

Westminster College

Senior Theses

in Creative Writing

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Senior Theses
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with Emphasis in Creative Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Every human being is born with some kind of artistic talent—literary, visual, musical, kinesthetic—some lucky people are blessed with more than one. But the distance between having a talent and developing it is vast. Most people have no idea how hard it is to write good poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, or drama. They believe that, because writing English is a basic skill, writing literature naturally follows it. I've been at many a party where someone—perhaps an architect—says to me, “I'm writing a novel.”

“That's nice,” I respond, and think to myself, *let me know when you publish it*. The literary world is still largely a meritocracy, and publishing—not vanity publishing, but publishing vetted by the industry—means that several editors have decided that the work is worth the paper it's printed on. I wouldn't dream of trying to build a house without the years of training and experience needed to do it well. The students in Westminster College's 2014 creative writing thesis class have had their work critiqued by each other, by me, and by a professional reader outside the class. As you'll see from their introductory statements, this has entailed four months of hard revision. Yes, anyone can write a novel or a collection of poems or essays, or a memoir. But making these literary works worth reading is something else entirely.

The writers in my spring 2014 thesis class have learned that writing well is not just a matter of elegant sentences, precise description, and good plots, but also emotional honesty. Revising one's writing means revising one's self, which is never easy. And it sometimes means cutting one's favorite scenes, characters, or plot twists. I applaud these writers for doing the dif

difficult work of coming to terms with their own weaknesses, and I applaud them also for their considerable strengths. Their feedback for each other was wonderful, and the class formed a bond based on that demonstration of honesty and care. I hope you enjoy their writing, and I wish them continued success with their art.

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KIMBERLY FALLIS

Writing Hannah was always a challenge for me. In an earlier draft, Hannah is a normal pre-teen with the exception that she has Dissociative Personality Disorder. In these earlier drafts of Hannah's story, one main alter comes in and serves as Hannah's much more aggressive self: Ollie. This idea of having a separate personality was eventually removed as the semester went on, but instead, the artistic choice was made to make Hannah a paranoid-schizophrenic. Due to this choice, it was much easier to write her perspective through a third person limited point of view. This was also another challenge due to the complexity of Hannah's character. It was even more difficult to keep authorial intrusion to the absolute minimum. To combat using authorial intrusion, the reader is able to see that I begin to use italics. The italics have two purposes: Hannah's thoughts and the paranoid thoughts that come up in her mind as time goes on.

My writing has always been something that I have been proud of. Although I write almost any genre, Hannah has been an interesting character to write when I first started to draft her story during my Fiction workshop class in fall 2013. As Hannah's story developed, it became much more obvious that the narrative wouldn't entirely fit with a split personality because it would make things incredibly complicated to read and also to write. But by writing "The Soft Edge," I found it much easier to have Hannah only have paranoia and have an emphasis on her home life and the relationship between her parents.

Creative writing, for me, has always been a long process whether I'm writing a short story, flash fiction, or even a novella. When I first begin a story, I have to map out every detail in the plot, character, and setting to make sure that I have a grasp on the essence of the story. Hannah's story originally was going to be much longer, but I learned quickly

that it would be crucial that for the thesis, her story would be cut down significantly. I was already aware of her character, but not what her character was like. This started an entirely different process by drafting small scenes to see who she is as a character and how she reacts with her parents, or doesn't react. Since she is usually not very verbal, it was difficult to show Hannah's nervous ticks and thoughts without them being constantly shown. No matter how difficult this was to keep in her point of view, I never even considered making her story a first person narrative. But as I continued to finish her story, I had to continually remind myself that I was writing a short story and that it was okay if part of it felt unfinished since I had intended to make this story longer. But I still tried to finish the story in the most completed way regardless.

Overall, the outcome of Hannah's story in "The Soft Edge" has been successful. By writing Hannah as a complex character, I felt the need to get to know her on a personal level by writing her story. Although there is a slight commentary about family values and dynamics in "The Soft Edge," it was interesting to write the parents as two complete opposites from each other and see how certain things are solved when Hannah seems to be stuck in the middle of everything and not sure what to do. By having the parents portrayed as opposites, one has to wonder if Hannah is even a reliable narrator, but that is for the reader to decide. Hannah has been both a joy and challenge to write, like most characters I have done, but her story is also one that I won't forget seeing how much I learned just by writing her character and through my own process as a writer as well.

THE SOFT EDGE

*Who are you? What do you want from me? Why are you here?
Can't you just leave me alone? I have done nothing wrong...*

Hannah lay awake on the bed, looking up at the ceiling as if trying to find new shapes that weren't there the day before. Outside, the sun was already beginning to set and the clouds began to disperse like a cotton blanket stretched over a baby's crib. For such a beautiful sight outside, the very inside of her mind was the exact opposite. Thoughts that crowded her own mind and spoke to her in childish voices that didn't belong to herself. Below Hannah's feet, she could hear two voices that she could recognize: Mother and Papa.

They're talking about you. Bad things.

"It's just strange, Troy. She doesn't have any friends and she doesn't like to leave the house, either. She just prefers to be up in her room, down here, or outside. Children of her age are supposed to be running around and having fun!"

Hannah sat up from the bed, the wooden frame creaking beneath her. She scratched her fingers through her dark-auburn hair. She scuffed her feet across the carpet and carefully opened the wooden door at the left side of her room.

"...I'm not saying this is a bad thing. But I am worried about her! She's just not normal!"

Hannah sighed and walked towards her closet. She opened one of the doors and pulled out a large moving box taped shut except for the top flaps. Out of the box, she took out a single stuffed animal and a doll. She caressed the doll's hair with her dry and cracked fingers; the yarn was unraveling and the clothing on the doll was already full of holes. Hannah

looked behind her shoulder, loose hairs falling into her eyes. She sat up from the floor and walked back to her bed, taking out a small orange Bic lighter from underneath her pillow. A grin came across her face as she kneeled back down where the doll was and clicked on the lighter, drawing the flame closer and closer to the doll's synthetic hair.

Hannah cradled the lighter in her hands as if it was a piece of glass. Mother stared at Hannah, her face wrinkled with confusion and anger. Papa, on the other hand, sat in silence next to her, cleaning his glasses nervously with the bottom of his shirt. Hannah didn't dare make eye contact with either of them. Mother coughed to break the awkward silence, doing her best to keep calm.

"Oh, Hannah..." Hannah kept her gaze at the floor, noticing different spirals in the Persian rug at her feet. "Why would you do this? This was one of your nicer dolls."

"Oh, Melody," Papa put his glasses back onto his nose and adjusted them to his eyes before they fell forward only slightly. "It's just a doll."

Mother stared at Papa, her ice-blue eyes piercing through his calm demeanor. "It was my doll as a child!" She turned to Hannah. "Just tell us why you did this, sweetie."

Hannah met Papa's gaze and attempted to smile, but her cheekbones refused to move. "I just felt like it, I guess."

Papa scooted closer to Hannah and patted her on the shoulder, "Okay, Hannah, just be careful. We don't want you getting hurt."

I'm not going to hurt myself. It was just a small fire...

"Troy, she could have so easily burned the house down because of this! I don't even know where she got the lighter. Hannah?" Hannah

looked up, but her dark green eyes didn't meet Mother's. "Are you listening to us?"

Hannah nodded slowly, keeping the lighter close to her palms.

"This is hopeless, Hannah. You don't ever listen to us and I still don't understand you even after raising you for almost 14 years."

But I do listen to you, Mother.

Hannah's mouth dropped open as she heard Mother speak, but yet, Mother's mouth hadn't moved. Or at least, Hannah didn't see Mother's mouth move. There were only sounds, no actual words. Hannah shook her head violently. Her hair rustling over her head in delicate waves.

"Give us the lighter, sweetie," Papa said. His voice calm and soft. He held out his rough cracked-skin hand. Hannah placed the lighter in her right hand, gripped it, and put her hand onto Papa's. His fingers tried to open her hand gently, but to no avail. He drew back his hand and used it to scratch at his head.

"It's mine," Hannah whispered, squeezing her hand closer to further contain the lighter. "I found it."

Mother sat down on the other side of Hannah on the couch and ran her hands through dark brown hair. "Hannah, you know we love you. But we just want to make sure that you're okay."

"I'm tired," Hannah said, leaning back into the couch, closing her eyes.

"The lighter first, Hannah."

Hannah looked at Mother at her left, Papa at her right. She ran her tongue over her cracked lips and drew in the lower lip as if to bite it. Hannah opened her hand carefully, exposing the lighter. Mother took it

and left the room. Hannah could hear a drawer in a nearby room open and close. Papa sat up from the couch and patted Hannah on the head like an owner to their cat.

There is something wrong with you. They don't want you, Hannah, and they never will.

It was a calm Sunday morning. Birds outside sang their high-pitched melodies; crickets could still be heard doing their own baritone harmony. Mother was in the kitchen preparing pancakes and sausage. Papa was reading the newspaper, a cup of coffee next to his empty plate still steaming. The fresh aroma of toast filled the air around Mother, mixed with stale perfume and another pot of coffee brewing. Upstairs, Hannah sat at her window, watching a breeze shake the leaves of the trees in their backyard.

“Strange how a window can be open and yet it feels like there is still no air.” She took out a sketchbook from her underneath her bed and began to sketch with light pinks and purples. She remained sitting on her bed until Mother called out from downstairs. Hannah set her sketchbook on her pillow and walked outside of her room. Down the stairs, she walked and counted the times each individual step creaked. Six. At the bottom of the stairs, the smell of breakfast began to filter into her nose. She inhaled slowly, letting in each individual scent. She walked through the living room and counted her steps as her feet walked over carpet and onto hardwood floor.

“Good morning, Hannah,” Mother said, turning around to give Hannah a smile. It wasn't even 10 in the morning and Mother already had lipstick-stained teeth.

“Morning, I guess,” Hannah said, taking a seat across from her

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father at the table.

“Sleep well?” asked Papa, eyes unmoved from the newspaper.

“Sure.”

“Well, here’s some breakfast. Would you like some jam or butter with your pancakes, Hannah?”

Hannah shrugged and took a fork from the dark grey placemat in front of her. She looked at it carefully. Sterling silver, the usual three prongs, and a flowery base at the bottom in a cream lining. She put the fork down as Mother sat other things at the table: other plates, butter, and a plate of bacon and sausage. Papa kept looking at the page in front of him, but all Hannah could read was “CLASSIFIDES” and columns of words. Papa took a sip from his coffee, still not looking, and put it back down on its saucer, adding additional sugar afterwards.

Mother came back into the kitchen after a few minutes with a plate of pancakes and set it in the middle of the table and in front of Hannah. Mother took a sip from her own coffee and began to butter her pancakes with delicate strokes, putting each one down carefully on the plate so the backs wouldn’t get messy. Hannah looked at her, and then to Papa, and then down at her own plate. Without looking, she grabbed two pancakes and put them down on the plate.

“Well, Hannah, good to know that after our little discussion last night that nothing happened.” Mother said, her voice slightly sarcastic and condescending.

Of course, something wasn’t going to happen last night. We wouldn’t allow it Right, Hannah? But something is going to happen.

“Would you like something to drink, Hannah? I can get you some milk, juice...”

“I can get it myself,” Hannah mumbled, her fingers fiddling with a

knife in her left hand, the edge of the blade felt soft and gentle against her cracked skin.

Papa put the newspaper down in front of him and smiled. “Well, I’m ready to eat some breakfast! Everything smells wonderful, Mel. Don’t you think... Hannah!”

Hannah looked up, terror in her eyes as she dropped the knife onto the floor with an echoing clang. Mother jumped from her seat and came running back from the kitchen with a washcloth, giving it to Hannah frantically. Hannah pressed it against her palm and felt the immediate sting as the blood flowed from her open skin.

Hannah sat cross-legged in the waiting room chair, the wood rubbing awkwardly against her knees. The air felt dirty with the scent of Lysol and children’s coughs. Mother stood at the welcome desk, telling the secretary unknowns. Occasionally, she would look over and give Hannah a smile. But Hannah refused to look up. In her lap, a clipboard with several papers awaited Hannah’s penmanship. To prove that she was here for a reason, perhaps. Hannah drummed her fingers with little movement except her fingertips moving up and down. Up and down in a pitter-patter like falling rain. With her other hand, she kept the blood-stained washcloth clenched tight. She didn’t know if there would be a scar there already. But when she looked, all she could see was scraped skin and dried blood.

“Does it still hurt?” Papa asked. She looked at him using her peripherals and shrugged. “Well, I bet we’ll be seeing a doctor soon. Just hang in there.”

Hannah held a pen in her crusted palm and began to write. Writ-

ing out her own name, it seemed foreign. The way her handwriting still looked like a child's just learning the alphabet. Her birth date just looked like a mess of numbers put in no particular order except for month, date, and year. She answered the questions as she went down the list. Have you had this symptom? How about this one? Several no's in the check boxes and a couple of yes's. Mother walked back over and sat down at a nearby chair. She shook her head, "You might need stitches, Hannah, but we'll be with the doctor soon."

Soon? Maybe in 20 minutes. Any less would be mysterious.

Hannah continued to write, now onto a third page.

At least we can afford it.

Around the waiting area, children ran around and played with various toys. Their mothers didn't look up from the home and living magazines that were seen on a nearby table, not even paying attention to their children. One mother would be talking on a cell phone, another flipping pages through a magazine. The children would make their own sounds whether they were healthy or sick. Hannah smiled in their general direction; jealous of the freedom the children seemed to have. Instead, Mother and Papa kept a close watch on Hannah, their eyes like a soldier on watch.

"I'll be right back," Hannah piped up.

"Where are you going?" asked Mother, not looking up from a gardening magazine.

"Bathroom."

"Just don't go anywhere too far. The doctor will be seeing you any minute."

Hannah nodded and sat up from the chair and began walking

towards the bathroom. She passed other people, dodging other children, and the large windows that overlooked the parking lot of the hospital. She finally got to the bathroom and walked in. The artificial light fell onto her skin from above the mirror and the air conditioning danced through Hannah's auburn hair. It was cold and stale. "Artificial air. We can breathe it in and yet it always feels like it's slowly suffocating us."

If you don't like the air, then why don't you just stop breathing?

