled with water bottles and Nerf footballs.

I stand motionless next to a birch tree, its trunk dusted with green flecks of mold, its branches stretched out above my head like feelers. I am studying an old man on a bench, watching as the wind flutters by and lifts up his toupee. I am watching as he unwraps a stick of Orbitz gum, delicately presses it onto his tongue, and smiles. He notices me and says, "Come, sit over here, boy."

I shuffle over to the old man in my white Reeboks. She had hated my Reeboks. She said they reminded her of old man sneakers. She always said this only after I would say something about her first. "I'll do the laundry tomorrow, it's only laundry. It's not like you don't have enough clothes—three closets full," I screamed at her as I sat on the couch eating Andes mints while she washed the dinner dishes. She would reply with a grunt, followed by a comment about my Reebok sneakers, and then she would slam the door that separates the kitchen from the living room, and I'd hear her muffled sniffles as she called her sister from her cell phone.

I sit next to him on the bench; he places a weightless hand on my knee and whispers, "I really like your sneakers."

"Oh really?" I replied. "Thanks."

“I’ve always wanted a pair of those white sneaks but my wife’d never let me get them. Said they were for geezers!” He adds emphasis and truth by nodding energetically, his mouth agape, allowing the chewed, gooey ball of Orbitz to escape, to plummet to the world below, prematurely and not ready to leave its comforting cocoon of the hot, moist mouth that it had just seconds before been a part of. The old man watches the small mass dribble itself over his kneecap and onto the ground. He looks at it as if it were a foreign object, as if wondering, *Where the Hell did that come from?* The man winks then and turns to face me. He quickly replaces the missing mass with a handful of TicTacs. I want to poke them as they appear underneath the skin of his cheeks. But I don’t. “So what do you do with your life?” he asks me, sucking the sugary coating off of each and every tic-tac until I can hear the crunch and crack as he bites down onto each individual one.

“Oh, um, I come up with advertisement slogans for toothpaste,” I reply.

“That’s what you do with your life, eh?” He seems to be sucking on my answer like he had sucked on his TicTacs, trying to wrap his mind around the whole idea. Then he squeezes his lips together, blinks—I think twice—and starts humming a tune I had never heard of before.

At home that night I am unable to shake the memory of the old man out of my head. I sit down Indian style in the middle of the living room. I sit down on the bare hardwood floor because she took the oval Oriental rug that we once had. It was the rug we bought at the Green Market in Manhattan when we went that year to visit her family for Easter. We had walked among stands of fresh fruits and vegetables and flowers and purses. She had stopped to look at jewelry, the kind that closely resembles new releases

from Tiffany & Co. but sells for half the price. When we noticed the Oriental rug, the one with the deep shades of blues and greens and swirls of purples set against a deep magenta background, we knew it would match perfectly to our sage green L couch.

Sitting on the bare wood, I notice the cracks between each panel making an imprint on my bare ankles. I pull a linty quarter out of my jeans pocket and start spinning it nonchalantly on the floor. I have come to the conclusion that I am an expert, not at spinning a quarter, but at listening to a spinning quarter. I have it perfected so that I can almost slow the quarter's motion down as it is rotating and hear only it and its conversation with the floor.

I can't hear the gentle hum of the heating vents across the baseboards in the living room.

I can't hear the wind outside whipping itself against the window.

I can't hear the purr of the computer in the far corner as it sits on top of the desk.

I can't hear the college-aged neighbors on the other side of the wall as they blast Korn or Alice in Chains or Nirvana on their stereo equipment.

I can't hear the random clocks spread out around the house, all set strategically thirty seconds apart, letting their loud, hourly musical become a round like we used to practice in third grade chorus, the clocks that she so desperately wanted from different parts of the country when she traveled, but said, "You can have them, they mean nothing to me," as she packed.

I can't hear any of this. I can only hear the sswoooooshhswwooooosshsswwooooooossssswwwoosssshh of the quarter until it hits an unexpected groove in the floor, or a particle of dust, or simply decides that it's done

talking to the floor and ultimately plans its fall. Then it's a completely different sound. More like a repetitious slapping sound that goes faster and faster and faster and faster and faster until you almost feel sorry for it, almost sympathize with it, almost want it to catch a second wind and throttle itself back into its sswwóooossh position.

And after its fall I can hear everything.

*

*

*

The next day at the office I decide to really focus on the criteria and buckle down with my work. I work in the toothpaste department of the advertising company, so it's up to me, and about twenty other coworkers, to come up with unique ways to stimulate buyer interest in any given toothpaste brand, through use of popups on the Internet.

As I sit down behind by laptop in my cubicle, the image of the old man keeps popping onto the screen, his brown eyes sad with both wonder and amusement. I check my e-mail account. **INBOX: 0**. I check my voicemail: *You-have-no-new-mess-a-ges*. *You- have-no-saved-mess-a-ges*. I always kind of wondered what that "You have no new messages" lady looked like in real life. I wondered if it would be like, how phone sex operators sounded all hot, but were usually the fat outcasts of society. They are the ones who always used to get picked on in high school.

I called a phone sex operator once and we formed more of a camaraderie type friendship than a fantasy type one. I would call every night, almost, just to tell her about my day, and hear about hers, and she would tell me stories about sleaze-bag men and nicer men and men who didn't have a clue what they were doing. She reminded me more of a therapist than a phone sex lady but that didn't bother me. We decided to meet one night for coffee at the cafe and there she was, a café mocha in one hand, and her own

stomach in the other. It was as if she was trying to keep her girth in place with her hands. I didn't care about her weight, although I think she did. We met a few times after that, never with a romantic connection nor with a desire for a romantic connection, but more because we both needed any kind of connection. After I moved into my current apartment, before my ex girlfriend moved in with me, the phone sex operator and I kind of lost touch... actually, we definitely did lose touch with one another and I never heard from her again. I still think about her sometimes, though, and the way words that ended in an "s" would be elongated, or the way her voice inflection would rise ever so slightly when she asked a question or proposed a suggestion.

I heat up a Michelin's Fettuccini Alfredo in the Sharp microwave in the break room and take it back to my cubicle for lunch. I started eating these Michelinas after I saw their ad that used the "Hey Macarena!" song. Now every time I eat one I want to do the dance around the office. I sit down and begin brainstorming new ideas for my current project: Colgate Deluxe III Whitener plus Cavity Protection plus Gingivitis Fighting Power. Plus, it comes in three different color schemes: "Americana"—Red White and Blue; "Kiddie Komfort"—Pink, Purple, and Teal; and "Take Me Away Freshness"—a Burst of Citrus and Lime. I sit strumming my pencil on my desktop, racking my brain for catchy slogans.

*

*

*

After work I decide to see if the old man will be at the park for a second day. I doubt it. But as I round the corner of Maple Avenue, there he is, his back to me, his head held alertly in the air, like a beagle hunting a new scent. "Come, sit over here, boy." The old man beckons to me from the bench, and pats the spot next to him. I plop next to him

and watch as he watches other people. “I like to people watch,” he tells me. “Do you ever do that? Just sit and watch people?” Before waiting for a response he says, “Oh, you should. It’s very interesting sometimes. You can learn a lot about people.” He glances over at me, his eyebrows raised. I let out a sigh. “So, what do you do with your life?” he asks me. Wait. Did this guy forget who I was?

I hesitated before I answered today. I wondered how I could better my answer so that it actually sounded like I *did something* with my life. “Well I’m working on a very large campaign right now for Colgate Deluxe III Whitener Plus Cavity Protection Plus Gingivitis Fighting Power, in three varying flavors. It’s a pretty big deal, actually, and a heavy amount of responsibility. It takes up most of my time.”

He is sucking on another gaggle of TicTacs. I remember from the ad that TicTacs are fresh entertainment for your mouth¹. “Sounds like quite the occupation you have there, feller. Yesterday you got an F, an F for sure. Today, we’ll go with C-.”

“I’m being graded?”