Hannah turned on the water at the sink and let the cool water flow over her skin. It felt nice. Refreshing. She removed the washcloth from her hand and carefully put soap into her palm. With the cold water, there was a dull sting. She clenched her hand shut almost like a fist, but released it after the sting subsided. Hannah reached over to the paper towel dispenser and tugged at the paper, ripping it in smaller pieces. She pressed it against her palm and felt the soap go into the cut. She pressed it harder and all she could feel was the dampness from the soap and water.

It's okay, Hannah, you'll be stitched up soon.

As she dabbed at her palm, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was longer than it used to be, past her shoulders and thick like curtains. Hannah watched herself shake her head and saw the strands dance from side to side without music. She remembered when her hair was shorter the year before. It used to be only slightly down her neck, clinging closely to her chin. She looked at the shades in the artificial light and watched her hair turn brighter and darker as she moved her head, rotating it slowly. She turned off the sink and threw away the paper towels. She grabbed the bloodied washcloth and headed outside the door. Maybe the doctor would be ready for her now.

On her way back to the waiting area where Mother and Papa re-

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mained seated, she took a drink from a drinking fountain. The taste was metallic and seemed to scrape against her teeth as the water flowed into her mouth. She felt the back of her mouth moisten as the water passed over the scratchy areas and rushed down her throat. She took another mouthful and let it sit in her mouth, allowing it to settle on her tongue. After swallowing the second time, her stomach began to growl. Hannah had forgotten she never had any breakfast.

“Hannah Michaels?”

Hannah looked at her bandaged hand. There was no visible blood left, but she could still feel the crust of the dried blood that had been there only a couple of hours before. The stitches didn’t bother her. They seemed to keep her thoughts together as well as her hand. But she could still feel the blade on her skin. How it felt and she didn’t even notice except for the slight feeling of a paper cut.

Hmmm, I wonder how many stitches I have. Will I have a cool scar when it heals? How is that a type of fabric can keep skin together? Does my skin grow back over the scar?

Papa sat down next to Hannah on the couch, rubbing his temples with a thumb and middle finger. His peppered hair lie flat on his head, but it shined in the lamp light next to Hannah. “Hi honey.”

“Hi, Papa.” Hannah said, leaning back into the couch’s cushion. She began to play with her thumbs, careful to not rip the gauze from her palm.

“How’s ... that?” he asked, pointing to her hand.

“It doesn’t hurt, I guess.”

“Hannah, we’re worried about you. First, a fire in your bedroom.

Second, a knife. What's going on here?"

The world is spinning. The room turns hot, flashes of white speckle the living room. Skin crawls beneath the bandage, itching at the adhesive, wanting the release. Colors begin to distort themselves. The sun no longer looks yellow, but pink. The sky is purple and the grass is no longer green. Blink. Exhale. Blink. You don't know where you are, Hannah, but this is not really happening. You are alone. Lost. Breathe in and breathe out. Find your breath and don't let it go. The air will poison you. Mother wants to poison you. She is constantly there. She won't let you go, won't let you out of her sight. Papa doesn't love you. Mother doesn't love you. Hannah...

"Stop!"

Hannah sat in a ball on the couch, her hands covering her ears. Tears streamed down her face and dripped down her chin. The tears dried on her cheeks as they passed, but they wouldn't stop. She rocked back and forth. Her head loomed with darkness, a pulsing inside that seemed to grow louder and louder.

"Hannah, it's okay! I'm here! What's wrong?"

"The voices... why can I hear the voices? Papa?"

Papa stood up from the couch and stared at Hannah. His green eyes widened as he watched Hannah contort herself further into a fetal position. He dared not to speak. Hannah stopped rocking, but her hands still covered her ears. She kept crying, but there were no audible screams.

Hannah sat at the countertop with her elbows on the smooth granite. She rubbed her fingers across the surface, noticing the rocks in the material, yet there was no roughness. She looked at Mother, who was fac-

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ing the stove, making soup, and looked at the clock on the right-side wall. 7:17PM. She watched the secondhand move as the hour and the minute hand remained still.

“What kind?”

“Chicken noodle,” Mother said, but she didn’t turn around. Instead, she kept turning a spoon inside of the pot. The steam making its way into the air and dissipating in random waves. “Is there anything else you would like?”

She’s never asked us before. Go on, Hannah, try and ask her something. Maybe she’ll say yes for once.

“Do we have any bread?”

“Sure we do. It’ll be from the freezer, but that should work. Is that all right?”

“Fine.”

Hannah took out a fresh page from her sketchbook and began drawing in dark purple and black. She made a midnight sky with stars, using broad strokes with the black to make it a velvet-like touch on the paper. As she colored in other shapes with purple, she felt the pastel rub off into her hand. It felt soothing to feel the pastel run over her skin. It wasn’t like a knife, or glass, where blood would be shed, but instead, a sense of calm. There was no need for pain. Hannah smiled, taking out a navy blue.

The soup was steaming, but the temperature didn’t feel hot. Hannah’s tongue felt the heat on itself and it didn’t seem to burn. Her teeth felt stripped away at like a chisel on ice, but her tongue remained moist. Hannah cupped the soup in her hand and nibbled at the roll on a separate plate.

“This is yummy,” Hannah said quietly.

“Good to hear it, Hannah. Maybe we can have a meal without something bad happening like this morning,” Mother said, reaching for her wine glass.

“Melody, that’s not a very nice thing to say.” Papa piped up, adjusting his glasses on his nose.

“Well, it’s true! Lots of things have been going on today and I think it’s nice that we can just eat a meal, as a family, without any incidents.”

Hannah looked down at her bowl; the chicken pieces bobbed up and down like an ocean buoy and the noodles seemed to have sunk to the bottom of the basin. She picked up the spoon and took a small bit of the broth. *Salty. Ick.*

Of course there are incidents. There will always be incidents. What has happened has happened. Things are going to continue to happen. Hey Hannah, where did Mother put that lighter? Maybe it’s time to have some fun. Let’s go out and play!

After dinner, with the sun still out, Hannah walked into the backyard of their home. Fencing lined the entire perimeter like a cage with only trees being the living inhabitant. Hannah walked through the garden and into the back where a hammock had been set up in the shade of a tree. She lay down in the hammock and watched the clouds above her. They were big and puffy, reminding her of cotton candy that used to eat at the annual fair. She reached up, as if to grab one, but all she caught was air.

Soft, airy, light, and possibly the texture of powdered sugar. Maybe this kind would taste like vanilla, or this kind piña colada. Hannah smiled. She yawned and let herself swing back and forth. The creaking around her muted as she closed her eyes and felt the clouds brush past her

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skin in the atmosphere.

Hannah woke up a couple of hours later, but she was no longer outside on the hammock. She assumed it was Papa who had seen her outside and brought her inside and tucked her inside of her bed. She turned to face her side table, her eyes adjusting to see what time it was. It was only 11:15PM, but Hannah could hear voices downstairs. She rose out of bed and walked towards her door and opened it slowly. The voices were coming from the kitchen and she instantly recognized them as Mother and Papa. She walked carefully out of her room, careful not to step on the weak spots of the floor beneath her feet, and sat on the first step.

“It’s only a matter of time, Troy.”

“Before what?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t you play dumb with me.”

“Do I? You seem like you are in control of everything and I’m just the lame husband and the lame father that doesn’t do anything.”

“Because you are!” A loud sigh of disgust. “Maybe this could’ve been a lot easier if we had chosen to do this earlier.”

“We need to be able to talk to Hannah about this before making any final decisions, Melody. It’s important that she knows what is going to change. That is, if we decide to do this.”

Hannah scooted back from the step and accidentally bumped into the wall with a small thud. Mother and Papa kept their conversation going, but Hannah’s eyes began to grow big. She covered her ears with her hands and felt the small hairs at the back of her neck begin to prickle almost like a ghostly presence playing with the tips of her hair. A cold

shiver went down her spine and Hannah's thoughts stopped, nothing going through her mind but confusion.

They chose something. Without me. What are they talking about? What do they mean? I wish I could scream. I don't know what's happening. Papa, what's happening? Do you and Mother hate me? What are you going to do to me? Are you trying to get rid of me?

Hannah crawled back into her bed and pulled the covers over her head, silky tears falling down her face and onto her pillow. Her nose ran, but she only wiped it clean with her sleeve instead of a Kleenex. She felt her head throb and her pulse begin to rush. She could feel beads of sweat pour through her body with flashes of hot and cold before she finally closed her eyes. "Just go to sleep..."

She woke up to silence. There were no birds outside chirping, nor was there a wind flying by through tree branches or leaves. Hannah heard distant cars going into whatever direction they were, going to unknown destinations. Hannah realized it was early in the afternoon because the smell of breakfast coffee still lingered in the air as she walked down the creaky steps. 12 creaks that time. It was 10 the night before. She walked into the living room and noticed that Mother's silver BMW was not in the driveway like it usually was. Hannah shrugged and walked into the kitchen.

"Hello? Someone?"

Hannah walked around the island and looked in the sink. Dirty dishes were stacked and two mugs were on top of each other. She picked one of them up and noticed that the mug was still warm. "Maybe they just put hot water in it to clean it." She dumped out the water. Cold. Hannah frantically looked over her shoulder and noticed that the place on the

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table where she usually sat had a piece of paper on top of a breakfast plate. Hannah picked it up and unfolded it, her heart rushing in her chest and in her ears.

Hannah,

Gone to do some errands. We'll be back around dinnertime, but not too late. We still have some left over soup in the fridge if you want to heat up something for lunch. As for breakfast, there's bagels in the freezer and some leftover scrambled eggs and bacon in Tupperware on the top shelf of the fridge. While we're gone, don't leave the house. Make sure to get your pillow and sketchbook from the hammock. It's supposed to rain this afternoon.

Mother

PS: Papa says to water the garden before we come back.

Especially the flowers.

Hannah folded up the note and put it back on the marble. She sat down in one of the bar stools and rested her chin on top of her wrist.

Where did she put my lighter? I know it's in here somewhere...

Hannah looked around the room, seeing if there was anything out of place. The drawers were closed, the cabinets were closed, but there was one door that was open: the pantry. Hannah walked over to the pantry and opened the door further, revealing the contents inside with the sunlight. She looked over cans on lower shelves and between cereal boxes on the upper levels. Everything seemed to be in place. She sighed in disappointment and closed the door behind her as she walked out. She paced around the room with her fingers to her mouth, chewing at the uneven nubs of her fingernails.

What if it was in their room, Hannah? It's the only place where

you haven't looked, isn't it? Go on. Let's go in there. Don't be afraid, sissy.

Hannah looked over her shoulder even though she knew that nobody would be there. She put the cold door handle in her hand and turned it. The door opened only as slowly as she pushed it open. She let the handle go and watched as a small draft of wind helped open the door further. Hannah walked into the bedroom and looked around slowly. Being her first time in their room, she looked at every inch of the room from the dark grey carpet to the off-white color of the wallpaper. Several pictures crowded the side table near the bed, a large dresser, and a separate side table. Hannah recognized some of the pictures from Papa and Mother's wedding day, one with Hannah as a baby, and one of Hannah by herself at the start of seventh grade only a year ago. She looked at herself and then in a nearby mirror. Her hair was a lot longer now and her smile had faded.

That was before you lost everyone around you, Hannah. This was when you were happy. Remember that? Before Papa and Mother had no problems with you. You weren't a trouble child back then and now look at you. You're a mess. You can't keep friends longer than a couple of months and you've become a burden to everyone around you.

Hannah picked up the framed picture of herself as a little girl, possibly around age 8, and smiled. She recognized her own hair and her own eyes. "I used to be happy," she said aloud, holding back tears.

She kept the photograph underneath her arm and sat down on the bed in the center of the room. She felt the bed squeak slightly beneath her as the blankets made way for her like a wave parting at the base of a beach. She continued to gaze around the room and watched herself blink

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and move hair away from her face in the mirror. She saw where Papa kept his glasses when he wasn't wearing them and Mother's jewelry box. Hannah smiled and sprang off of the bed and scurried to the dresser. She took the jewelry box and looked it over. Hearing the contents move around like marbles inside. Some would hit the other side of the box, others not. Hannah took the latch from the lid and opened it, her smile growing bigger and fuller.

She clicked on the lighter and felt the warmth embrace her fingers. Her smile continued to glow like the portable flame that she carried. She left the room with her treasure and put everything back to where it was. Hannah walked through the house and left to go into the backyard towards the hammock. This time, she didn't sit down, but she looked at a green garbage bin that sat alone near the end of one of the gardens. It was half full with weeds and half-eaten vegetables. Hannah clicked on the lighter and picked up a handful of weeds and lit them. She watched the fire engulf the weeds and she felt a release inside of her. One that she didn't know was possible. Hannah blew out the fire before it would touch her fist and dropped the stems of weeds back into the barrel. She put the lighter into her pocket and walked back to the house.

The world around her never stopped turning as the clouds in a light-blue blanket began to leave the sky, evaporating into the universe and never to be seen again. The sun found its way through the landscape as if playing hide-and-seek with the moon, but never truly finding it until they would make their appearances by early evening. The stars would take a little longer to come out, but the way the sun would follow its usual rotation and meet the moon halfway.

A couple of days later, Hannah could tell that something was off in

the house. Maybe it was the way that the summer heat was present inside and outside the house. She wiped at her sweaty brow, feeling the thick perspiration around her forehead and making its way into her air. Her long hair felt heavier than normal even if she put it in a ponytail or bun. Her throat felt dry despite the overwhelming humidity that coated her skin.

Hannah looked up from her plate and noticed that Mother was shaking her head. Hannah put down her fork and cradled a glass of water. She didn't take a sip.

"It's so hot outside..." Hannah started to say.

"I just don't understand," Mother said, taking a sip from her wine glass.

"What's that, Melody?" Papa asked, putting down the newspaper and taking off his glasses. "It's always hot in the middle of July here."

"No, Troy, not the heat." She pursed her lips together and then said in a hushed tone, "I mean Hannah."

I'm right here, Mother. I can hear you.

"What?" Hannah said quietly, tracing her fingers around the soft edge of the glass's rim.

"Oh, Hannah. You. You're the one who's changed. You used to be so social and energetic. Don't you remember when you would play with your dolls outside? Rain or shine, you would be out there. Almost as if you were an explorer and Barbie was your companion."

Of course I can remember that. Why are you so upset with me?

"I think that's besides the point, dear," Papa said softly.