“You know, if you ever feel a cold coming on, now, come, lean in closer than that boy, whatcha thinks going to happen, a cootie or something? No, now that’s better. Now if you ever feel a cold coming on, this is real important now. Run down to the drugstore and you’ll buy an herbal vitamin. It’s natural of course. Vitamin called Echinacea. Take that for a few days and BAM. That cold is wiped out cold. Never knew what hit it.”

*

*

*

That night I came up with a slogan that I was sure my bosses would praise. After all, I had a mere three days to prove that I could not be replaced, that I was irreplaceable to

¹ www.tictacusa.com

the company: “Want A Bite Of Something Fresh? Colgate Deluxe III Will Fill Your Mouth With America And Give You Something To Feel Patriotic About!”

*

*

*

I decide to go out to celebrate my hopefully successful ad. Once comfortably on a barstool, I notice I am across from a group of women playing darts. “Where’s the missus?” asks the young, British bartender while she sets my usual bottle of Yuengling down on the polished bar in front of me. I watch the women and their lack of skill, their inability to control the dart, and the way their eyes fail to focus on the target at hand. For lack of a more suitable or witty answer, I simply say, “Gone,” and the bartender shrugs and goes to get someone else’s drink order. I chuckle to myself, sip from my bottle and concentrate on the four women as they take turns shooting, missing, and high-fiving one another.

“What’re you laughing at? Bet you couldn’t beat one of us girls even if you tried.” I hadn’t noticed that one of the dart-playing-girls had sidled up next to me, her ass dangerously close to my lap. She bends over the bar, a strand of her auburn hair falling from its ponytail. She has a darkened birthmark on her left cheek that closely resembles the state of Texas.

“Let’s take that challenge for a test drive,” I reply, beckoning the bartender and buying the girl the beverage of her choice: a vodka and cranberry with a lemon wedge. She smiles at me as she pulls the lemon wedge off the edge of the glass, sticks the mushy part between her lips, and sucks, her eyes wide, her nose scrunched. She squeals as she removes the wedge and plops the stringy remains back into her glass. The seeds pop out, taking over the contents of the glass, and colliding with the chunks of ice.

I impress the girls with my unusual dart technique, but one that I always have success with. It goes something like this:

- 1) Grip the tip of the dart loosely between thumb and middle finger.
- 2) Raise arm so that the dart is next to the ear on the same side as the throwing arm, and the elbow is directly facing the target. Your arm should be at a 90-degree angle along the side of your face. (Elbow should be a maximum of two inches above the top of your head.)
- 3) Loosely bite the inside of your cheek (this is just for the “concentration” effect—this really makes you look like you know what you’re doing).
- 4) Release the arm in a quick downward motion so that at first the dart looks like it will hit the dartboard with the wrong end, but mid-air it flips itself around and sticks. Right on.

Needless to say the girls are impressed with my technique and two of them actually ask me for private lessons. Auburn hair girl goes home with me, and we hardly notice when we stumble over the cardboard boxes in the apartment.

* * *

My visits with the old man start to become highlights of my weekend days. I wake up, and brew a pot of coffee. I think I started drinking coffee just because I liked the smell of the coffee beans. And I always liked the ad on television. It said that Folgers is the best part of waking up². Plus, the caffeine always made me shaky and nervous.

² www.folgers.com

Then I dress and make my way to the park. The park is nestled between four streets. The park that, from above, in a helicopter maybe, looks like a perfectly square, green window. “Come, sit over here, boy.” The old man calls to me from his usual spot.

“Um, are you wearing lederhosen?” I ask, eyeing his suspicious leg-coverings.

“As a matter of a fact, I am!” The old man stands up and turns himself around, posing finally with a hand on his hip, his left leg jutted out, toe pointed. “I think they’re slimming, and I feel ethnic!” He smiles at me, and his crooked, yellowing teeth poke out from behind his thin lips.

“Stunning. Simply stunning.”

The old man tops off the morning by showing me a magic trick in which he loses the penny that is supposed to reappear in his palm. He shrugs at the one-cent loss. I rent a movie that night and go home and make love with auburn hair girl.

*

*

*

After my five-day trial period, my bosses say that I have improved in my demeanor and my productivity just enough to remain on the staff. However, they have several stipulations to this news. They present these stipulations in bulleted form in a memo that is left on my desk:

- You must submit ten ads per week, all of which must meet the criteria on the memo labeled:

Criterion for Advertisement Output

- You must stop eating Michelina’s microwavable dinners because their stench is overpowering

and causing sickness throughout the toothpaste department. Think Sandwiches.

- You may no longer walk around the department wallowing in self pity and despair—it simply brings the other employees' moods down and results in a decrease in positive and productive output.

I post this new memo up below the previous one, unknowingly covering up those barely visible green eyes.

*

*

*

Christmas nears and I had been sitting with the old man in the park every weekend for about two months. Today I go to visit him and as usual he shouts, “Come, sit over here, boy.” He has his scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, his two pair of glasses sleeping tightly with their corresponding elastic bands around his covered head. He pulls one pair down, the pair with the GO BILLS! in red and blue scrawled across the elastic. We sit closer together this day because it was the coldest day yet that winter. “Ever hear of Snowflake Bentley?” he asks me, squinting his eyes through his lenses.

“No, who was he?”

“He’s this old fart, way back when, before the cavemen maybe, I don’t really know. But he, he had this infatuation with snowflakes. His family was poor growing up, but his dad always managed to buy him the microscopes he needed in order to study those damn snowflakes. I mean, ambition like you wouldn’t believe, this guy Bentley

had. He would walk for hours outside in snowstorms, collecting snowflakes, placing them gently in their own chilled jar, and carrying them back home to his garage, defending and protecting them from the wind. This guy is the one who discovered that each and every stinking snowflake is different. Can you believe that?”

I find myself intrigued by the old man’s tale although I almost doubt him. I’d never given thought to why I knew that all snowflakes were unique, but I didn’t think it was possible for one man and one man’s passion to be responsible for this knowledge.

The old man blinks up at the sky and pulls his Thinsulate gloves which reflect radiant heat and trap air, tighter around his hands³. “So, what do you do with your life, boy?”

Today I can’t answer the old man. I tell him I have some errands to run that I forgot about. He shrugs at me. He looks silly and small and fragile when he shrugs because his coat is entirely too large for his body. His head almost disappears into the red collar. His hands are held together, as if in prayer, between his two legs.

*

*

*

Tonight the girl with the auburn hair is over and we start talking about past relationships. I tell her about how my last girlfriend left me, and that these boxes aren’t lying around because I just moved in and hadn’t unpacked yet (which is what I had originally told her) but because she still hadn’t come to pick up the rest of her stuff. I tell auburn hair girl that I was such a disappointing person that my ex girlfriend couldn’t stand to be in my presence anymore. I tell her that I come up with pop up ads for toothpaste companies for a living and that I will probably never amount to much of anything. I tell her that I like my white Reeboks and my parents died a long time ago and

³ wikipedia.com

my best friend is an old man in Coughlin Park. I tell her that I wear reindeer embroidered sweaters around the holidays. I tell her that I giggle when I'm nervous and pick earwax out of my ears without realizing it. I tell her that I don't buy gifts for Valentine's Day because it's overrated and that I never buy cards for any occasion. I tell her that my favorite things to do include watching movies, eating Chinese, and having sex with her.

The girl with the auburn hair lifts her hand to her face and rubs her cheeks and chin. I watch her pick at something beneath her nail and wipe it on my taupe carpet. She blinks slowly and quickly and slowly and quickly. She crosses her legs and recrosses her legs. She pulls her auburn hair back behind her head with her hands and secures it in place with three bobby pins. Then she wraps her sweater, the one with the big buttons going down the front that I don't really like but I don't tell her that because it would make her hazel eyes sad if I did, around her body. She slides herself across the carpet, on her ass, toward me and sits inside my lap. Then she grabs me around my waist, and puts her head on my chest and feels my lungs moving and hears my heart beating and she knows I am alive. Or maybe I know I am alive.

We sit on the bare, hardwood floor, together, with a fleece blanket covering us both. We don't spin a quarter because I haven't shown her that trick with the noise and silence barrier yet, but we do smoke pot, and we hold hands, and we watch the furniture hold hands and dance around us.

*

*

*

It is after Christmas and I decide to take the girl with the auburn hair to meet the old man in the park. It is still very cold and the ground crunches beneath our fleece lined boots as we walk, left right left right, in sync with each other's feet, and round the corner

of Maple Avenue. “There he is—” I start, pointing with my gloved hand toward our bench.

“I don’t see anyone...there’s not even a bench there. Are you sure it’s the right spot?” She glances up at me, her eyebrows disheveled and her hazel eyes questioning.

“Oh God.” My eyes blur with fog and steam and water and fear and my back is heavy and hot. I feel something big and fierce swell inside my throat, an object so real it feels unreal.

“Come, sit over here, boy.”

“Look!” The girl with the auburn hair points across the street to an old man sitting on a park bench. We make our way over to him, and my face is burning with relief.

“Thought I’d change it up today, boy, did I give you a scare over there?”

“I thought you were dead,” I say as I itch underneath my armpit and feel the moistness behind the cotton fabric of my long sleeved shirt. “Did you drag this bench over here yourself?”

“Hey, I may not be superman but I’m not some old fart either. Sit down now, both of you. Who’s your friend here by the way? Welcome to the park bench, sit here, next to me.” He winks at the girl with the auburn hair and pats her leg as she sits down next to him, me on his other side, him squished in the middle in his oversized winter coat.

I look over at the girl with the auburn hair, and I look over at the old man, and I don’t look down at my white Reebok sneakers. I watch the old man smile at me and smile at her and smile to himself.

“Oh, do I have a story for you two. You know that Britney Spears? Did you know she shaved her head?” He sighed. “Well I’ll be.” The old man squeezes my knee and gestures toward the gray-blue sky. I tear off my glove and stick my hand out into the air. The three of us sit on the park bench. We tilt our faces upward and let the blanket of Bentleys fall over our bodies.

Green Lipstick and a Red Rose

“Shit!” I frantically wiped the algae-colored lipstick off of my two front teeth with my white-gloved index finger. Glancing at my watch I noticed I was already fifteen minutes late for my blind date with Sonya Pickerston.

*

From a young age, my mother knew my fascination and it scared her to death. She used to pace around the house muttering, “My son, the freak. The homo! Oh no...” and would find a friend in her vodka on the rocks and an issue of *The Enquirer*. It seemed to soothe her mind, reading about children with elephant trunks instead of noses, and the woman who had a full-sized man inside her stomach. That gave me ample time every evening to sneak into her glamorously huge walk in closet and stand in awe at her high heels, her shawls and glittered scarves, her long flowing silk skirts and matching blouses. But my mother had it all wrong. I simply thrived when I was surrounded by fine fabrics, the different stitching, the way certain fabrics cling to the body just so, hugging the hips or accenting the peccs.

*

Just minutes after getting home from work I was ready to make “the switch.” But before I was even able to start, I was distracted by a foul death smell coming from my laundry room. Death isn’t a smell that can be described, but as soon as it is inhaled, it is an instant memory trigger. I thought of third grade when I found my dog in the garage, her body limp and sagging on the cold, concrete floor.

I thought of my grandpa, found dead in his bedroom after fourteen days, a pool of drying blood surrounding his head, his gun on the floor next to him. I met my grandpa the day of his funeral. “He was no good, Frederick, no good to be around. It’s best this way,” my mom said, puffing on her Salem and scratching at the pantyhose on her legs because she wasn’t used to wearing them. “Now go pay your respects.” She shoved me into the funeral parlor and I looked back to watch the smoke curl up like Medusa’s snakes around her head. I remember thinking she looked beautiful.

*

So I went on a death-scent hunt, sniffing and peering into cracks and crevices, until finally hauling the dryer out of its nook. Beneath it, in a pile of dust and hair and lint, was the upturned body of a mouse, his legs limp and still, his mouth slightly ajar. Sitting behind him was another mouse, maybe his mother. It had its paws up near its mouth. I ran out of the laundry room and slammed the door shut. I screamed as if I could be heard or rescued or saved, grabbed the toilet bowl cleaner wand from its holder on the bathroom floor, and jumped awkwardly onto my bed. The wand was gripped tightly in my hands as I squatted safely and I was breathing heavily and loudly and uncontrollably, tears rushing down my face.

*

In sixth grade, Jerry Gray tripped me in the lunch line and I fell face first into my tray of sloppy joes. I ran home sobbing, hearing the echoes of children’s laughter in the cafeteria. When I reached my house I shouted for my mom and tasted the tomatoes mixed with my tears inside my mouth and on my lips. I heard the washing machine rumbling from the laundry room. I opened the door and saw my mom sitting naked on

top of the washer, her legs wrapped around her boyfriend, Juan, her fingernails clawing at his back. I watched his naked ass clench as he thrust himself into her, and heard her screams. I ran after him with the broom, reciting a line I'd recently heard on television, something resembling a "Hi-Yah!", swatting at the flesh of his legs and arms and chest and face. I heard my mother screaming for me to stop. I took the end of the broom and attempted to smash Juan in the jaw with it, but he caught it mid swing. I ran toward my room but only made it to the living room couch, collapsing on the soft cushion, watching as Juan ran in, his boxers clasped inside a tight fist. I watched as he put them on. My mother was in the background fastening her bra and pulling up her strapless dress. She looked at Juan as she lit up a cigarette.

*

The switch usually involved going from a T-shirt and jeans to a full body polka dot jumpsuit, and placing a rainbow wig on my head. The sneakers would come off and the bright red and yellow size 13 shoes, the bow on either side of the knot perfectly symmetrical, would come on. And last, the makeup. The white cream is the most important factor because if it's not the purest of whites, if it doesn't remind someone of a wedding dress or the powder from a smashed ibuprofen tablet, then no one will take any of it seriously. Eyes are the most fun because the shadow can change from application to application. One day they're a stormy sunset, the next, my mother's stewed tomatoes and carrots. The beauty lies in the makeup.

People don't realize how much time and energy goes into being a closet clown. It's like having an alter-ego; living two separate lives. By day, a business man working at

“Pampered Paws,” a locally owned pet grooming operation. By night, it’s a whole different story. The hardest part of a closet clown’s life is having a life.

*

In kindergarten my best friends were Timmarie Meseti and Rocko Wirth. They dared me once to bring in my mom’s makeup so we could put it on each other. The night of the dare I went home and stood staring at my mom’s glass topped white wicker vanity, my reflection bouncing off the mirror. My mom had been on a date with Steve Pickerelli that night. Steve, a night manager at the Chick-Fil-A down the street, had a scary goatee and glasses that barely went around his eyes. He had a weird lisp that always threw me off and he always managed to talk to me with lots of “s” sounds in his words. “Tho, howth my thuper little thport, huh? Thootin’ up like a damn weed, every time I thee you.” Then he would rub his hands together like he was warming them up, touch my face softly with his fingers, and rub my back with the palms of his hands—up and down, caressing my neck and shoulders. “Go get me a beer, would ya little buddy?” he requested on several occasions, making himself comfortable on the recliner in the living room.

The rows of Revlon lipsticks in Pouty Pink, Mystic Maroon and Fantasy Fuscia, the blush in Rosy Pink, the eyeliner made by CoverGirl in Smoky Hudson, Black Sky, and Moonlit Path, were all lined up like they were waiting for their execution. They watched me watch them watch me in the mirror.

The next morning I carefully placed each item into my duffel bag, being sure not to bang into anything. My mom was still sleeping that morning so I pressed my lips to her forehead and tucked the sheet up to her chin and squeezed her hand and whispered

that I loved her. She mumbled something about scrambled eggs and go-cart racing then turned on her side and let out a long, deep sigh.

Mrs. Contoast caught us within five minutes. We had been kneeling in front of the cubby holes and I remember how soft the carpet was on my knees. She discovered us below the cubbies just as I was applying a coat of Summer Sizzler on Timmarie's small, pursed lips. "Where'd all this come from?" she asked, peering at the three of us.