Mother ignored him. "You did a lot of things when you were younger. Remember when we went to Florence, Troy? Hannah would

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just run around the area next to the Duomo, trying to talk to the market people even though she didn't know any Italian. Hannah, I bet you don't remember that."

"Yes, I do," Hannah said, putting the glass back onto the table.

Mother didn't answer, "But now look at you. You don't have any friends, you rarely do anything other than lounge inside of the house. What's been going on? We're worried about you, Hannah."

I have friends, Mother. They just don't want to be around me. Nobody wants to be around me.

Papa sat back down and said, "She's not a little girl anymore, Melody. She's growing up."

"Well before she started any of this "growing up" business, she wasn't at all like this. Troy, don't *you* remember being in Florence? What about Paris? She was alive back then. Energetic. Social."

"She still is, Melody!"

"Then please explain to me why she cut her hand open," Mother said calmly, setting down her wine glass. Hannah looked down at her hand and noticed the bandage, her eyebrows rising. She didn't dare say anything. She felt like a mouse scurrying away from a cat, but without movement. She picked up her fork and started tapping it on the table. Each vibration calming her nerves as the fork hit the table's edge.

I didn't mean to cut myself, Mother. But the pain. It hurt so much...

"Melody, calm down. Look at her. She's scared because of all of your shouting."

I think you mean "our" shouting, Papa.

“Melody, how much have you had today?”

“This isn’t how little girls are supposed to act,” Mother looked at Hannah and shook her head. “Where did we go wrong?”

Hannah watched as Mother stood up from the table and began to walk away with her wine glass in hand. She turned briefly to look at Hannah, scoffed in disgust, and walked towards the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Hannah looked at the door for what seemed like an eternity until the heaviness of her eyes became too much. She blinked as she looked at Papa with curious eyes.

“Now, Hannah, we need to talk about the hose,” Papa sighed, rubbing his temples. “You can’t just forget things like this when we aren’t home. You even left the front door open last week. Imagine what could’ve happened if somebody had walked by.”

Hannah shuddered, “I didn’t mean to, Papa...”

“I know, Hannah, but we need to set some rules. Or at least make some changes. Why don’t you go visit a friend of yours for a couple of days?”

You’re allowing me to leave the house? I thought you said it wasn’t safe...

“I don’t have any friends, Papa.”

“Sure you do, Hannah! What about Carmen, Julie, or even Adrienne? Surely there’s somebody you could go play with.”

Nobody likes me. They say I’m weird. They’re afraid of me.

“Don’t you worry, Hannah, having some friends around will help with your boredom.”

“But, Papa...”

“Well, it’s getting late, Hannah. Besides, I should go talk to your

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Mother. Make sure she's all right. If you'd like, I can come tuck you in." Hannah nodded, sitting up from the chair and started to head up to the staircase that led to her room.

Hannah crept down the stairs, still hearing Mother and Papa in the bedroom. Their voices were loud. Something Hannah wasn't used to with Papa's voice, but was much more familiar with Mother's "angry voice."

"This isn't how things should've happened, Troy!"

"Tell that to yourself and whoever you were with when I happened to come around. If it weren't for me..."

"What, then I'd be all alone in the world?"

"You're just lucky that I love Hannah, Melody."

"We both love her, there's no doubt of that. Just because our own relationship is falling to shit doesn't mean that we should stop loving her. I'm just worried! I don't know what's happening to our daughter and why she's acting so strangely. First hearing voices and now memory problems. It's never been this bad before, Troy."

Hannah sat on the furthest cushion on the couch from the bedroom. She could hear something thud against a wall, but she didn't dare know what. There was other screaming, but words that Hannah had never heard before from either Mother or Papa. She then heard crying and a nose being blown.

"We can't let this affect Hannah, Melody. Even with life as a mess, we are her parents. We need to be here for her. To be supportive in every way."

"But Troy, don't tell me you haven't noticed her behavior lately? Teenagers don't act this way, even if she's only just 13."

"Of course I've noticed. But we can't just argue or yell at her for

something that may be beyond our control. The best we can do is try and help her, not hurt her.”

“We are her parents, Troy, we need to be able to talk about things as a family.”

“As a family? You’re the one that overacts to every little thing she does. Give her a break! It’s all part of growing up.”

“Are you saying I’m incompetent in my job as a mother?”

“I didn’t say that, Melody, but think about this...”

Hannah slowly walked up to the bedroom door and took in a deep breath. She couldn’t tell if Mother and Papa were just talking calmly, or whispering. But it didn’t matter to her. She knocked slowly on the door and heard the echo as it went through the wood and into the bedroom.

There was shuffling and the door began to open slowly. “Hannah, what is it?” it was Mother. Her hair was in curlers, her make-up pale from the lack of make-up, and her hands trembling trying to draw her night-gown closer around her middle.

Hannah looked between the crack of the door and could see Papa in the reflection of the mirror. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

“All right then.” Mother opened the door wider, but Hannah didn’t move. “What do you want, Hannah? Do you need something?”

I want...

Hannah looked past Mother and glanced over to Papa. His eyes and face were a bright red like the color of a fire hydrant. He kept wiping his face with his sleeve and tried to smile.

“I feel sick,” Hannah said, clutching her stomach.

“Hmm, you don’t seem to be running a fever,” Mother responded, tak-

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ing her hand up to Hannah's forehead. Mother's cold hands sent shivers down Hannah's spine. "Just your stomach?" Hannah nodded. "Well, then let's go make you some soup and we'll come tuck you in. Troy?"

Hannah looked at herself in the mirror, carefully stroking her long auburn strands of hair. It was thick and matted, almost looking like a bird's nest. The moonlight hit the mirror almost perfectly, acting as a natural light. From the top drawer of her desk, she took out a pair of scissors and the lighter from underneath her underwear in the dresser. She put her fingers in the respected places in the scissors and put them close to her hair, taking each strand and cutting them off with swift hand movements. Before long, her hair was lying in chunks on the ground at her feet and some pieces laid on the top of the dresser. She ran her fingers through her short hair, feeling her hair prickle, and brushed out any loose hair. She set the scissors back down and gathered all of her hair, placing it into a small plastic bag. With the bag in her left hand and the lighter in the right, she walked out of her room and quietly down the stairs.

A warm breeze greeted Hannah as she opened the door to the backyard and the moonlight continued to shine on top of her pale skin. She walked past the various vegetables and flowers until she got to where the hammock was. From the shed, she quietly took out a garden disposal bin. She rolled it away from the door and opened the plastic bag full of her hair. She dropped it to the ground and took out a large clump while clicking on the lighter. She put the fire close to the hair and watched it ignite before throwing it into the bin. The fire was small and didn't last, but she repeated the motion until all of her cut hair had been burned. The contents of the bin had nothing left when the last embers died out, but she

continued to take various branches from nearby trees.

Careful...

Hannah turned off the lighter before going to the apple tree for more substance. She put the lighter down next to the base of the tree and began to tug at a large branch. It hit her across the face, scratching at her skin as she jumped back. The branch finally snapped off and apples thudded to the ground, hitting both the ground and her feet. She didn't cry out. She didn't scream. She simply put the branch into the bin and came back for the lighter. But as she clicked it on, the spark didn't come up instantly. She tried with both hands and when it finally lit, the fire began to eat at her exposed flesh.

The lighter dropped to the ground and she did the same, trying to pull dirt from the ground and onto her hand in attempt to put out the fire. After rolling around on the grass, the fire finally extinguished. The burn made her hand twitch, but the burn continued to grow despite the absence of the flame. She covered the burns of her hand with her bandaged palm, holding back tears.

What lovely specks of glitter. Navy and magenta. So pretty and so sparkly. My toes don't look lonely anymore. So boring. So plain. Now I'm the one that's boring and plain. There's nothing for me to do.

"Hannah, are you in there?"

There were a couple of knocks at the door before it opened. Papa stood at the doorframe and gave Hannah a smile until it quickly turned into an upset frown. "Hannah! Your hair... it's..."

It's gone.

"Oh, honey..."

"Don't you like it?" Hannah asked, shuffling uncomfortably on top

of her bed; her feet dropping to the ground.

Papa walked over to Hannah and ran his hands through the spikey and uneven hair. Hannah watched as his mouth tried to curve into a smile, but it didn't seem to last. "It's, well, interesting. When did this happen?"

"I don't remember," Hannah confessed, eyes dropping to the floor.

"Well, Mother and I need to talk to you about something. Lunch is almost ready, you know. See you downstairs?" Papa reached down and kissed Hannah on the head. She gave a small half-smile when Papa looked back at her from the door, nodding. The lack of movement of her hair on top of her shoulders was bizarre as she brushed away invisible bangs on instinct. Her hands dropped to her lap and let her feet dance in the air. She inhaled and exhaled loudly, shaky whispers trailing outside of her mouth.

"It's okay, Hannah, it's okay. It won't hurt you anymore... the fire is gone for now. You're safe now."

She sat up from the bed and walked to her bedroom window, gazing out into the garden. The garden disposal bin was still next to the shed, seemingly untouched from the night before.

The trees look empty. Stripped naked. The fire that consumed them with its cravings. A path of destruction and they can't stop it. These voices inside of my head that make no sense, but they tell me to do things. Horrible things. Papa can't understand. Mother won't understand. There is nothing I can say or do to make them understand...

Hannah slipped into navy blue slippers and walked down the stairs. One foot and then the second. New step. One foot, the other. New step. She felt her heart beating rapidly in her ears. An uncomfortable pounding. She gripped the railing in her left hand and walked down using it as a

crutch, her right hand to her head.

Hannah looked up from the last step and noticed that Mother and Papa sat on the couch spaced apart from each other. Hannah observed that Papa was playing with his fingers when he would usually play with his dark-rimmed glasses. Mother, on the other hand, sat with lips pursed, tissues in her lap, and messy hair. Papa motioned to her to take a seat; Hannah sat in one of the leather chairs that sat at an angle to the TV. Mother blew her nose and sniffled. Hannah looked at Mother, then Papa, and back to Mother.

It was only a matter of time before they would talk to you, Hannah. This has been going on long enough.

Hannah shook her head, hoping that the voices would stop. Hannah heard Papa clear his throat.

“Am I in trouble?” she asked, quietly.

“Remember how we discussed some consequences for your actions as of late?” Papa said. Hannah nodded. “Well, your mother and I have discussed some other things. Melody?”

Mother sighed, “We think that it’s best that we take things slow as a family. You’re going through a lot of changes. You’re going to be starting high school soon and we want to make sure that everything is all right. But in order to do that...”

Uh oh...

“Your mother and I will be taking a break from each other. We notice that we’ve been fighting a little bit more than usual and it’s not fair for you to get in the middle of this. Do you understand?”

It’s all your fault, Hannah...

Hannah nodded, “But... why...”

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“We discussed this a lot, Hannah, but we wanted to at least make sure that you would know. That way, if one or the other of us wasn’t home, there would be a reason behind it.”

Hannah looked up at Mother. She could feel her skin begin to prickle and sweat slide down the nape of her neck. Mother’s eyes seemed vacant. There was no trace of color. Only whiteness to compliment black pupils.

“Who’s leaving?” Hannah croaked, swallowing tears.

“We love you very much, Hannah. Both of us. Equally. Don’t forget that.”

But at the same time, you don’t.

HILARY FORBUSH

The idea for what became this one-act play was spurred from my mother's love for cable ghost-hunting shows. As an intelligent, thinking, reasoning human, I was intrigued by the inanity these shows displayed, and I determined that, if I were a ghost, I would never stoop to communicating to people who invaded my personal space with ludicrous questions and questionable electronics. That was how my main character, Charles, and the first draft of my play, then titled *the Ghost Paradox* was born. My piece, which I had intended to only be a comedy of errors, had a dramatic element when I realized my characters wanted me to add flashbacks to Charles' life before he had passed on, to illustrate who he was before. And that was how I "met" Clarissa, Charles' love interest. With such vocal and insistent characters, I had finished the initial draft within two weeks, and it was this piece in its most elemental form that I brought to thesis class in the hopes that, with the help of professors and classmates, it would become the best it could be.

It quickly became clear in the collaborative revising and editing process that I was working with something that wanted to be a full length play; as I braided a narrative that had both past and present strands, and within the constraints of the page limit, I was encouraged to extract the love story between Charles and Clarissa in the Romantic-England setting, and focus on that.

It has been a struggle cutting down and shaping my full-length, slightly genre-confused play to fit a more constructed and specific narrative, mostly because in my (simultaneously occurring) playwriting class, my teacher asked me to expand my play. Having to compact and fill out the same piece of work proved to be a challenge that I had not anticipated.

That new story is my thesis, now titled *No One Guides Me*, and the main character is arguably not Charles, but Clarissa. Clarissa has been something of an enigma to write, with her strong sense of duty often at odds with the independent, talented woman that she is. In writing *No One Guides Me*, my goal became examining the under-appreciated voice and talent of women in this particular era, as well as scrutinizing the challenges that they faced in their personal lives. Without fully realizing it, my piece had become a postmodern feminist look at the way women were treated, which was completely not what I had intended to create when I started out on this project.

I specifically wanted to have a lot of witty British-style banter when composing the dialogue between Charles and Clarissa. I wanted to maintain that for my shorter piece. For inspiration, I turned to two plays by Tom Stoppard: *Arcadia*, for period dialogue and wit as well as the expertly braided narrative; and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, for the unmatched back-and-forth snappiness of the discourse. These two plays are what I most hoped to emulate in my own work. I also examined

several other plays, for dialogue, and read several poems by Romantic poets Keats, Byron, and Shelley, to get a feel for what Charles might have written himself. However, my own attempts at writing Romantic-style poetry failed miserably, and I decided to keep the bad poetry and make Charles a bad poet, with Clarissa being the more talented one. So in order to save face, I searched for a period poem in the public domain that I could use for Clarissa, and found one in a poem called “A Song” by Helena Marie Williams, a little known female Romantic poet. It fit perfectly, and I felt I had benefitted from a huge stroke of luck.

Obviously, in compacting my piece, several pivotal things changed. Without the comedic element and insight into Charles’ head that the ghost part of the story previously provided, Charles becomes more flat and annoying, because he hasn’t had a century or so to figure out how flawed he actually is, and the story takes on a completely different flavor. But in shrinking it, I learned things about the relationship between the two main characters: the extent of their love, their boundaries with one another and where life was concerned, and their moralities. It was remarkable how much more raw and charged their relationship became when I had fewer words to express their feelings. Cutting it down to the extent that I did actually made it more emulative of Tom Stoppard in certain places.