"Frederick brought it," Timmarie and Rocko said in unison, fingers outstretched, pointing. I had to sit in time out during recess that day and watched Rocko and Timmarie laugh as they drew silly pictures of ducks and frogs and families with their own personal boxes of Crayola crayons. Except the pictures weren't silly at all.

*

When I was thirteen, my mom's boyfriend Bill took me to the "Barley and Brothers Circus" downtown. People came out of the woodwork (my mom said) to go to this thing. Bill had to buy tickets four weeks in advance just to get in the door. We ended up sitting behind a man who introduced himself to us not in words but in grunts, and I watched as a slight trickle of drool crept from the corner of his mouth. The woman he was with was wearing lime green high heeled shoes and a mesh dress with just her bra and underwear underneath. I watched the fabric around her breasts expand as she leaned back after wiping the wet substance from the grunter's chin. She shoved the tissue down the front of her shirt. She winked at me and smiled and her front tooth was chipped and browning at the tip. As if knowing I was staring at it, she rubbed her tongue along the jagged, broken edge, and put her hand underneath the mesh of her dress, in between her legs, and she worked her hand back forth between her thighs.

“Here they come, champ,” Bill said to me as a dozen or so clowns pranced out onto the stage, throwing confetti into the air and squirting one another with water guns. The show lasted about an hour but I don’t remember anything except the clowns. I’m sure there was a trapeze artist or maybe a one-legged, bearded woman, or a man who ate fire, but I don’t recall any of that. All I remember were the clowns and their bright, happy faces, and their floppy shoes that guided them across the stage, and the woman in the mesh dress with her wet underwear and her browning tooth.

*

Finally ridding myself of any traces left of “Scrappy,” except my tube of green lipstick, which I like to carry simply for the sake of carrying it, I was able to make my way out of my apartment building and hail a cab. I was now running close to thirty minutes late. “Fuck,” I muttered out loud as I sat in the back seat.

“What’s your problem, man? Dude, I’m going as fast as I can. I can’t help the fucking gridlock.” The young cab driver rolled his eyes at me and continued pumping the brake, jerking me around in the back seat.

“I certainly wasn’t talking about you. I’m just running late,” I tried my best to reconcile any hurt feelings, as that was what I found myself doing most of the minutes of my life: minimizing the number of humans on earth with potential to hate me.

“Oh! Righteous! Sorry dude, I get a little on edge at times. My shrink says it’s cool, I mean I need to let out my aggression somehow, but she definitely advised me against being a cab driver. I said screw her, and applied anyways. So, where you in this big rush to, man?”

“Blind date.”

The cab driver bobbed his head, his mass of dreadlocks lacking movement. “I mean, do what you gotta do, dude. I met my girl at an AA meeting. Never thought it would happen for me, you know? I mean, who would have thought? I got up there, said, ‘Hello, my name is Slim Shady,’ just to get a good laugh out of people, lighten them up a bit. Her laugh was the only laugh I heard and it was like the laugh of a fucking angel. Then I saw her. And that was it for me. We hopped the first bus out of AA and been, you know, happy ever after ever since. Never know. Maybe you’re the next me. And you’ll meet the chick of your lifetime when you least expect it. Just listen for the laugh,” he said. The cab driver smiled faintly. Then he apparently got distracted from his own thoughts as he began plucking hairs out of his earlobes.

We finally pulled up to the restaurant. I slapped some cash in the cabby’s outstretched hand and dashed out of the taxi. I noticed him giving me a thumb’s up sign through the window. I was going to need more than that on this one. I didn’t even think Sonya would be waiting still. She said she’d have a red rose woven through her hair.

She was there, sitting perfectly poised on a bar stool, sipping a Cosmopolitan and strumming her fingernails on top of the bar. She looked magnificent. Sonya and I ate dinner and shared a slice of cheesecake. She told me about her cat, Sebastian, and how he walks with a limp and has extra toes. She told me about her job as a cashier at the Krogers and how she gets to wear an apron and a nametag and sometimes make announcements in the microphone. She told me that her grandfather had been a Native American from the Cherokee tribe and showed me a picture of him from her wallet and there he was with long, shiny black hair and an earring made of feathers. I paid the bill and helped her put her jacket on and we held hands and walked on the sidewalk, staring

into the closed store fronts. We admired the mannequins and their beaded dresses and their sweet, unknowing faces. We talked about the simplicity of their cheekbones and how beautiful their horse-mane hair was as it shone below the track lighting in the windows.

“Frederick, thanks for a great time tonight,” she whispered to me as we looked at each other on her front porch. Her eyes were green, her hair was pulled back and I wanted to run my fingers through her ponytail and kiss her neck.

“It was my pleasure,” I replied instead, and grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips and kissed it deeply and wanted to bite the skin on her hand but I didn’t, I just kissed it. She giggled, fumbled in her purse for her keys, and handed me a folded piece of paper with her phone number written on it. Sonya smiled a soft smile as she unlocked her front door, stepped in, and said hello to Sebastian.

*

I went on my first date when I was sixteen and a junior in high school. Her name was Marge Mertle and she wasn’t beautiful. She had braces and crossed eyes and wore spandex pants all the time with big, bulky sweaters over the top of them. But I had never kissed a girl and figured she was as good as any to start with. When I left my house that night my mom was sitting at the kitchen table with her head resting on her arms, and her Salem burning in the ashtray next to her. I put the butt out and tried to wake her up to move her but she could only mumble and swallow and rub her eyes. I lifted her up and carried her like I would assume one carries a baby, and her head snuggled into my neck and I could feel her hot breath and felt her lips touch my skin. I put her in her bed and

took her socks off for her and pulled her comforter up, wrapping it tightly around her small body.

Marge wasn't home when I got to her house but her mother invited me in for a cup of coffee or tea and I chose chamomile tea with a little bit of sugar. We sat in the den on a brown leather couch.

"Frederick, it's really so nice to meet you. I can't imagine what's keeping Marge, she's been talking about this the whole week! She even told me about your cute little dimples," she said as she rubbed her thumb along my cheeks and smiled over her cup of steaming tea.

"Mrs. Mertle, really, it's okay, you don't have to make excuses for her."

She looked ashamed then and sipped from her mug and twirled a strand of hair around her fingers and didn't even try to make it okay. "Frederick, you can kiss me if you want to." I stared blankly at her face and studied her and wondered if she was setting me up for a huge fall or if she was being sincere. She licked her lips and set her mug down on the floor next to her. "Really. You can." And so she sat, with her back straight, and her shirt so low I could see down it and I saw a small mole on top of her left breast and for just a second I wanted to touch it with my finger and rub it and kiss it. I touched my lips to hers very softly and slowly and felt a small piece of dry skin on her lip. She licked inside my mouth and along my gums and over the tops of my teeth. Then my stomach started hurting like I was cramping up and I felt sick like I was going to vomit so I pushed her away from me and stood up sweating. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I have to be getting home." I cleared my throat and smoothed my hair down as she sat staring at me, smiling, waiting for me to say more or do more. I ran out of the house all the way

home and checked on my mom who was still sleeping quietly in her bed under her comforter. I walked over to her bed, pulled the blankets back and crawled in, falling asleep inside my mom's flannel sheets.

*

I didn't call Sonya for three weeks. I thought about her stories and her soft, whispery voice and how I would lose her as soon as she knew the true me. I went to the mall and walked around and watched the families and children laugh and eat lunch in the food court. I got smacked in the head accidentally by an elderly lady's purse that was the size of a bowling ball bag. I glared at her as I rubbed the back of my head. I thought that if I had been in my proper attire, the wig would have protected me. I decided to call Sonya from a pay phone. I wiped the receiver off with a handy-wipe and dialed.

"Hello."

"Sonya, hey, it's me Frederick. How are you?"

I heard her sigh.

"Hi Frederick, nice to hear from you. I'm doing well. I'm just on my way out though. Can you call me later?"

"Can we meet somewhere for coffee or something?"

"Well, I guess. Meet me at the place next to the laundromat on Bank. I have to go to a birthday party in two hours though, so I can't stay long." She hung up quickly and I could hear Sebastian mewing in the background.

I paced around the mall for a while longer and bought some French fries from the Burger King and dipped them in sweet and sour sauce. Then I grabbed a cab and watched out the window as we drove down the secluded streets, bare because of the rain.

When we pulled up to the coffee shop I started sweating and scratching my ankles and wanting to tell the cab driver to turn around and take me home.

I surveyed the shop and shook the rain off of my head and wiped my face off with my sweatshirt that was just as wet. I ordered a cup of cafe mocha and sat down on a bench with my back facing the entrance. “Hey Frederick, sorry I’m late, this weather stinks.” I glanced up and saw a Sonya in a tight-fitting navy blue guard suit. There was a small, rectangular nametag pinned above her left breast, and a baseball cap fit snugly on her head. Her pants were tight against her thighs and flared out a little at the cuffs. Her black shoes, I could tell, had just been shined that morning.

“Sonya?” She glanced down and remembered what she was wearing and laughed until tears dribbled down her cheeks and smeared her makeup.

“I quit my job at the Krogers,” she said after she had calmed down. “I just started my security guard job at the museum last week.” She sipped from her mug of chai tea to get warm, and sat down next to me.

I was speechless. Now this was a woman in uniform.

“Oh, you have some green on your front tooth,” she said and reached up and wiped it off with her index finger.

A Long, Straight Road

The night of my dad's funeral it was five degrees and my fingers were dry and cracked. I couldn't feel my hand inside my mother's hand as we stood looking at each other in their kitchen.

At the calling hours earlier that day a woman with red pumps and a matching red scarf tied around her head walked in. Her sunglasses were large on her tiny face and her mouth twitched like a mouse when it's eating. I watched the woman walk over to my mother who was not dabbing the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief, but rather soaking the wetness up from her face with a hand towel. They shook hands and the woman with the red scarf and heels shook her head slowly as she handed my mother a key.

My mom looked over at me, her eyes puffy, her cheeks pink, and her chest heaving. I walked over and eyed the woman in the red scarf.

"You must be Grace. You're exactly as he's described you," said the woman in red.

"And you are?" I touched my mom's hand and then finally rested my hands on my hips.

"Oh, I'm sorry, this is so awkward I've lost my manners," she said and tugged at the knot of material underneath her chin. "I'm Alissa. Al. I was a..." Her voice trailed off and her eyes bore into my mom and I watched them become watery and she blinked a few times.

My mom finished her sentence. "Al here has supposedly been banging my husband for three years and has come to pay respects. Grace, please take her to your

father's casket so they may properly say goodbye." She stood up straight and walked away toward my grandmother, who took both of my mom's hands into hers and kissed her cheeks and led her to the bathroom.

I went home with my mom that night and we walked separately around the house, randomly touching things that we had never really noticed before but that now stood out so brightly. His glasses on the nightstand and a mug with a brown stain around the bottom from his coffee: one sugar, a little cream. A pair of nail clippers had been tossed onto the coffee table in the living room next to the remote control for the TV. I pulled off my blouse and skirt and let both fall around my ankles. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I stared at myself naked except for a pair of pink underwear. I touched my skin on my face and could only feel the roughness of my fingers. The skin on my stomach and arms and chest and thighs was no different. I hadn't shaved my legs in three weeks and felt the soft hair that was lined up and down my shins and calves. I pulled one of his flannel button down shirts out of his dresser drawer and buttoned it up. I smelled the cuffs of the sleeves and breathed in my father's smell. With the collar turned upward, against the back of my neck, I slipped under the covers of my parents' bed and held my mother close to my body as she wept into my neck.

*

My dad took me fishing once when I was about eight. We drove out to Barker on a long straight road that suddenly broke open into Lake Ontario. If we kept driving we would have fallen right into it and would have felt the coldness of water in October. We sat on the edge of the grass and I dipped my feet into the lake and wiggled my toes and watched the tadpoles slip around my ankles. He put his sailor cap on top of my head and

let me put the bait on the hook. I used a plastic creature because I couldn't be cruel. I watched him as he threw the line into the water, and watched as the ripples formed echoing circles on the surface. We didn't catch one fish that afternoon but we were there for hours. He let me run underneath the trees when I became bored with being quiet and patient and still. He watched me run in circles around the picnic table underneath the massive maple tree. Finally he set a blanket onto the soft, cool grass and we both settled on our backs with our arms behind our heads, and the mosquitoes emerging from wherever they emerge from. I remember he started humming softly and the sun set and the sky became a deep blue canvas painted with dazzling specks and the fireflies danced with one another in the October air.

*

My mom asked me to come over and pack my dad's belongings. I stopped by the U-Haul store and picked up some boxes and made my way to my parents' house. When I pulled in the driveway the first thing I saw was my dad's pickup truck and I remembered when he used to take me out driving.

He sat calmly in the passenger seat when I went through the red light. His Winston was perched on his bottom lip, smoke flowing like a snake out of his nose. I noticed his right hand gripping the handle of the door, the veins more distinct than normal, the redness in his fingers fading, but I didn't say anything. "You're doing good Gracey. Let's try parallel parking." I swung the car up next to a blue pick up, put it in reverse, and slammed into the back of the truck. "We won't tell your mom about this. It's just a scratch anyways," he reassured me after he'd gotten out and assessed the

damage. He patted my head and brushed my hair away from my face. I never went for my road test that year.

*

I decided to start in my parents' bedroom and pack up all of his clothes. I rummaged through his dresser drawers and haphazardly folded his shirts and underwear into the boxes. I stopped when I came to a shirt I had tie-dyed for him during summer camp one year.

When I was sixteen I brought home my first boyfriend. His name was Jack and he was cute with dimples and blond hair and always wore a tie, no matter what type of shirt he was wearing underneath. On this particular day Jack was wearing an old school Grateful Dead tie-dye t-shirt, with a pastel blue tie over it. I unlocked the front door and pulled him inside by his tie, kissing his neck sloppily, hearing my own breath escape in little puffs. Jack's teeth dug deeply into my neck, and his tongue explored inside my ears and down my throat and up my thighs. I groped his blond hair between my fingers and dragged my black fingernails up his back and into his shoulders. He grabbed my waist and touched my face and whispered that he loved me. His body fell on top of mine, on top of the living room carpet, on top of the hardwood floor, and his gasps flew out of his mouth unevenly into my ears.

The day Jack broke up with me I was a sophomore in college. I cried for three hours. I sobbed loudly, tears dripping onto the comforter of my bed as I lit a clove and inhaled, feeling the calmness rush through my body. I decided I was going about this whole breakup the wrong way. I stripped off my pajamas, pulled on a halter-top and mini skirt sans underwear, and fucked his best friend, Cal, in Jack's unmade dorm bed.

Cal was dangerous and that was different for me. He wore a black leather vest with nothing underneath and often went commando. "Easy access, babe," he would brag to everyone. He was big on pain and handcuffs and outfits. I broke it off when I found a bruise on my ass.

*

I packed my dad's nail clippers and razor and shaving cream. I packed his comb and toothbrush and hankies. I packed his collection of Hemingway novels and photographs of his mother and father in his portable safe. I found a package of his cigarettes on his nightstand and went out onto their front porch and smoked on the steps.