The Ghost Paradox still exists in its own world as a full-length play, and it always will, because it *needs* to be. The contradictory actions of expanding and contracting it have made me realize that more fully.

But *No One Guides Me* stands alone as a one-act. Both pieces have a totally different message, even though they are related, and that is what fascinates me. In my writer's mind, the stories are inextricably linked, but when I step out of that writing persona and examine them separately, the fact that two stories cut from one cloth can have two different meanings is surreal. That unexpectedness, I have found, is what makes for the best writing experience.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CAST LIST

CHARLES DAWES, a Lord. Charles, in essentials, is a Romantic poet who wants to be a Romantic Poet.

CLARISSA BELMONT, from the estate next door. She is sophisticated, a writer, and is the only person on this green earth who can stand the real Charles.

MRS HALLOWAY, the housekeeper of SUNNINGHILL ABBEY, the Dawes' estate

HENRY GOODAL, a fortysomething baronet. Henry is a lot more observant and smart than most people give him credit for.

Poems used in the play, accreditations.

I.

*No riches from his scanty store
My lover could impart;
He gave a boon I valued more -
He gave me all his heart!*

II.

*His soul sincere, his gen'rous worth,
Might well this bosom move;
And when I ask'd for bliss on earth,
I only meant his love.*

III.

*But now for me, in search of gain
From shore to shore he flies:
Why wander riches to obtain,
When love is all I prize?*

IV.

*The frugal meal, the lowly cot
If blest my love with thee!
That simple fare, that humble lot,
Were more than wealth to me.*

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V.

*While he the dang'rous ocean braves,
My tears but vainly flow:
Is pity in the faithless waves
To which I pour my woe?*

VI.

*The night is dark, the waters deep,
Yet soft the billows roll;
Alas! at every breeze I weep -
The storm is in my soul.*

-A Song by Helen Maria Williams

Little Known the Night
for Cassandra Belmont

The leak of Time bends never to my will;
the moving dark is chilled and vast.
The very stars are strangers to it still,
and I, of briefer budding life--Alas!

admit that I will little know the night.
The essence of my self is based on breath,
each breath is counted, numbered, and finite:
I am but always in a dance with death.

And when I die, I duly will confess
I have well loved, but little known the night.

-Charles Dawes

HILARY FORBUSH

SCENE ONE

Lights. It is 1870. The audience sees a well-stocked library, with a large French window on the back wall UC. The Right wall of the stage (Up, center, and down) is covered with the walls of the library, and the shelves continue Right and Right Center as well as Left and Left center Upstage. Stage left there is a door that leads to the rest of the house. Another door USR leads to the next room. From the window we can see the garden of an extensive English estate. Right Center, near the fireplace, is an end table, a squashy armchair and footstool. There is a balcony that wraps around the shelves (similar to the one in My Fair Lady) with the spiral staircase leading up to the balcony Downstage Right. There is a piano USL next to the window. There is a desk and chair Left Down.

The door opens.

CHARLES (*to himself*): The stars are strangers still, and therefore I, of shorter-budding life--No, no, that's not it, that's not it at all...

The door L opens and in walks CHARLES' housekeeper, MRS. HALLOWAY.

MRS. HALLOWAY: Post's just in, Master Charles. There's another few letters for you.

CHARLES reaches out his hand, indifferent. HALLOWAY puts them in his hand and exits. CHARLES brings his hand underneath his vision.

CHARLES: Miss Edith LeClare, Miss Edith LeClare, Miss Edith LeClare--

He tosses the letters over his shoulder and refocuses his attention back onto the poem, muttering to himself.

CHARLES: If I don't get that right, it's not worth tuppence--

NO ONE GUIDES ME

LADY CLARISSA BELMONT, CHARLES' very pretty childhood friend (she is about twenty five) enters the room without any ceremony or introduction from the housekeeper. She takes a quick look at CHARLES, scribbling away at his desk, takes another look at the letters scattered on the floor, and bends down to pick them up.

CLARISSA: Three letters? She must really have liked you.

CHARLES: It's bad manners to snoop, you know.

CLARISSA: What's the excuse you'll be giving this poor girl, once you finally do write her back? Already engaged, or just the opposite?

CHARLES (*without losing a beat*): Whichever makes me sound more debonair.

CLARISSA: Is this the young lady I saw dancing with you at the ball? The gossips had a heyday afterwards. Do you enjoy getting women's hopes up?

CHARLES (*long suffering*): Clarissa, I'm a poet. It's part of my calling.

CLARISSA: There have been plenty of poets who don't feel the need to behave cavalierly. The Brownings, for example.

CHARLES: Yes, but they were married. It's different if you're married. You can behave cavalierly towards each other.

CLARISSA: Charlie, are you going to read these, or not?

CHARLES: Not.

CLARISSA: Why not?

CHARLES: She called me "Charlie." Nobody calls me "Charlie."

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: I call you Charlie.

CHARLES: Well. You're different.

CLARISSA: Am I?

CHARLES: Certainly. We're old friends.

CLARISSA: What do you want done with these letters, then?

CHARLES gestures over his shoulder towards the fireplace. CLARISSA, sighing, crosses, feeds the letters into the fire.

CHARLES: Are you disappointed in me?

CLARISSA: On principle. But you already know that.

CHARLES: Are you sure you're not just jealous because Edith LeClare got to spend three full dances soaking up my charm?

CLARISSA: I'm not sure how she managed to last for three dances. I wouldn't have been able to stand more than two.

CHARLES: Obviously. I don't waste my charm on women who don't appreciate it.

CLARISSA: Is that what you call it? No wonder Edith LeClare was just practice; you've got some improving to do.

They lock eyes.

CHARLES: I'd love to joust some more, Clare, but I'm in the middle of a difficulty.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CLARISSA: Difficulty? You always say that when things aren't going your way. (*she comes over, and in a sudden change of tone, puts her hands on his shoulders and leans over, looking at the scribbled out bits on the paper*). Charlie, this is actually good.

CHARLES, *brightening*: You think so?

CLARISSA: Would I lie? (*she snatches the paper off his desk, he protests halfheartedly*). How about you start it differently so you can keep the line about little knowing the night?

CHARLES: I was thinking of cutting it.

CLARISSA. Nonsense. It's the best line in the whole poem so far.

CHARLES: I thought the beginning was rather good--

CLARISSA: The "leak of time?"

CHARLES: Yes--

CLARISSA: No. Leak? Horrible choice of words.

CHARLES: What? Why--

CLARISSA: It has vulgar connotations. Time doesn't *leak*.

CHARLES: It's artistic license--

CLARISSA: It's bad. It *sounds* bad. The rest of it's passable.

CHARLES: Passable? (*beat.*) You're shielding me, aren't you?

CLARISSA: Well, it does lack some dimension--

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: Ah-ha!

CLARISSA: The technique itself is commendable.

CHARLES: But if it's not memorable, then where are we?

CLARISSA: Memorable? Why must it be memorable?

CHARLES: Because if I can't leave my mark on the world in this way, no one will remember me. For anything.

CLARISSA: I'm sure that's not true.

CHARLES: No, it is. When I die, that will be it. I will fade into the vast annals of history as though I had never existed.

CLARISSA: Plenty of people have lived full and satisfying lives and faded away.

CHARLES: I know, but I don't want to be those people. I want to be different.

beat. Clarissa bends her head again over the paper, pen in hand. Charles watches her.

CHARLES: Why does this come so easily to you?

CLARISSA: I don't know; it just does.

CHARLES: Why aren't you a poet?

CLARISSA (*beat*): I don't think I have the temperament.

CHARLES: Well, obviously you have something that I don't.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CLARISSA: I don't think it's so much that I have something you don't. More, I think I have less to lose.

CHARLES: Whatever do you mean?

CLARISSA: I don't feel the pressure of future generations peering over my shoulder, trying to see if what I'm doing is any good or not.

CHARLES: Are you saying my humors are imbalanced?

CLARISSA: Charlie, you are many things, but sanguine has never been one of them.

CHARLES: I see your point. *beat*. So what do you think of while you work?

CLARISSA: I don't work. I dabble. Isn't that what you men say we women do?

CHARLES: I'm serious. What's your secret?

CLARISSA: I think--I think writing poetry means you can't be afraid to feel.

beat. Clarissa avoids Charles' questioning glance by picking up the pen and bending over the paper again.

CHARLES: To feel?

CLARISSA: Yes. To feel all things, even the mundane ones. Even the frightening ones. To experience them with the eyes of an innocent, and then to describe them in the clearest detail.

CHARLES: Do, explain.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: Well, it's the reason there are so many love poems, isn't it? When they're done well--well, it's like looking at a new emotion. You're experiencing everything as if it's new, and you remember what it was like, the first time you realized that-- (she breaks off).

CHARLES: No, go on, please, I'm curious.

CLARISSA: Well, you know (*brushing it off*). That sensation of love. The sudden knowing that you'd do anything for a person.

CHARLES: That is a feeling I understand, amazingly.

CLARISSA (*lost in thought*): Looking at one's love makes everything else make sense, and you don't know if your feelings are even requited, so rather than risk everything and tell them, you'd much rather maintain the status quo. I think Shakespeare said it best.

“Such is my love, to thee I so belong,
That for thy right myself will bear all wrong.”

CHARLES squints at CLARISSA.

CHARLES: Eighty-eight.

CLARISSA: What?

CHARLES: That was sonnet eighty-eight. I cannot believe you just quoted a sonnet. They're definitely not his strongest work.

CLARISSA: The sonnets are less trivial than the current opinion holds.

CHARLES: They're so blase.

CLARISSA: People who say that haven't read them (*she looks at him disdainfully*).

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES (*changing the subject*): Right, so you think that first, you can't be afraid to feel when writing poetry. So, for example, if I were to write a poem about my fear of death, that would be--

CLARISSA: Authentic. Genuine.

CHARLES: But how would it make death new?

CLARISSA: Poetry makes the hidden beauty of a thing new, not necessarily the thing itself.

CHARLES: I can hardly see death as being beautiful.

CLARISSA: But it is, isn't it, or it wouldn't move you. In any case, your contemporaries certainly seem to think so.

CHARLES: Yes, but a great number of them have all died young. I'm not planning on dying young.

(beat. CLARISSA turns in her seat, gives CHARLES a stern look.)

CLARISSA: Think about Keats.

CHARLES: Tuberculosis is an ugly way to die.

CLARISSA: Not his death. His poems. Say Ode to a Grecian Urn.

CHARLES: It has some decent moments.

CLARISSA: It is a lovely piece of literature, and you know it.

CHARLES: I don't want to write poems about Grecian Urns. I want to write about the things that matter.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: Grecian Urns matter. (*Charles scoffs slightly*) Give me a chance to elaborate! They symbolize civilization and all the things that have gone before. It should be a lovely sentiment, especially since it could embody memorability. And if you don't believe that, then think about the ways that people matter, the ways the human experience matters. Love, life, death, nature, all of it matters. Because it's all human. What matters is the way we say things about it.

beat. CHARLES looks at CLARISSA for a moment. There's a shift.

CHARLES (*gently, genuinely*): "Thou still unravished bride of quietness."

CLARISSA (*suddenly blushing*): I thought you said Grecian Urns didn't matter.

(beat. They sit there, looking at each other. CHARLES takes up one of CLARISSA's hands in his. He has dropped his usual snarky demeanor and is actually being a genuine person.)

CHARLES: I'm not very good at letting myself be unprotected. Will you teach me, Clare?

CLARISSA: Don't tease me, Charles.

CHARLES: I'm perfectly serious.

CLARISSA: I'm not accustomed to you, serious.

CHARLES: Please.

CLARISSA: Very well. Do you ever feel emotions that are indescribable? Emotions that for which you don't have the words?

CHARLES: Yes (*he strokes her hand with his thumb*).

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CLARISSA: For example (*she swallows*), finding a new way to talk about love that's not using old phrases like "exquisite pain." Or like floating.

CHARLES: What does love feel like, to you? How would you describe it?

CLARISSA: Well, if I was gathering thoughts for a poem, I might write down a lot of words that I associate with that feeling. I might write about how loving--someone--has a hope that's not dissimilar to the way the tide pulls in, and out--some days it feels like there's more cause to hope than others.

CHARLES: What else?

CLARISSA: Heat.

CHARLES: Heat?

CLARISSA: Slow warmth. Burning.

CHARLES: Ha! Desire, burning. That's rather tired.

(the energy that was there is gone because of his glibness. Clarissa moves her hand, swats at him. Laughing, he defends himself).

CLARISSA: You're incorrigible!

CHARLES: You just don't like it because I won!

CLARISSA: See if I help you with your poetry ever again!

CHARLES (*suddenly serious*): You don't mean--

CLARISSA: Of course I don't. Imbecile.

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: Don't ever go anywhere, Clare. I think I'd lose my mind if I didn't have your help.

CLARISSA: If you aren't nice to me, I'll get myself a husband and then where will you be?

CHARLES (*teasing back*): I'd say you were making a wise decision. Your parents aren't getting any younger, and I doubt--

CLARISSA: Beast!

CHARLES: --that your second cousin, Mr. Lah-di-dah or whatever his name is, with wife and ten children--

CLARISSA: Five! He has five children!

CHARLES: --will let you just live on their estate.

CLARISSA: You fiend! Maybe if that happens, I'll just come live here.

CHARLES: Excellent! I've always said this house has always needed a madwoman in the attic.

CLARISSA: Oh, how I despise you sometimes.

CHARLES: It's all in jest.

CLARISSA: And that's why I don't despise you *all* the time.

(*beat*)

CHARLES: Clarissa, you know you'll make a fine wife.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

Beat. CHARLES and CLARISSA look at one another. They're sitting side by side on the couch after their mock-fight, and they get closer together, tension fizzing again. He takes a breath to ask her something, changes courses.

CHARLES: May I read some of your poetry, sometime?

CLARISSA: Maybe, someday. *If you're nice. (she smiles).*

she starts talking about the poem at hand. CHARLES listens as

Lights.

HILARY FORBUSH

SCENE TWO

CHARLES is sitting with his feet up on an ottoman, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. CLARISSA is sitting on the couch, curled up with a book. She is writing in it. Every now and again she steals a look at CHARLES, who is staring, glassy-eyed, up at the ceiling. They have just had dinner with CHARLES and his parents.

CLARISSA: How's your work progressing?

CHARLES sits up, takes a drink, looks at her.

CHARLES: It's brilliant. Of course it is.

CLARISSA: Did you get rid of "leak?"

CHARLES: Yes.

CLARISSA: Good. Small victories.

CHARLES: I just wish I could convey more fully what it is I feel about death. So many things I want to know, but I only have an allotted time to exist.

CLARISSA: I know. It'll get there, I promise. You just have to put some faith in emotion.

beat. CLARISSA goes back to writing. CHARLES looks at her.

CHARLES: Clarissa?

CLARISSA: Yes?

CHARLES: Why God?

CLARISSA: What?

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: You've answered all my questions with questions.

CLARISSA: And you're speaking in a myriad of existential non sequiturs.

CHARLES: One is *not* a myriad!

CLARISSA: You're drunk, aren't you?

CHARLES: Topsy. Maybe.

CLARISSA (*self-satisfied*): You always become a philosopher when you're ossified.

CHARLES: I'm serious. Why God? Why do people believe in God? Or, if not God, why do people believe in religion?

CLARISSA: All the usual reasons.

CHARLES: Such as?

CLARISSA: It provides people with a sense of community. Safety. Believing in God gives people purpose. Faith--

CHARLES: Faith is dangerous.

CLARISSA: *Blind* faith is dangerous. Faith in something could be argued as being healthy, beneficial.

CHARLES: How can you say that? You know that reason is what should be the driving force in people's lives.

CLARISSA: Reason is, of course, much more functional, but it makes no sense to say that the two can't co-exist in one world.

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: But look at the number of wars fought on the basis of faith alone. Surely you must find that disturbing.

CLARISSA: Of course I do. People who act on hateful, power-hungry impulses rather than loving ones will always be baffling to me.

CHARLES: Do you?

CLARISSA: Do I what?

CHARLES: Believe in God.

CLARISSA: Charlie, I--

CHARLES: Because you still go to church every Sunday with your parents.

CLARISSA: Your point?

CHARLES: You're too reasonable to believe in religion.

CLARISSA: I'm not sure. I don't think religion is the answer, regardless of whether or not God exists. But I don't know atheism is the answer, either.

beat.

I just don't know if I can believe in nothing. I'm partial to the idea that there is something out there that gives everything a greater purpose. Possibly it's horribly naive of me to believe that. But I like the idea that things happen for a reason.

CHARLES: What are you working on?

CLARISSA: What?

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: You're *writing*.

CLARISSA: I can't keep up with you tonight, you're bouncing from subject to subject. *beat. He looks pointedly at her book.* It's just a little bit of silliness--

He grabs the notebook from her. She is genuinely upset, and normally he would notice this, but because he's a bit tipsy, he doesn't notice.

CHARLES: Let's see what Lady Clarissa Belmont's great secret is!

CLARISSA: Charlie, no--

CHARLES (*reading aloud*): The night is dark, the waters deep,
Yet soft the billows roll;
Alas! at every breeze I weep -
The storm is in my soul.

beat. He reads it again, more slowly. CLARISSA sits down, face burning.

CHARLES: This is yours?

CLARISSA: It's nothing. Just me playing with verse a little bit.

CHARLES (*softly*): This is yours?

CLARISSA: Will you give me my book back?

He ignores her.

CHARLES: All this time, you really have been a better poet than me.

CLARISSA: Really, it's just a bit of nonsense.

CHARLES: What does the not-nonsense look like, then?

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: Will you *please* give me my book back?

CHARLES: What storm is in your soul?

CLARISSA: What?

CHARLES: It says “the storm is in my soul.” What storm?

CLARISSA: Charlie, you wouldn’t understand.

CHARLES: Why do you always assume that I won’t understand? I understand quite a bit. Or maybe you think because I don’t write as well as you, because I don’t feel as much as you do, you think I won’t be able to understand. Is that it? You think you’re superior to me?

CLARISSA: No, of course not. But you’ve had enough whiskey. You won’t remember the majority of this conversation once you come back to yourself.

CHARLES (*mimicking a woman’s voice, presumably his mother’s*): It’s bad manners to drink in front of a lady.

CLARISSA: That hasn’t stopped you in times previous (*she snatches her book away from him*).

CHARLES: It’s equally bad manners for a lady to partake, you know.

beat. CHARLES settles down in the armchair again, head resting on a cushion. CLARISSA repositions herself on the couch, but only after looking nervously at the journal, closing it, and clasping it to her.

CHARLES (*hoping to catch her off guard*): What storm?

CLARISSA: It looks clear to me.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: No, no no no. The storm. The one in your poem.

CLARISSA: Charlie--

CHARLES: I know it's serious. Or you wouldn't have written about it. There's a storm. Inside you. And as your closest and oldest friend, I demand to know what it is.

beat.

CLARISSA: Do you know what being committed to your duty feels like, Charles?

CHARLES: Duty?

CLARISSA: Yes. To be bound to something you aren't sure is right, but not knowing how to escape it?

CHARLES: No. I've never felt that. I've decided that any unpleasant situation could always be sidestepped or avoided.

CLARISSA (*under her breath*): And that's why you wouldn't understand.

CHARLES (*continuing as if she hadn't spoken*): The idea of doing something just because one must to appease some sort of higher power-- God, religion, government, family, what have you--is repugnant to me.

CLARISSA: Here we go.

CHARLES: Consider Hamlet. Hamlet, who struggles with his duty to revenge for the whole play. His moral obligation to restore stasis to his universe is what kills him. He alienates everyone; his family, his friends, the woman he loves. The visit from the ghost--allegedly, his father--is a convenient plot device to drive that idea of duty forward, but nothing like that would actually ever happen, because ghosts don't exist in reality.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA (*edging him onward, playing him*): You don't know that.

CHARLES: Oh, Clarissa. Please. Ghosts are the most ridiculous idea. They don't exist. Not in this world, not in any other world.

CLARISSA: Other world?

CHARLES: You're missing the point. Having an obligation to duty is the same as bumbling blindly forward with an unexamined belief in God.

CLARISSA: So you equate duty with faith?

CHARLES: They're both moral constructs designed to keep the populace in check.

CLARISSA: I disagree.

CHARLES: On what grounds?

CLARISSA: To be duty-bound is to uphold honor. Having a moral obligation to uphold can be a most fulfilling experience.

CHARLES: So why is your storm about duty?

CLARISSA: Because sometimes what you want gets in the way.

CHARLES: If you want something, go after it.

CLARISSA: Spoken like a member of your sex. Men of your class lead the most convenient lives; everything is given to you. Freedom, money, meaning, estates, titles. Do you know what I would give for fifty pounds and a room of my own?

CHARLES: If you had a room of your own, you wouldn't be able to come help me write.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CLARISSA (getting excited): Or would I be more able to help you write? Think about that. If I was free, if I never had to worry about money or family again, I would write such beautiful things--

CHARLES: Am I really so tipsy as to miss why you have a storm? Because you still haven't answered that.

CLARISSA: I am conflicted.

CHARLES: Yes, but why?

CLARISSA: I'd prefer to keep it to myself.

CHARLES: Is the answer in that book of yours?

CLARISSA: No. It's not my diary.

CHARLES: Can I read it?

CLARISSA: No. *(beat)* I'd best go home.

CLARISSA stands, picks up her affects from the table. CHARLES is sitting still until--

CHARLES: I wish you'd told me you were so proficient. Now I feel ashamed for the poems that I've written.

CLARISSA: Don't be. I don't mind.

CHARLES: Come here.

She moves so that she is standing at the end of the ottoman where his feet are resting.

CHARLES: No, come *here*. Sit.

HILARY FORBUSH

She sits on the corner of the couch next to the armchair. He reaches up and takes her hand.

CHARLES: This may be the whiskey speaking for me, but I suddenly feel like I've taken you for granted.

CLARISSA: If it's the whiskey, the whiskey would be right.

CHARLES: Oh.

CLARISSA: No, don't feel bad, I--

CHARLES: Clarissa. I've taken you for granted. For too long.

Beat.

And I feel horrible about that, as it turns out. No one should ever take you for granted. You're too exceptional for that. I'm sorry. I've been a cad.

He reaches up, touches the side of her face. She leans into his hand, closes her eyes, smiles. The moment lasts for quite a while, until Charles' hand droops. He has fallen asleep. He curls up on the armchair, oblivious. She pauses--puts another log on the fire. As she crosses with the intent to leave, she looks at CHARLES, pauses, puts her fingertips lightly on his face for a moment before removing them.

Lights.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

SCENE THREE

It is December 1870. The Dawes' are hosting a ball, and sounds of music and conversation are audible. CHARLES pulls CLARISSA through the SL door into the library. They are both laughing. He catches her up in his arms, starts to waltz along with the music. CLARISSA laughs harder.

CLARISSA: You brought me in here just to dance with me?

CHARLES: You do owe me.

CLARISSA: But you could have asked me out there--

CHARLES: Stop worrying about "out there."

(they dance.)

CHARLES: You're the prettiest woman here.

CLARISSA: In your library?

CHARLES: At this ball.

CLARISSA: Charlie, it's me. You're treating me like one of your flirtations and you know me too well for that.

CHARLES: Well, if it's not working, I suppose I may have to try a different tactic.

(they have stopped dancing. CHARLES is looking down at CLARISSA and she is staring right back up at him. There is breathless, electric energy in the room. CHARLES puts a hand on her face. He kisses her. She hesitates for a moment, and then kisses him back; the kiss deepens, until--)

CLARISSA: I have to tell you something--

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: So do I. Clare, I love you, I think I've probably always loved you--

CLARISSA: Charlie--

CHARLES: --and I don't think I'm wrong in guessing that you love me, too, and I always supposed that I would get married, and it just makes sense that I marry you.

(beat)

CLARISSA: Was that what I think it was?

CHARLES: I--yes. It was. Would you, Clarissa--

CLARISSA: Charlie--

CHARLES: do me the honor of--

CLARISSA: would you please just--

CHARLES: becoming my wife, and--

CLARISSA: LISTEN!

CHARLES stops. CLARISSA yanks her hand out of his, crosses to the window, looks out of it. She is silent. CHARLES, still kneeling, sits, watching and waiting for a beat.

CHARLES: Well, you wanted me to stop and listen; I'm listening.

CLARISSA: I'm engaged, Charlie.

beat.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES (*dangerously quiet*): What?

CLARISSA: My parents arranged the marriage earlier this month. And--

CHARLES: I'm sorry. You're what?

CLARISSA: Please, don't make this harder for me than it already is.

CHARLES: Who is it? Who are you engaged to?

CLARISSA: Henry Goodal. He's the son of a friend of my mother's. He's a baronet.

CHARLES: Isn't he the vaguely middle-aged one?

CLARISSA: He's almost forty, yes.

CHARLES: I need a drink.

beat. CHARLES pours himself a drink, CLARISSA watches him from her post by the window.

CLARISSA: Charlie. I love you. That's never been the problem.

CHARLES: What is the problem?

CLARISSA: The problem is I was never sure if you loved me.

CHARLES: I thought I made that fairly obvious--

CLARISSA: By what? By flirting with me? Or possibly by treating me like a comrade? I've never had any indication that you--that you really-- (*getting frustrated*) no, I can't.

CHARLES (*mocking*): Please, continue.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA (*steely*): Fine. Charles, I waited for any sign of you forming a serious design on me. I waited after my first Season, I turned down so many suitors--

CHARLES: You had suitors? When?

CLARISSA: --through all my best childbearing years. I waited through the teasing, the practice-flirting, I waited--(*she breaks off, frustration gone*).

CHARLES: I fail to see what you're trying to say.

CLARISSA: I'm twenty-five, Charles. Twenty five, unmarried; for all intents and purposes, I am an old maid. My parents were worried about my future; I'm an only, female child, estate entailed away, no prospects--

CHARLES: So?

CLARISSA: I found out weeks ago that they had arranged a marriage for me. I was furious when I found out--it's so old fashioned--we had a horrible fight.

CHARLES: Well, there seems to me to be a fairly simple solution to this problem.

CLARISSA: I'd love to hear it.

CHARLES: Break off the engagement.

CLARISSA: I can't do that.

CHARLES: So you're resigned to marry the forty-something baronet instead of the man you've been in love with your whole life? Why?

CLARISSA: I met him. Henry is even-tempered, intelligent, and I--I like him.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: Dear God. *Like* him?

CLARISSA: Yes.

CHARLES: I cannot believe that Clarissa Belmont, secret poet extraordinaire, would deign to use such a disgustingly bland word as *like* to describe feelings.

CLARISSA: It's a perfectly valid feeling.

CHARLES (*ignoring her*): Why would you want to have *like*, when you could have passion?

CLARISSA: Henry is a real person with real feelings, just like you and me. I don't expect you to understand--

CHARLES: You're right, I don't understand! I find it to be appallingly stubborn! How can you go against everything you know you desire?

CLARISSA: Consider this: you really think, if you had managed to become engaged, and I suddenly came to you and said that I loved you, you would abandon it for me, just because I said so?

CHARLES: If I was in your situation and you were asking me to leave, I would do it, in less than a heartbeat.

CLARISSA: You must realize how irresponsible that is. If you broke off your engagement with another woman, what's to say you wouldn't do the same to me, for all your declarations of love?

CHARLIE: You're different.

CLARISSA: Not fundamentally. Not when it would come right down to it. You forget we grew up together; I know you, Charles. You fell in love with different girls every week. Believe me Charlie, I would fix this if I could.

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: You can fix it. End the engagement. If you ever really wanted to be my wife, nothing would be standing in your way right now. Not the engagement, not Henry, and not your asinine sense of duty.

CLARISSA: And that's how every woman wants to be courted.

beat. They look at each other.

CLARISSA: I'm really going, now.

CHARLES: You're not irreplaceable, you know. I could have any woman I wanted, anywhere in the world.

CLARISSA: Good-bye, Charles.

CLARISSA exits, closing the door softly behind her.