When I was thirteen my mom found me hiding underneath my bed once after they had been fighting. I remember hearing my dad call her names and she called him names and he ran out of the house and took her car and was gone for four days. She found me lying on my stomach with my Strawberry Shortcake sheet wrapped around my body. "Oh baby. It'll be all right please don't cry, you'll make me cry." She held me inside her lap and kissed my forehead and then left for work. After stealing a pack of my dad's cigarettes off of his nightstand I ran to my friend Shane's house. He let me in, said "shh" and dragged me upstairs with my hand in his. We sat on the window seat in his bedroom with the window open and he smoked cigarettes with me and we watched the smoke curl itself with the wind and fly out the window. "You're too pretty to cry," he said and leaned over and licked my tears off of my cheeks. "Salty." And we both laughed so hard we rolled off of the window seat and onto the floor and he rolled on top of me and told me not to laugh so loud because his parents would wake up. He said, "Have you ever done it before?" And I shook my head no. And he said, "Do you want to?" And I

nodded my head yes so he clumsily took his pants off and I took mine off and we became adults together that night. I bled on his hardwood floor and then I shivered so he got up and closed the window and pulled the comforter off of his bed and wrapped me up in it and held me the whole night.

*

Once I finished packing his clothes I began rummaging through his cassettes and DVDs, putting his collection of Kentucky Headhunters and Willie Nelson tapes into a box. My nose tickled and I thought for a minute that I might cry but I didn't. I thought of the summer I packed for college.

I had just turned eighteen and was packing to leave for my freshman year of college. "How you doing Gracey?" my dad asked as he came into my room, glancing around at the jumbles of clothes, DVDs and pictures scattered on the carpet. He bent down and picked up a picture of the two of us sitting on the back porch swing. It was always my favorite because I was laughing and he was smiling. The best thing about the picture, though, was my dad's eyes. The deep blue-green was so far away, so disconnected from his body.

"Okay, Dad. Look at all this shit though."

"Nah, you'll sort through it, no worries." He looked up at me and back at the picture. "My Gracey. This picture. You're beautiful." That was the first and only time my father ever told me I was beautiful. I looked at him long and hard, waiting for a smile to break from his face, or a wrinkle to crack near his eye, but nothing happened. He simply stood staring at the picture, then back at me. When he dropped me off at college that following week he was a mirror image of the being in that photograph. He smiled

and hugged me, and whispered to be good and stay strong and laugh, always laugh. But his hands were far away when he touched my face, and his eyes were somewhere in the distance like they were searching for something lost long ago.

*

My Junior year of college I met Daniel; he was the professor of the psychology course I was taking. He was intelligent and structured and soft-spoken and married. His wife was a woman who I felt could have been my friend under different circumstances. She wore lilac scented lotion and made the bed every morning, which we would unmake every afternoon. She liked Jazz music and tofu and Lo-mien. She wore long, flowing skirts with patterns of flowers or mountain scenes stretched across them. His wife had curly red hair that poofed out around her head like a sunset. Her smile was always worn very deeply on her face, this I know from the pictures scattered around their house. She left him notes on the counter, and packed his lunch for him and reminded him to get the laundry from the dry cleaners or stop by the bank on his way home from work. She would always write “xo” on every note and sign her name with large, cursive letters. Daniel told me that she couldn’t have children and that the disappointment rested so heavily on her heart that she had become a different woman from the one he had once married. He would look down at his wedding band and sigh and grab me around my waist and plunge his tongue into my mouth, smelling and tasting the spiciness from the Mexican we had grabbed for lunch. He would set me onto his wife’s bed and touch my hipbones with his fingertips and would say nothing as we made love. I assumed he would be thinking about his wife, and I was thinking about him, wishing I were more than a replacement, a filler, a body. I broke it off the day he looked into my eyes and said

he could see himself with me forever. I dropped his class, paid the forty-five dollar fine, and never spoke to him again.

*

My dad was the one who got me hooked on tea and now I drink at least three cups a day. He introduced me to chamomile and Constant Comment and earl gray and vanilla almond and chai. I found his supply of teabags under the counter in the kitchen and dumped them all in a plastic grocery bag from Tops Market. Those I couldn't pack away so I put them into my bag to take home.

My mom went into the hospital for kidney stones on a spring day. It was one of those days where everything was still and peaceful and I could smell the earth and the air. I went to visit her and saw my dad sitting in the waiting room, a cigarette dangling between his fingers, his eyes watching the smoke float up into the floor plant next to him. His eyes were sunken and his lips were white. His voice cracked when he saw me, "Oh, Gracey, I didn't know you'd be coming by, your mother will be so happy to see you." He patted the seat next to him, flicked his butt into the plant's soil, and licked his lips.

I remember wanting a beer at that moment, wanting to be in a crowded restaurant with a stranger, toasting to deep kissing and *Casablanca* and snow storms. I wanted to be held in a stranger's arms and feel warmth. Instead I walked into my mom's room and sat on the side of her bed and we talked about my classes and men and heartbreak.

My mom's nurse was a male and he had hazel eyes and pouty lips that were blood red. He reminded me of a vampire and I was attracted to him for that and other reasons. His hair was long and shaggy, with bouncy curls and ringlets that most women would die for. I daydreamed about wrapping his hair around my fingers, and licking his pouty lips.

His name was Randolph and when he introduced himself to me, his eyes were wide and alive and his scrubs were inviting. He took me to the cafeteria and we sipped tea quietly together, feeling the warm liquid invade our mouths and throats. I don't know if it was the tea, or the circumstances, but I was instantly in love. Randolph took me into my mother's room and we stood for a few minutes watching her sleep and watching her lips moving as she dreamed. Randolph pulled me onto the guest bed and breathed his hot breath onto my neck. He took my socks off and kissed my feet and smiled over my knees. He taught me how to use a stethoscope and kneaded my body like dough. My mom was in her own hospital bed five feet away and my dad was in the waiting room and Randolph was on top of me, working me like a loaf of bread.

*

Once I had taped up all of the boxes I took them into my parent's basement and stacked them neatly one on top of the other along the cement wall. I labeled each one using a black Sharpie as "Dad's Stuff" and hurried out of the house and into my car.

I drove about thirty miles out to Holcomb's Hill where a lot of kids like to sled during the winter. Stepping outside I noticed how much colder it had gotten during the short ride. I sat down on a small bench just to the right of the hill and watched the children who were sledding with friends. I watched the older kids who were there flirting and tossing snowballs at one another. I watched as a father in a blue knit hat sat down on a round sled and waved his daughter over. She sat crouched in his lap and he pulled her hat down over her ears. Using his hands he launched them off and they flew over a small mound and the snow danced all around them like they were in a snow globe. I heard the little girl's laughter breaking through the silence.

How the Dexys Midnight Runners Brought a Couple Back Together

Eileen had finally had enough of her fiancé Nick's shenanigans and kicked him out of the house two days ago. She had said, "You can come back when you have balls like a man, a job like a decent taxpaying human, and a heart big enough for more than just yourself to be a part of." So she gave him five minutes to collect what he needed. He had grabbed this month's copy of *Maxim* magazine, which had a photograph of a half-naked Christina Aguilera hugging a pillow seductively to her chest on the cover. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and his hair was messy and grungy and his eyes were red and sad-looking. He also snatched a pair of white tube socks and an apple.

Two days later Nick found himself settled himself onto the front porch with his back leaning against the railing. He vowed to himself that he would not leave the porch until she forgave him. He banged his head seven or eight times on the railing and finally settled with his head wedged between two of the wooden posts, his hands resting on his stomach. Eileen came out of the house about an hour later in a yellow-ruffled skirt.

"Baby," he said, lifting a hand to touch her skirt. Eileen didn't say a word but she set a dry cheese sandwich down on his lap, stepped over his outstretched legs, and hurried to her Camry. Nick picked up the sandwich and savored each bite. Then he sat with his head against the front door and napped for three hours.

"Mister. Hey, mister." Nick woke to the sound of a whiny, nasal-y voice, and a stick jabbing him in his sock-ed foot. "Mister, mister," she repeated until he finally opened his eyes. Nick rubbed his face and eyes for a while. While he rubbed she twirled

one of her pigtails with one hand, and started hopping around the sidewalk. Then she started humming off key in high octaves.

“Okay. I’m up.” The little girl jumped happily onto the top step and sat next to Nick, leaving her poking device down below on the grass.