CHARLES: Clare--

He crosses to the closed door. Goes to open it, stops. Crosses to the armchair, sits. Puts his head in his hands.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

SCENE FOUR

Late 1872. The curtains are drawn. The face of the grandfather clock is covered with black material and the clock is stopped. It is the year of CHARLES' Mother's death, and CHARLES has recently returned from his European Tour because of it. He is dressed in a white shirt, black waistcoat, black trousers and is sporting a black tie and a black armband. Strewn around the library are half-unpacked crates of books, arts, and there are even some clothes strewn on the armchair and the couch. CHARLES is on the top level of the library, a box of books at his feet. A glass of brandy is in one hand. It is right after his mother's funeral.

CHARLES: And you, you beauty, can go next to my fifteenth edition of--

CLARISSA: Hello, Charlie.

She has entered the library while he was preoccupied. She is nearly full term pregnant. She looks drawn, paler than we have seen her previously, offset by the black clothes she wore to Charles' mother's funeral. A wedding band glints under her lace gloves. Charles gives her a brief glance over his shoulder.

CHARLES: Oh, hello.

CLARISSA: I thought I'd just come over and see how you were doing. I've come to--

CHARLES: I'm fine, thank you.

beat.

CLARISSA: It was a very nice service.

CHARLES: I should hope so. It interrupted a liaison with a very lovely woman in Barcelona.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: Is it serious?

CHARLES: It never is.

CLARISSA: Of course. *(beat)* May I sit?

CHARLES gestures at the couch, and Clarissa moves slowly towards the couch, sits with care. This is the moment when he actually takes a moment to look at her.

CHARLES: My mother wrote that you were pregnant with your first. Are you happy?

CLARISSA: Yes. Aside from the backaches.

CHARLES: And your husband?

CLARISSA: He's very happy.

beat. Charles takes a sip of his brandy; the slurred motion of his gesture tells Clarissa he's had more than one glass. She stands up, crosses to him.

CLARISSA: Charles, listen. About before, you know, before you left--

CHARLES: No need to apologize.

CLARISSA: Who said anything about apologizing?

CHARLES: Well, I'm assuming you were going to apologize for being obstinate, but you needn't. You were absolutely right. It was just a passing phase.

CLARISSA'S mouth tightens.

CLARISSA: I'm so glad.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: So am I, really.

beat. Clarissa moves stiffly to go and sit on the couch again. She is chewing her lips, Charles continues to organize his shelves.

CLARISSA: Looks like you acquired some good books on your travels.

CHARLES: Oh, are you still here?

CLARISSA (*picks one up*): Ooh, look at this beautiful edition of Barrett-Browning. Where did you find this?

CHARLES: In a dusty little bookshop on the Rhine. The owner didn't even realize what it was. I got it for a pittance.

CLARISSA: Of course you did. I'm glad. I always thought you needed more female authors in your library. (*recites from memory*) "And if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death." Which number is that?

CHARLES: Forty-three.

CLARISSA: I always liked that one.

CHARLES: Sentimental woman believed in God. And an afterlife. I'm starting to forget why I bought that in the first place.

CLARISSA: Because her poetry is honest.

CHARLES: (*sarcastic*) You're absolutely right. Some women are honest with their feelings.

CLARISSA (*closes her eyes. Again the audience sees how tired and sick she is*): Charlie, I'd really hoped we'd moved past all that.

CHARLES: Clearly we have.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: Then what was that jibe about honesty?

CHARLES: Nothing whatsoever, I was just saying that some women actually listened to their hearts and honored their feelings, rather than marrying the first bloke who asked because they were--past their prime.

CLARISSA stiffens as if slapped.

CLARISSA: You never were this mean. Not to me.

CHARLES: Times change. People change.

CLARISSA: So that's what you really think? That I married Henry because I was *expiring*?

CHARLES: Did I say I was talking about you?

CLARISSA: No, but it was implied.

CHARLES: Look who's suddenly an expert in subtext.

CLARISSA: You never were; you've always been as subtle as a blunt knife. Your poetry is proof of that.

CHARLES sets his glass down with a heavy clink, and turns to look at her. She's hit his weak spot and she knows it.

CHARLES: You're just like the rest of your sex. If I have always been too honest then you have been too furtive. Hanging around here as a child, hoping that one day, maybe, the impressive boy from the big manor house next door would be enchanted enough by you to take notice--

CLARISSA: Charlie, that's ridiculous. Please don't--

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: As though you were enchanting at all, lording it over me that you were better at everything, well; what good did knowing everything ever do you? What good was any of it, sitting around here, laughing with me, kissing me, in this very room--

CLARISSA crosses to him again.

CLARISSA: I know I hurt you, your erratic behavior has been a perfect indicator of that, and that's why I wanted to come to apologize--

She reaches out to touch him, she's crying by this point. He flinches away, looking at her, a horrible, hateful look in his eyes. The moment holds for a second, for a second it almost feels like he might hit her.

CHARLES: God *forbid* I would have ended up married to you.

CLARISSA'S mouth finds a shape in a tiny, perfect O. She's absolutely silent. Then, her chin starts working, and she speaks.

CLARISSA: Well, I'll just leave then.

CHARLES: Please do. Why did you even bother coming in the first place?

CLARISSA winces as she gathers her reticule up from the table and starts to exit. It's obvious that CHARLES is starting to feel guilty about what he's said to her, and the threat of violence, but he's too proud to recant any of it.

CLARISSA (*numbly*): Do you know, I can't remember anymore.
(*small beat*) I'll show myself out. Good-bye, Lord Dawes.

She exits, still moving cautiously--her balance is off. CHARLES makes an effort to go back to shelving but instead he ends up watching her. The door closes, and he takes a book--possibly the Barrett-Browning, and hurls it at the door. Then, he sulks.

CHARLES: Bloody woman. She'll come back. She always does.

HILARY FORBUSH

SCENE FIVE

This is a scene that does not take place in the library. Spring 1873. A sheer screen drops down over most of the set, leaving about a quarter of the stage exposed--or, in productions where money is not an issue, the library set can be rotated to reveal something that looks like a garden. A wrought-iron garden table and chairs, laid for tea, surrounded by orange trees in planters, sits SL. CLARISSA is sitting on one of the chairs, and a baby carriage is sitting to her left. She is pale and drawn, she looks weak. She drinks tea and, every so often, makes cooing noises. CHARLES enters from SR, but CLARISSA is looking at the baby and does not see him.

CHARLES: Hello, Clarissa.

CLARISSA jumps.

CLARISSA: Charles. You startled me.

CHARLES: Oh. Sorry.

beat.

CHARLES: How are you?

CLARISSA: I'm well, thank you. And you?

CHARLES: Very well.

CHARLES: And this?

(he gestures at the baby)

CLARISSA: Henry.

CHARLES: After his father. *(beat)* He's lovely.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

another beat.

CLARISSA: Why are you here, Charles?

CHARLES: Well, I was just in the vicinity--

CLARISSA: No. Why are *you* here?

CHARLES: I wanted to see you.

CLARISSA: Why?

CHARLES: Because my dearest friend in all the wide world had a baby.

CLARISSA: Dearest friend?

CHARLES: Because *you* had a baby.

CLARISSA: I see. (*beat*) Anything else?

CHARLES: I wanted to see the baby. May I sit?

CLARISSA: Certainly (*she doesn't sound certain*). Tea?

CHARLES: I'd love some.

A moment of quiet while CLARISSA pours. She hands him a cup and saucer.

CLARISSA: So what have you been occupying yourself with?

CHARLES: Getting ready to go back to the continent. I was on a perfectly good holiday. No sense in ending it.

beat.

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: How's your husband?

CLARISSA: He's well. He's in London for the week. As you already know.

CHARLES: What do you mean?

CLARISSA: You wouldn't have come to visit me if you thought there was a chance you'd run into him.

CHARLES: You give yourself too much credit.

CLARISSA: Really? The baby has been in the world for two and a half months, and I haven't had a word from you since that day--that--

CHARLES: I've been busy.

CLARISSA: Of course you have. I know you have.

beat. the baby gets a little fussy. CLARISSA gets up and takes him out of his pram, rocking him and singing softly to himself. CHARLES watches her.

CHARLES: I have a gift for him.

CLARISSA: What?

CHARLES: The--your--baby. I have a gift for him.

CLARISSA: Uh--how nice.

CHARLES pulls a silver rattle out of his pocket.

CHARLES: It used to be mine, but--I thought you could make better use of it than I could.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CLARISSA: Oh, look--it has your initials on it.

CHARLES: Does it? (*he looks*) Oh. So it does. Would you rather I get a new one with his?

CLARISSA: No, it's perfect. He doesn't have one, anyway.

CHARLES smiles, bends over the pram, shakes the rattle.

CHARLES: He has huge eyes.

CLARISSA: Yes, he--

CHARLES: Your eyes. He has your eyes.

beat. Charles puts the rattle down in the pram, strokes the baby's face.

CLARISSA: Since when are you domestic, Charles?

CHARLES makes cooing noises at the baby.

CHARLES: Hard to believe you created this.

CLARISSA: Decent company would be shocked by your casual reference to childbirth.

CHARLES: I don't care.

The atmosphere is softening between them--butter that's been at room temperature for long enough to almost be sliceable. CLARISSA looks like she's slightly choked up, and CHARLES is completely absorbed in looking at the baby. He starts to sing a lullaby. CLARISSA listens.

CHARLES: Based on this, I may actually like babies.

HILARY FORBUSH

CLARISSA: They're wonderful, except when it's three in the morning and they're clamoring to be fed and changed.

CHARLES: Don't you have someone to do all that for you?

CLARISSA: I could. I just prefer to do it myself. I feel closer to my son, that way.

CHARLES (*unthinking*): You're so unconventional. It's refreshing.

The atmosphere starts to chill, again.

CLARISSA: High praise, coming from you.

CHARLES (*backpedaling*): Well, you're mostly unconventional. Sometimes, you're painfully conventional. To each his, or her own.

CLARISSA (*an undertone*): Of course.

CHARLES returns to his seat, throwing a look over his shoulder at the pram as he is walking back.

CHARLES: I should go.

CLARISSA: Oh, all right. Well, it was nice to see you.

CHARLES: Lovely, indeed.

They bow/curtsey to each other. CHARLES moves to leave.

CHARLES: Actually, I was wondering if you'd mind--

CLARISSA: What?

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: Reading this for me. I'd really appreciate some guidance, and--

CLARISSA: Yes?

CHARLES: No one guides me quite like you.

Beat. CHARLES puts the poem down on the table, pats it.

CHARLES: Well, I'll just leave this here, and you can decide if you want to--help.

CLARISSA: Right.

CHARLES: Goodbye.

He starts to leave.

CLARISSA: Charli--Charles?

CHARLES: Yes?

CLARISSA: Never mind. Just be careful on your journey back, the sky's got pretty dark. I think I'm going to go inside, myself.

The baby starts to fuss again. CLARISSA gets distracted.

CHARLES (*while she's distracted*): I miss you, Clare. I wish things could be better. Maybe they will be, someday. That thought gives me hope.

CLARISSA: What?

CHARLES: Be sure to get inside before the rain starts.

CLARISSA: I will.

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES exits. CLARISSA looks at the piece of paper left on the table, picks it up. Reads. Her face goes through several expressions before she rips it into pieces.

CLARISSA: No more.

She exits, with pram.

Lights.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

SCENE SIX

It is about two years later. The Library again. CHARLES is cupping his face in his hands at the desk. There is a letter, opened, by his elbow. His pen and papers have not been touched. Everything is covered in black.

HALLOWAY enters.

HALLOWAY: Sir, there's someone here to see you.

CHARLES: Someone?

HALLOWAY: Henry. Mr. Henry Goodal.

CHARLES: Perfect.

HALLOWAY: Do you want to see him?

CHARLES: No. *(after a stern look from Halloway)* Yes.

HALLOWAY: I'll tell him to come through.

HALLOWAY exits. CHARLES goes through an elaborate ceremony of straightening himself up--he takes off his dressing gown, throws it across the couch, looks at it, moves it off the couch, stuffs it on the desk chair and pushes the chair under the desk. He puts on a coat, and is tying a cravat when HENRY enters.

CHARLES: Ah, Mr. Goodal.

They bow.

HENRY: Lord Dawes. I assume you received my letter by this morning's post.

HILARY FORBUSH

CHARLES: I did. And to say that I was devastated by the news would have been an understatement.

beat.

And--call me Charles, please. Your wife always did.

HENRY: Charles, then.

beat.

CHARLES: How are your children?

HENRY: They're well. With the nanny.

beat.

HENRY: Lord-- Charles-- I shouldn't mince around the subject.

CHARLES: What subject?

HENRY: I have to tell you. I swore on my honor.

CHARLES: Tell me what?

HENRY: She died in my arms, you know.

CHARLES: That must have been--

HENRY: Her last words pertained to you.

beat.

CHARLES: To me?

NO ONE GUIDES ME

HENRY: She made me promise to come here and tell you something.

CHARLES: Did she?

HENRY: It makes no sense, but I'll say it anyway.

CHARLES: What? (*composing himself*) What was it?

HENRY: She said, "tell Charles 'I have well loved, but briefly known the night.'"

CHARLES (*to himself*): Damn woman improving my poetry even as she's dying.

HENRY: What?

CHARLES: Nothing.

HENRY: May I ask you what it means?

CHARLES: Your wife was an amazing woman. She was one of the only people who understood poetry. She understood it better than I did.

HENRY: She cared about you.

CHARLES: Did she?

HENRY: She did. She was horribly sad when your friendship ended.

CHARLES: She never said anything.

HENRY: She wouldn't have.

CHARLES: She was stubborn, Clare was.

HILARY FORBUSH

HENRY: You were in love with her, weren't you?

beat.

CHARLES: I really don't think--

HENRY: It's all right, you know. If you were.

CHARLES: Yes. I was.

HENRY: I thought so.

(beat)

CHARLES: But you know, I never would have--We never would have--

HENRY: I know. That poetry, it was yours, wasn't it?

CHARLES: It was. Some of my more juvenile verse.

HENRY: I thought as much. She also particularly wished for you to have this.

He hands CHARLES a small black notebook. It is the one that CLARISSA was writing in.

It's her work. Some of it. I might have had a hard time parting with this; in fact, I didn't want to give it to you, but it's too painful for me to look at, now.

CHARLES: Thank you. I'll treasure it. I really will. She never let me read very much of her--

beat. He breaks off because he is emotional. HENRY pretends not to notice.

NO ONE GUIDES ME

CHARLES: Is there--anything else she said?

HENRY (*hesitates, just for a second*): No.

CHARLES: Well. Thank you for telling me. And I am, again, so sorry for your loss.

HENRY: Our loss.

CHARLES: Yes. Our loss.

Beat. HENRY nods, exits. CHARLES stands, pours himself a drink, sits in his armchair, swirls the drink around and watches it. The letter is on the table, still, CLARISSA's journal next to it. CHARLES takes a drink, sets it down, picks the paper up, and looks at it. He rips it in half, then into fourths, then tinier and tinier pieces. He stands up, throws it into the fire. Watches it burn.

Main lights down as he crosses back to the table, opens her book. We only see him by the light of the fire. He looks through it, his expression pained and amazed and grateful all at once.

END.

JAMES DOMINGO MADRIGAL

One day I was scrolling through a news website when I came across a headline: “Company plans to send couple to Mars to live, and die.” Immediately an idea began to form. It was a simple idea: what would happen if you were to take two people, married for many years, and maroon them on Mars? What if they get there and they find out that they don’t actually like one another? This is the high concept behind “Divorce: Martian Style.”

But how do you approach such a concept? Sure, you could tell it from a straight science fiction perspective. In this case the logistics and technology hang heavy over the story. It becomes about the people fighting to stay alive, and their struggle to surmount The Problem, that is the inhospitable Martian environment. In a traditional science fiction piece this would be absolutely appropriate and expected. However, my interests lie elsewhere. I want to explore the absurdity of the situation and by analogy the society that creates it. My goals are to explore the characters and expose how modernity shapes their expectations and sets up the absurd circumstances they find themselves in. In order to do this I would have to adopt an irreverent voice to keep the narrative from approaching the saccharine or the histrionic.

A scenario having occurred to me and a tone with which to explore it, I next sought out characters to exist in, and be tortured by this strange world. I knew there would be two of them and they would be married and eventually their relationship would sour. But who were they and how did they relate to one another? Thinking further into it I speculated that if a company were to try to send this couple to Mars the company would be very conscious of the public relations implications of whoever they would send and would want to avoid as much controversy as possible.

It also occurred to me that they would want to send people with advance degrees, probably in the sciences. From this speculation a couple began to take shape, one of them was a scientist and the other not. The expected thing would be to have the male in the scientist role and the female as the reluctant tagalong role, but having made the decision to be as unexpected as possible I reversed the positions to see the consequences. The result was the character of Dr. Ricci-Wu, the reluctant English professor who accompanies his wife, the scientist Dr. Cecilia Ricci-Wu, on the dangerous mission to Mars.

From this initial inclination came other themes that I found worth exploring: the devaluation of the humanities in favor of the sciences, the emasculation of modern males, and the consequences of isolation that modern technology forces upon us, creating the need for us to connect digitally even as we continually disconnect physically.

In order to handle these themes appropriately with the tone I was attempting I sought out models to aid me in finding my voice. Primary among the models I relied upon was George Saunders whose short story collections often mix science fiction elements, startling social commentary, absurdity, and dramatic revelations. Saunders allows us to access his characters inner worlds through his deft use of narration and tone, exposing at once the absurdity of their preoccupations while still compelling us to empathize with their situation. This tension between the absurdity and empathy runs throughout Saunders's short story collections such as *Pastoralia*, *CivilWarLand in bad decline*, and *Tenth of December* and provided the perfect model and tone for me to explore my own story. Other works such as *The Miniature Wife: and Other Stories* by Manuel Gonzales, *Jesus's Son: Stories* by Denis Johnson, and *Girl With Curious Hair* by David Foster Wallace, helped to further hone my voice and shape the narrative of the story.

This was vitally important since maintaining the voice for the piece I found to be essential to achieving the effect I wanted. I began reading a short story from one of these collections each time I began to write, as well as reviewing the writing already done. This had an amazing effect, allowing me to hit the ground running each time I approached the work, smoothing out my workflow.

Revisions have also been extremely vital in shaping the final piece. It was through the revision process that I found my main character behaving passively and hence required more action to make him more believable and interesting. It was through revisions, also, that I found the middle part of my story needed a stronger situation in order to justify its ending.

DIVORCE: MARTIAN STYLE

She's pissed at me again. Not uncommon these days, but this time it feels different. Instead of the "throw-something-against-the-wall kind of angry" I'm used to, it's the "punch-a-hole-in-my-head-with-her-eyes angry" that really makes me uncomfortable. When she does that I feel small and stupid, like she's finally figured me out. Her silence makes it worse, I guess. It fills the spaces between us and draws in the sounds of the dust storm raging outside. Sometimes I can barely feel myself breathe.

But after all these years I've finally had enough.

Cecilia's been in the supply room for hours, organizing aluminum canisters of freeze-dried bananas and carrots. It's important, for her, that the canisters are arranged for maximum efficiency. Maximum efficiency equaling maximum good. Maximum good being that which ensures the best possible mission outcome. This is the same logic that possessed the Ares Corp. engineers to put the bathroom in the same location as the kitchen, thereby guaranteeing that Cecilia and I spent the rest of our lives shitting where we eat.

Little white rings outline the deep blue sweat stains under the armpits of her jumpsuit. She's working hard stacking and restacking the silver canisters, neatly noting their quantities in a ledger hanging on the wall. Occasionally she will look at the paper and shake her head slightly.

The pamphlets helpfully supplied by the Ares Corp. say "It is important to maintain morale through activity during periods of prolonged stress. Stress is a disease that wreaks havoc on the body and mind of an astronaut, greatly reducing effectiveness and jeopardizing mission outcomes. Like the common cold, stress is highly contagious and astronauts should be on guard against their partner's moods. Should your partner exhibit any

mission-jeopardizing behavior, please contact mission control immediately for remedy. The Ares Corp. has invested billions of dollars to ensure mission success and so is heavily invested, monetarily as well as personally, in the happiness of the crew.”

I’m taking out my stress on the unfortunate bacteria on the kitchen floor. It’s a holocaust in here—a bacteria trail of tears. I look down at my hands, now red from the Brillo Pad and bleach. My fingers are beginning to wrinkle and small cracks are forming at the edges where the nails meet skin. Calluses crease the palms of my hands. After years in college avoiding manual labor, I’ve finally found my calling: a glorified space-janitor.

Maybe that was to be expected though. Marrying a scientist as I did and earning an advanced degree in English literature, guaranteeing a tenuous career as an adjunct professor teaching freshman comp courses, I probably never had much of a chance at a sensible career path. Sure there was always the hope of something on the horizon, the old tenure bait-and-switch game administrators like to play during contract negotiations. “Well, you know we can see what opens up in a year or two. Professor Merkley isn’t getting any younger, as you know. Poor guy hasn’t made it to an MLA in god knows how long. If we do make that determination, which I can’t stress enough at this point is a no, but who knows what the future brings, Merkley could decide to retire tomorrow or maybe have an aneurism on his speed bike, we could revisit that decision. When and if we make that determination, which I’m not saying we are or will make that determination, I am not authorized to say that, we will be looking for someone who is a team player, someone who was there for us when we needed him or her to be, like we need you to be here for us right now

through this unfortunate budget situation, or phase because these things seem to happen in cycles and right now we are in a ‘down’ cycle and much belt tightening is needed, which affects adjunct faculty most acutely, but administrators not at all.” Etc., etc., etc.

My career followed my wife’s career, which in a way helped out a lot. I got most of my jobs because universities were so eager to get her on board that they were willing to throw a bone my way as an extra incentive. Some men might have felt emasculated by this, but I didn’t. I was always proud of my wife’s accomplishments in the sciences, not an easy field for a woman.

One day I was clicking through the Times’ website when I saw an article about a planned mission to Mars. A newly formed corporation, put together by a bunch of guys in Silicon Valley and backed by Chinese and Russian investors, were looking to send a couple to Mars to begin preparations for an ambitious mining operation. They were looking for a couple who had been together a long time but didn’t have any children and didn’t want any children and who were also highly educated. They would go and do surveys on the geography of the planet and take measurements for future use. There was a catch: there would be no return flight. It would be too costly to send the fuel needed to bring the astronauts home and making fuel on Mars was at this point beyond our technical limitations. The piece read like a “isn’t-this-weird-and-kind-of-crazy?” article.

I laughed at the weirdness of it all and forwarded it to Cecilia with the subject line: “Martian Invasion: We Come for Your Minerals!”

A couple of minutes later I checked my inbox and found “Re:

Martian Invasion: We Come for Your Minerals!” But instead of her laughing with me at the weirdness of the story she said, “Looks awesome! Do you think they’d mind that you’re not a scientist?”

This, of course, is not what I had in mind. What was supposed to be a few minutes of shared hilarity with my wife, turned into years of applications and physical screenings and interviews with boards of directors and psych evals and equipment training and zero-g tests and public relations grooming. Our lives were picked apart and put back together into a neat little package that the Ares Corp. could send to Mars. There was even a reality TV show chronicling our training, *Mission: Mars*, hosted by Patrick Don Donavin, former child star of the hit show *Martian Mom* whose last stint on television was as a patient on a celebrity rehab program. Donavin signed off every episode with a variation on his famous catch-phrase, “Mom, you’re out of this world!” Instead of a sprite ten year old with overly expressive eyes saying the words, there was a middle age man with spikey hair and an eye twitch turning to the camera, “These guys are out of this world!”

The “reality” show, of course, was heavily scripted, with a cadre of interchangeable producers, identifiable by their fashionable eyewear, always lingering just off camera, directing us into ever more ridiculous situations and giving line readings. One time the producers had me climb into a giant spinning machine while covered in vomit. They had me covered in vomit *before* they turned on the machine. So there I was, smelling of pea soup and oatmeal slurry spinning around and around. The smell gagged me and nature took its course. By the time the machine stopped I was covered in vomit for real.

“That was so great,” one of the producers, Randy or Jay or Kit or something, said. He grinned like a Mr. Potato Head who had just put on his “grin” lips.

“Dude that was rancid,” Patrick Don Donavin said. “Did you eat like tomato soup last night?”

I was too disgusted to talk to any of them, making a beeline for the showers to get the fake and real vomit off of me. The worst part was that none of the training mattered. All the episodes were filmed in a six-week span on back-lots in Los Angeles two months before we were to head into the Nevada desert to begin our real training. It was all to get the public interested. Apparently the idea of sending a person to Mars wasn't compelling enough. In those six weeks, between daily humiliations in the “scenarios” and the contrived “confessions” that took hours to film because neither Cecilia nor I were very good actors, I began to have my doubts. It became apparent that we were functionaries for the Ares Corp. to use however it saw fit. Everything was negotiable: personal space, dignity, taste. It felt like being on the vomit-go-round, spinning wildly out of control. I thought about getting off and retaking control of whatever was left of my life. But the machine had already been put in motion. Contracts were signed and the consequences of stopping would be severe. And what would I be going back to? A job with no prospects? A family I hardly spoke to? Despite its humiliations, the Mars mission was consequential. It was my chance to be part of something that people would talk about long after I was dead. And Cecilia's enthusiasm had not diminished. She had been training for this sort of thing her entire life and I had long ago hitched my wagon to her star. Where she went I would follow. We might even get a high school named after us. During that time, it really seemed like what

DIVORCE: MARTIAN STYLE

we were doing was the most important thing in the world. More than that, it was something we were doing together.

Despite initially strong ratings, the TV show didn't last past the first season due to weak performance in the prime 18-34 male demo, but the nondisclosure agreement barring us from ever talking about Donavin's habit of sneaking away to do lines of coke in the dressing room lasted much longer.

I rinse out the rags in the work sink on the other side of the kitchen. The place is spotless, just as it was before I started cleaning. Outside the screaming wind has achieved another key. I wonder how much force the walls can take.

I walk by the storage room. Cecilia is not there, only the boxes and canisters neatly arrayed on the shelves, much as they were this morning. I'm sure Cecilia would be able to tell immediately what has been moved in the room, but I don't have her eye for detail. To me it just looks like boxes on a shelf.

I find her sleeping in the "bedroom," a little alcove set apart from the rest of the colony. She's on the small pullout bed that doubles as a desk when not being used for minor activities like sleeping. Her dark hair has escaped her ponytail and lies around her heart-shaped face which has relaxed from the default scowl it has taken on in the last few days.

She looks beautiful and young, like when we first met in college. Back then she was a socially awkward geology student who had rarely spent an hour of her life outside the plan that her parents had set for her. Violin lessons as soon as she could hold the bow. Extra math, science, and language tutoring beginning in the third grade. Thousands of hours

of volunteer work at the local Taiwanese Christian church, helping old ladies sort through mounds of donated clothes and hygiene items for use “back home.” Her one act of rebellion in all that time was to forgo the Ivy League to come to a university in Utah, where she could ski, a passion she developed in high school, and where she met me.

I went to the university because my father was an alumnus. His generous contributions to the alumni fund smoothed over my less than stellar high school grades. This intervention was one that my father would never let me forget, always bringing it up during family dinners, when I still went to family dinners. He would declare that I had entered college based on his merit, not my own. Then, just as his voice would begin to quiver with emotion and my mom was forced to cover his hand with her own, he would cap it off with: “And look what he has done with the opportunity I gave him. Did he decide to do something with his life? No! He’s a goddamn English major. Jesus Christ.”

Surprisingly, my junior year I decided not to go home for Christmas break, electing to stay in the dorms by myself. Only I wasn’t by myself. On Christmas Eve, I came out the front doors to find a young woman overburdened with skiing gear wrestling in her pockets for keys. I had seen her around campus. She was shy and kept mostly to herself. She was beautiful but it didn’t look like it was her job to be beautiful. The kind of girl that haunts you from high school yearbooks.

“Need help?” I said.

“Could you hold the door for me? I can’t seem to find my keys.”

“And here I thought I was the only one in the dorms.”

“Is that why you blast The Beatles until two o’clock in the morning?”

My mind did a thing where it goes blank for a second, like getting called on in class for an answer when you realize you hadn't been paying attention to what the professor was saying. "I...I mean..."

"It's okay, I like The Beatles."

She smiled immaculately white, ordered teeth.

"I was just going out for some dinner..."

"I would love some dinner, can you wait a second while I put these away?"