“I’m Missy. I live next door. I’m six years old. I was just at my house practicing the C scale because of piano lessons. Then I was looking out the window and saw how sunny and blue it was outside and thought maybe I should go exploring. So I did. And then I saw you and thought maybe you were dead. I thought that maybe if you were hurt I could wrap you up in bandages like Zoe did to Roly Poly Olie once.” She twisted her mouth like a fish and crossed her eyes. Then she set her head against the railing like Nick’s.

“Well. That’s interesting Missy,” Nick replied after a minute. “I think I’ve met you before though.” He watched her stick her lips out like she was practicing kissing someone. “What’re you doing?”

“When I go like this with my lips,” she said and paused while she demonstrated the maneuver again,” and then breathe out my nose like this,” another pause for dramatic effect, “the air is really hot on my upper lip. My mommy says that you’re a woman-sir.”

“Honestly, Missy, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“A woman-sir. She says you ‘like the ladies.’”

“Womanizer,” Nick said. Missy looked at him puzzled and hurt as if she never made mistakes. “Womanizer. And no, I’m not. I have a fiancé, Eileen. And no one else.”

“Well. If you say so. I’m just telling you what my mommy said. So then why have you been out here for two days? Did you sleep out here?”

“It’s kind of a grown up thing.”

Missy stuck her tongue out at Nick. “My father says I’m very grown up for my age. That I’m too grown up for my own good and it’ll get me into trouble.”

“Does your father tell you to mind your own business as well?”

“You’re really funny mister, you know that?” Missy rolled her eyes and stood up.

“You can call me Nick. Wait, where’re you going?”

“Hey you want me to bring you some lemonade later? I can squeeze the lemons myself and then I’ll add a little sugar to it and everything and I’ll pick the seeds out because no one likes seeds. I learned how to do it in school last year with Mrs. Porter.” Missy looked at Nick with wide deer eyes. He noticed she had two freckles on her chin right below her lip.

“I would love some lemonade, Missy. Thank you.” Nick held his hand out to Missy to shake and she grabbed it and squeezed his fingers and smiled. Her front tooth was missing. She skipped down the steps and ran onto her lawn, disappearing through her front door.

Nick decided to pass the time by eating the handful of Starburst candies that were in the pockets of his cargo pants. He folded each empty wrapper up into a tiny square and after he’d eaten them all he held the remains in his two hands. He noticed that they looked like confetti and then he shoved them all back into his pockets.

It was around four o’clock and he figured Eileen would be back from her errands soon. It was a Saturday and they usually went out to dinner together and then stayed in

watching movies. Last weekend they rented *Garden State* and both tried to do a completely original act that night. Eileen had done an interpretive dance to an Enya song and Nick had eaten an ice cream cone while skipping backwards through the living room. They had both laughed hysterically at one another and then Nick grabbed Eileen around the waist and pulled her close so that her chest heaved against his and she buried her face into his neck and they danced slowly as silence serenaded them.

This evening would be different because he wouldn't be in the house. She would change into pajamas, make herself some pasta for dinner, call her mother and watch a sitcom on TV.

Nick thought about the nicotine patch he had pulled off of his arm earlier that day because it had been time to put on a new one. They were all in the house though, as was his safety reserve-only pack of More cigarettes. He looked down at his arm and saw the scars from when hot oil had splattered on him a few months back. Eileen had asked him to help make tacos and in an attempt to brown the meat, the pan tipped and the spatula fell to the floor. He had screamed out in terror thinking that his whole arm might have to get amputated. It turned out that it had only been a small burn and Eileen grabbed a frozen ear of corn out of the freezer for him to put on his arm and rub up and down.

He looked up at the sound of Eileen pulling into the driveway. He stood up and watched as she unbuckled and grabbed something out of the backseat. She walked to the porch and held a small dog in her arms.

"You found him. Where was he?" Nick ran down the porch steps to meet them.

"He was found by a trucker just past the Pennsylvania border. The guy picked him up on the side of the thruway and Frito freaking bit him on the thumb. He had to get

stitches and we're lucky he's not suing us." He noticed that she looked beautiful despite the fact that her eyes were puffy and her hair was oily from not washing it. He opened his mouth, "Please. Don't even try okay? Are you an idiot?" Eileen didn't wait for a response. She hurried onto the porch, unlocked the door and went inside.

Nick sat back down and looked at the splinters of wood beneath him. He was happy that Frito was okay and not gone forever. He heard a buzzing noise and followed the sound to a hummingbird above a bush lining the porch. The bird looked like it was standing in mid-air and barely even moving. The bird flew quickly from spot to spot, stopping randomly in the air. Nick's amazement grew and he continued to study the floating bird. It came towards him before he even had a chance to react and stood a mere inch from his face, staring him in his eyeballs, the long, slender beak almost touching Nick's nose. In the five-second duration, Nick saw the sage-green shadings underneath the bird's wings and the dark shadows under its eyes. Then it flew away just as quickly as it had come.

The air become colder as the sun set and the clouds met one another in the sepia and oatmeal colored sky. He wished he were wearing more than a t-shirt, jeans and tube socks. The sound of a sprinkler system in the neighbor's yard caught his attention because that particular neighbor didn't really have a lawn. An older, single man owned the property and had told Nick earlier that year: "Dirt suits me just fine. Don't got to mow then." So obviously a sprinkler system would be pointless. Nick got up, walked to the railing and leaned over it to investigate.

"Oh. Hi, Thad." Thad looked up and gave a wave as he relieved himself on the bushes lining Nick's house. "Those're my bushes."

“Heh?” Thad finished his business and zipped up his pants. He walked over to Nick and leaned against the railing. “I’ve been cooped up inside all day working on my golf swing. Thought I’d come out here and catch a breath. Your Mountain Laurel doesn’t look too good. Have you been watering it? Did you mulch it good when you planted it?”

“I’m not really concerned about my Mountain Laurel right now, Thad.”

“Well excuse me mister nursery-know-it-all. I just thought I’d give you a head’s up on your foliage here, but I can see it’s not necessary.” Thad pushed himself off of the porch with the bottom of his foot and stuffed his hands into his pockets.

“Hey, Thad. Wait. You wouldn’t have something to drink would you? I haven’t had a glass of water in two days. Feels like someone shoved cotton in my mouth.” Thad blew a puff of air out of his mouth that sounded like “puh” and walked away. About two minutes later he walked out of his house and threw a can of Keystone to Nick.

He nodded, said “Goodnight,” and disappeared into the darkness surrounding his house. Nick saw a light go on and then off again in Thad’s house and knew that he had gone to bed.

Nick flipped open the can of beer, and even though it wasn’t exactly what he had requested, he felt obligated to drink it. He gulped the whole can down, burped loudly and settled back down onto the porch, folding his knees up toward his chin. The porch light went off and he whispered “night Eileen” into the darkness. He heard Frito yelp and his toenails scamper across the hardwood floor in the foyer. “No, Frito. Come here,” demanded Eileen as Frito clawed at the front door. Nick pressed his hand against the door and pretended he could feel the warmth from the other side.

Nick got little sleep that night, especially after the rain began. It started as a cool, light sprinkle and quickly formed into a downpour. Nick buried his face into his shirt and wrapped his arms around his legs forming a tight, human ball. The warmth he had felt from the beer subsided until his entire body became one shiver. He remembered about a fight he and Eileen had had recently about his “lack of motivation and drive” as she had stated it. “I’m not ready to grow up, Leen. I know that’s selfish and cruel and not fair to you, but what am I supposed to do if I don’t know what I want with my life?”

Eileen had stood motionless, her eyes wide with sadness. “You should want me. That’s what you should want with your life. And you should want to do anything possible to make our life a good, stable, healthy, loving life. Lots of people have jobs they don’t love, or don’t understand, Nick. But they have them because they have to have them. I can’t support the three of us forever. And I am certainly not bringing kids into this situation.” Nick had tried to grab her face and stroke her hair but she backed away and cried in the bathroom. He went out the next day and filled out applications for the Yellow Goose, the ArrowMart, the JiffyLube, and a pet super store down the road from their house. He never told her that though. He wanted to surprise her when he came home from training somewhere, wearing a uniform, proud that he could now make her proud.

After a morose night, the sun came up the next morning and Nick thought of going for a run but remembered he had no sneakers. His stomach growled and he thought of walking the seven miles to the Burger King to get a ham, egg and cheese croissant-wich, but he had no money either. The front door opened shortly after the sun had turned the sky a deep magenta, and Eileen set down a glass of orange juice and a

plate with a bagel and cream cheese. "Morning Leen," Nick said and heard only a grunt in response.

Eileen came outside fully dressed in a long skirt and sweater, about a half an hour later. "I'm going to church. Frito's inside but he'll be fine. But I'm pretty sure you weren't worried about him." She stood with her hands on her hips and looked down at Nick who had bagel crumbs on the lap of his pants.

"Leen, when're we going to talk about this? I made a mistake. My mind's been completely spaced the past few. Don't you know how sorry I am? You know I love Frito. And I love you." Nick stood up and reached out for Eileen's hands.

"Your mind's always spaced. Get your head out of your ass, Nick. And grow the hell up." She stepped around him and stomped down the steps to her car. "You lost our dog Nick, and then just figured he'd find his way back here." Eileen shook her head sadly, got into her car and drove away. Nick was left with the echo of her words.

He thought about his first date with Eileen. He met her at the Tim Hortons in Fredonia on route 36. She was standing in front of him in line and ordered a medium iced cappuccino and a reduced-fat blueberry muffin. When she pulled her change pouch out of her purse the button popped off and her coins scattered all over the tiled floor. He bent down to pick up a few pennies; she looked up at him through her bangs, and said, "Thanks. You can just put those in the donation box."

"Oh. Okay," Nick replied and dropped the change into the plastic box on the counter. "Are you eating here?"

"I think so. I'm on my way to work but have a few minutes." After Nick ordered he spotted her sitting at a small table next to a window and a hanging spider plant. The

plant was dangling just above her head and Nick worried that it might fall. “Let’s switch spots.” She stood up and they danced around one another trying to switch seats. He had brushed his hand against her arm and she turned to look at him quickly, smiling. That had begun their romance. They moved in together quickly, after only two months. She became the bread winner, working at the credit union in Dunkirk, and Nick stayed home, training the puppy they bought together. He spent his mornings sleeping in then eventually getting up to wash the dishes, walk Frito, smoke a bowl and spray Renuzit After the Rain throughout the house before Eileen came home at five.

Missy went to visit Nick around eleven with a tall glass of lemonade, a peanut butter and pickle sandwich and a bowl of cherry Garcia ice cream. “Wow Missy. What a treat. You didn’t have to do all this.” Nick began eating quickly. He realized how much he liked the idea of someone taking care of him like Missy did. He also realized that Eileen probably craved the same type comfort and solace and love.

“Not a problem mister. That’s what friends are for. I saw your fiancé leave this morning. She’s real pretty. What did you do to make that pretty lady so mad at you?”

Nick chewed and swallowed his last bite of sandwich and washed it down with a sip of the lemonade. “I lost our dog, Frito. Just like people lose their keys, can’t find them, that’s what I did, only with a dog. Eileen finally found him just across the Pennsylvania border.”

“How do you lose a dog? I would never lose my dog, Sebastian. She’s an Old English Sheepdog. Really big and furry.”

“Sounds like a nice dog, Missy.”

“Fruit salad. Yummy yummy.” Missy started dancing on the sidewalk and singing the same lines over and over again.

“What’s that song from?”

“The Wiggles. My little sister loves that show. She watches it all the time. Look, go like this with your hands and then jump. It’s easy. Stand up Nick!” Missy held out her hand to help Nick stand up. “Dance with me.” Nick shook his head vigorously and planted his feet firmly on the step. “Come on, don’t be a poopy. Dance with me.” And that’s how Eileen found Nick that afternoon when she pulled into the driveway: dancing to a fruit salad song with a six-year-old girl. Nick watched her stare at them from inside her car and listen with her windows rolled down. Nick laughed and held Missy’s hands and rubbed his stomach to go along with the words. He finally saw Eileen wipe her face, grab her purse, and get out of her car.

“Hello Missy,” Eileen said, smiling, as she made her way up the front walk. She didn’t look into Nick’s eyes. Instead she looked at his bare feet.

“Leen, I’m glad you’re home. Can we talk?” Nick stood with one hand on Missy’s shoulder. His teeth felt grimy and he could smell his armpits. Eileen stepped around him, walked up the steps and into the house greeting Frito.

“I got to run and practice now. That C scale is tricky.” Missy slid her flip-flops back on which she had kicked off during her dance with Nick, and ran back to her house. She turned when she got onto her porch and gave Nick a big wave.

Nick sat down on the top step and realized they really needed to buy some furniture for their porch. One of those comfy swings maybe or a hammock.

Nick thought about the trip he, Eileen and Frito had taken to Cape Cod the summer before. It had rained the entire vacation so they sat inside their cabin and smoked pot together and played ball with Frito. They watched every movie they had brought and touched one another on the couch and made love in the bed and the shower and on the floor. He had loved her more than ever that trip and saw how beautiful she was. On their last day there they woke up and made scrambled eggs and sausage and smoked and laughed. Eileen went into the kitchen to get a glass of water and when she came back Nick had gotten naked and stood in the doorway and smiled and said, "Eileen, will you marry me, all of me and all of my imperfections?" And though he didn't have a ring to give her then, she had grabbed him so hard around the waist and kissed his lips and she had tasted like cheesies and banana bread and Hawaiian Punch. Then he ripped her clothes off and carried her into the bedroom and kissed her everywhere.

Just before the sun set that same night, they decided to go for a bike ride. They rode down the narrow, gravel path that led right into Corporation Beach and left their bikes at the spot where the gravel met the sand. They walked onto the beach and stood on a rock and let the small waves jump onto their toes.

Now Nick wished he could go back to Cape Cod and feel Eileen's love and her soft touch and hear her laugh. Instead he sat with his back against the front door and waited for the night to become silent and dark.

Eileen turned the porch light off around eleven. Nick could see her standing on the other side of the window. He began singing loudly, without any particular rhythm, to a song they were both fond of.

“Come on Eileen. Come on. Eileen taloo rye aye. Come on, Eileen taloo rye aye too rah too rah taloo rah. Oh, oh Eileen. At this moment, you mean everything to me.”

He stopped singing and looked at the house waiting for a light to turn on. Instead, the door opened and Nick’s pillow was thrown out and he caught it at the bottom of the stairs. He gripped it between his fingers and sighed. Nick once again sat down and pressed the back of his head against the door. He fell asleep that night holding the pillow to his chest and resting his head on the metal threshold.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. New York: Bantam Books, 1969.
- . "Still I Rise." Poem Hunter. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/still-i-rise/>. 15 February 2007.
- Atwood, Margaret. "On Writing Poetry." Hay On Wye, Wales. June 1995.
<http://web.net/owtoad/lecture.html>.
- Bartkevicius, Jocelyn. "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction." The Fourth Genre. Ed. Root, Robert L. Jr. and Steinberg, Michael. New York: Pearson Education, 2005. 275-281.
- Block, Francesca Lia. Weetzie Bat. New York: Harper Collins, 1989.
- Burroughs, Augusten. Running With Scissors. New York: Picador, 2002.
- Dillard, Annie. "To Fashion a Text." Root 286-295.
- Eggers, Dave. A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Folgers. 17 February 2007. www.folgers.com.
- Foster, Patricia. "The Intelligent Heart." Root 303-305.
- Frey, James. A Million Little Pieces. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.
- Ives, Peter. "The Whole Truth." Root 322-329.
- Lott, Brett. "Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction." Root 359-365.
- Pearson, Michael. "The Other Creative Writing." Root 366-270.
- Salinger, J.D. "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Nine Stories. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1948.

Thinsulate Gloves. Wikimedia Foundation Inc. 17 February 2007.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinsulate>.

“Tic Tac.” Ferrero Company. 2006. www.tictacusa.com. 17 February 2007.