And like that we had our first date. Dinner at a local greasy spoon, vaguely Asian restaurant. A walk along the snow-covered streets. Conversation in the dorm's common room about the college, the courses we were taking, and campus life, and then onto more heady themes like religion, politics, and the meaning of life. Talking to her was easy. We agreed on so many of the same things. Without forethought I ended up sitting on her bed watching a nature documentary narrated by a British guy, "And so the exquisite beauty of the cicadas' mating dance continues. Another generation will be born to take up the call."

When the documentary was over she leaned in and kissed me on the mouth. "I don't want to be lonely," she said.

"Okay," I said.

Two years later, in the only decision of mine my father ever approved of, I married Cecilia at a courthouse near campus, a week before our graduation. She was traditional in that she chose to wear a white dress to the ceremony, but not so traditional that she gave up her last name.

"I don't think that I should have to give up my family's name," she said. We waited for the judge on the couch in his office, Cecilia's white dress taking over most of the cushions.

“That’s okay. I’m not some Neanderthal. I don’t think you should have to give up your last name either.”

“It’s strange that you say that because Neanderthals were probably more sensitive individuals than humans, due to their increased brain sizes. But that is not the point. I guess that I want to honor my family, but at the same time I don’t want to be one of those feminists who gets bent out of shape over having to buy new stationery.”

“I don’t think it would be annoying at all to keep your last name. I know that you’re very proud of your heritage and we should preserve that.”

“Yes, I know, and I know that I’m sounding annoying and indecisive but I think I’ve come to an elegant solution. We should hyphenate!”

“You want to hyphenate your last name?”

She grimaced, as she did whenever I was slow to catch on to something.

“No, I mean *we* should hyphenate our last names. That way we will both have the same last names and we will honor both our family’s history and tradition. It will be a true coming together of cultures, just as our marriage is! I think it’s a good idea.”

She beamed at me, like she had just gotten the big stuffed animal from a claw machine. I fidgeted in my seat, but finally nodded ‘yes’. She kissed me on the cheek and squeezed my hand.

And that is how I became Mr. Ricci-Wu.

It wasn’t always bad, the mission. When news broke across the online newspapers that we had been selected I was summoned to the president’s office at the university. I had been to the office several times

before. The president prided himself on being a “hands-on” administrator by arranging five minute meetings with faculty, even adjuncts, in a two week cattle-call at the beginning of the year. The meetings would always run over, leaving me to wait at least a half an hour in his cramped reception room to enter his presence.

This time I was greeted by his receptionist, Lena, at the door. The faculty in the English department called Lena “The Taskmaster,” because of her zealous protection of the president’s schedule and her German accent (which was actually Swiss) that hadn’t disappeared or even faded in the thirty years she had lived in the United States. During the yearly cattle-calls she would walk around the reception room with the president’s day planner, gently, and sometimes not-so-gently, pushing tenured and adjunct professors alike, all dressed in their Sunday bests, into the room to meet the great man.

The day I was summoned, however, she greeted me at the door with a magnanimous smile. “Dr. Ricci-Wu? President Brownstone is ready to see you, would you like a drink? Coffee, tea, a soda perhaps?”

“Uhhh, err, a water would be nice.”

“Sparkling?”

“That sounds good.”

In seconds I had a cold bottle of carbonated water in one hand and was standing in front of a large mahogany desk occupied by the taut Dr. Brownstone. Immediately I noticed that the guest chairs in the room were different than during the cattle-calls. Those chairs were plastic, hard. These were leather and inviting. Dr. Brownstone called me over with a flick of his wrist.

“Dr. Wu! Please have a seat. It is so good to see you. Lena can you make sure we are not interrupted?”

“Of course,” she said, closing the heavy wooden doors behind her.

“That Lena. ‘The Taskmaster’ as you word nerds like to call her, right? Oh I know all about it. And let me say that that’s right on! She is a taskmaster, the best sort. I don’t know how I would be able to keep this place on track without her. But I’m sure you know how that is. I’ve met your wife after all.”

He stopped for a second to grin, like we had some secret joke together. I didn’t know whether to be insulted so I elected for a polite laugh.

“Amazing women, all of them. Simply amazing. It takes an amazing man to be on the same level as those amazing women, which is why I was so impressed to look at your body of work, Dr. Wu.”

“It’s Ricci-Wu.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, a quizzical look crossing his face, as if I had said something inappropriate.

“My wife and I hyphenate our names. I took her last name and she took mine.”

“How very modern. How very progressive! This university has always prided itself on its unorthodox professors, as we like to underline in the brochures. That comes through very handsomely in the work you’ve produced here.”

“You’ve studied my work, Dr. Brownstone?”

“Please, call me Phil. And yes, of course I have. I always keep apprised of the work that our top academics are doing. It is in the interests of this institution that I do so. Our corps of professors is our greatest asset and *the* key market advantage we have. Well that and our world-class

climbing wall. Have you had a chance to try out the climbing wall?"

"I think I may have tried a few times when it opened but haven't been back since."

"Simply amazing. The climbing wall is a key selling point of our university. But back to the issue at hand, I didn't bring you here to talk about our recreational facilities, even though I could go on for hours about the new athletic and aquatic center and the state-of-the-art equipment. No, the reason I called you here is to talk about your future. This Mars business. You two are making a lot of headlines. Lots of PR potential. You have suddenly become 'hot' as the ad people like to say. And pardon me for being forward, but it is in the interest of the university whenever one of our faculty becomes a positive marketing opportunity. We have had so many setbacks recently with negative marketing, what with poor Dr. Merkley going off the deep end finally. Tragic situation that."

"We were all saddened by the Dr. Merkley situation," I said. It takes a special sort of person to get arrested in Bangkok for indecency, I thought but didn't say.

"Exactly. Simply amazing. But as sad as that whole incident is it creates an even greater opportunity for you to serve this university in a capacity that is unique to your situation. Having one member of our fulltime faculty chosen to go to Mars is an honor, but having two is an absolute boon, marketing-wise. Cutting to the chase, if I can employ a cliché without insulting you, we would like to offer you a fulltime position."

I sat there. I didn't know what to say. This had been the goal, ever placed out of reach from me, like Lucy taking the football away from Charlie Brown's kick. I wanted to jump up and shake Dr. Brownstone's,

Phil's, we were now on informal terms, hand and say "Yes! Of course I would." But instead I just sat there.

Phil smiled, seeming to recognize the weight of the moment.

"Obviously this has been a long time coming, but 'all good things to those who wait' as the saying goes. I just know we would be honored to have a scholar of, er, um, remind me again what your area is?"

"Well my specialization has been applying feminist and queer theory to novelizations of classic science fiction films from the early sixties."

"Amazing," he said. "Simply amazing. We need a scholar of your quality working for us full-time, pushing along the field into new and unexpected frontiers."

He stood up, grabbing my hand and elbow in a Kung-Fu grip. I noticed he was wearing Bermuda shorts, his suit jacket and shirt tails untucked.

"Simply amazing," he said.

My tenure as a fulltime professor lasted only one semester. Somehow my teaching load didn't change. I would be a "professor in abstentia" thereafter, because it looked better on the marketing. We were given four months to get our affairs in order before reporting for duty in Los Angeles. There was a lot to do at the beginning. We had to sell our home, the cars, and pay off our debts with the proceeds.

After filming on the show ended, we were sequestered for training in a stylish compound that looked like it was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the Nevada desert. Although most of the tasks on the shuttle that brought us to Mars and the colony would be performed automatically by computer or remotely by technicians at mission control in San Francisco,

there was still a lot to learn. We were the option of last resort. In case everything else failed, we were expected to save the mission, and ourselves.

What this usually amounted to was a lot of simulator time or what I called the how-can-we-fuck-with-the-lowly-meatsacks-training. It wasn't so much the outlandishness of the situations the teams of engineers came up with that embittered me to the whole process as the solutions they presented. These could always be resolved with the same pair of solutions: turn it off and turn it back on. Computer malfunctioning and spiraling the shuttle dangerously out of control? Turn it off and turn it back on! Oxygen levels dropping below the accepted levels for human respiration? Turn it off and turn it back on! Has a micro-meteor breached the hull of the ship, causing it to explosively depressurize? Well you *could* turn it off and turn it back on if you were still alive, but you're not, so best not to worry about it. These trainings would go on for hours every day, a lot of time with us on our backs, strapped into chairs to better simulate the environment we would encounter on the mission. By the third week I had a permanent ache in my neck and back.

The simulator was placed conveniently thirty feet down the hall from our "quarters," which is how I was encouraged to refer to our bedroom and corrected every time I slipped up and called it a "bedroom." "Quarters just sounds more professional, more military-like," one shaggy-haired Ares Corp. exec in a Pink Floyd t-shirt and sports jacket told me. And I suppose he was right. When I started thinking about our suite with the king-sized bed and thousand-count pima-cotton sheets and walk-in closet as "quarters" rather than as a "bedroom" my outlook on things began to change.

The first thing that changed was that the sex stopped. Somehow by mutual silent agreement, Cecilia and I decided that we should cease any and all physical contact that couldn't be shown in a PG-13 film. We were affectionate, of course. We still kissed each other on the cheek. We still hugged. We still said, "I love you." But anything more was strictly verboten. It didn't help that there was a camera installed in our room, although assurances were given that the camera was not directed at our bed. The red blinking light on the camera was anything but reassuring and a sure-fire way to kill any sort of romantic mood.

But even without the lingering gaze of the mechanical eye, we were simply too tired for romance. Our days at the training camp were filled with stringent physical activity meant to build as much muscle mass as possible. The months of weightlessness in space would inflict terrible costs upon our bodies. And so we were forced to push weights for four hours in the morning in routines dreamed up by some sadistic Dr. Strangelovian-ex-Nazi scientist I am convinced. Push sleds. Bench presses. Deadlifts. Good mornings. Kettle bell swings. And on and on. I still have nightmares about them. In those dreams my hands are numb and rubbed raw to a bright pink, red blood not yet showing. While I'm bent over in exhaustion in some other corner Cecilia is still going, layers of perspiration drying on her face and down her synthetic workout tank-top. She's talking to herself. She's demanding that she push herself further. Demanding that she become better. She looks at me in those dreams and I can sense her disapproval. I feel like she wants to pick up a weight and smash it into my head while saying over and over: "Why did you stop? Why did you stop?" But before she can I wake up in a cold sweat and realize that I am alive. Somehow I never feel relieved by that realization.

DIVORCE: MARTIAN STYLE

The Ares Corp., ever conscious to put a human face on every facet of the mission, didn't want the fact that we were being directed remotely from mission control to dominate the "narrative" of the human race's first exploration of another planet. The public, and the stockholders, would be better served by the fiction that we were intrepid explorers taking the aspirations and dreams of the people left back on Earth into the stars, rather than the truth that we were basically needy passengers being chaperoned into space by an army of computers and anonymous engineers.

In addition to the short-lived reality TV show, there were weekly broadcasts on the Internet where we would try to answer questions from people about our mission and Mars in general. Most of the time the questions we received from AskAnAstronaut@Arescorp.com were not suitable for broadcast. A great many people wanted to know how we used the bathroom and did we have sex while in zero-G. The answer to that question, although we never addressed it in the broadcasts, was once. In fact we were provided a special doubles sleeping bag for this very purpose. The bag was a maze of complex Velcro straps and looked more like a straightjacket for Hannibal Lector than a sex aid. The idea was that we would strap ourselves to the hull of the ship so that when we began intercourse we would stay stationary long enough to complete the act. The straps were adjustable, allowing us to control how tight we were bound together. The trick was to find the right amount of give that would allow my hips to move against Cecilia but tight enough so that when I moved against her we would not float away. We never did get it right. Every time I pushed against her or her against me, we would float away from the hull and bang back against it. After two hours of this, and a new set of bruises, we stopped altogether out of exhaustion, nothing accomplished.

The questions we received from elementary schools were better. They were not so much interested in the logistics of our defecation or lovemaking as they were in the wonder of the mission itself. “Are there aliens on Mars? How far away is Mars? How do you breathe on Mars? What are you going to eat when you get there? Are you going to bring a dog to Mars?” I was put in charge of answering these questions. I seemed to have a knack for it and an easy rapport with the children. I looked forward to hearing from them every week in the little clips they would send, little faces at the front of classrooms from all around the world, reading off index cards in halting, unsure speech.

The Ares Corp. had a team of interns research the answers to the science questions and they would give them to me along with the videos from the kids, but the presentations would be all mine. I had fun coming up with different ways to present the concepts. One I am particularly proud of involved me picking up our rover and holding it over my head to demonstrate the weakness of Mars’s gravity. Cecilia let me work on these on my own while she tackled more heady questions like the composition of dirt patches in quadrants around the base. I received rave reviews from the project supervisors at mission control and the flood of “thank you” e-mails from the kids kept my inbox full. I was the face of the mission to school children around the world, and everyone said I was a vital part of the effort to keep the mission relevant. And for a while I felt that I was contributing, making an impact in a way that only I could.

But this, too, didn’t last.

The news media was the first to lose interest. During the launch and thirty-nine days in transit we were in demand. The prospect of

impending tragedy was very real, and with it the promise of drama that the news outlets hungered for. When we landed safely, thanks to the miracle of engineering, and it became obvious that we wouldn't die in a fiery crash, thereby frustrating the media's secret desire to showcase our teary-eyed loved ones speaking over stock footage of us heroically preparing for the doomed mission to come, the media lost interest.

Initially it was a relief to be done with the journalists and their tendency to invest back breaking amounts of gravitas into even the silliest questions. "We understand that you will be recycling your urine on Mars, did you think about that when you applied for the mission?" We were busy with too many things to worry about our diminishing PR profile. There were supplies to organize and labs to set up and systems to check and recheck and little autonomous drones to put together and turn on. And I had to prepare my videos for the elementary kids.

Cecilia and I settled into a routine, seemingly happy in our busyness, even if we found that we spent less and less time speaking to one another. I didn't mind the silences in the morning as we ate our protein enhanced wheat slurries out of little aluminum pouches, our eyes glued to our electronic screens. During long stretches of the day she went on field trips with the drones, searching out new mineral deposits, or she worked in the lab testing samples and making reports. I spent my days in the common area reading through e-mails, trying to plan my videos, or performing routine maintenance on the drones, usually nothing more complicated than anyone with a working knowledge of basic tools could perform. At night we were in the same room together, there was only one bed in the compound. We stayed up reading, our eyes again fixed on the electrons flowing through the digital screens. One or the other of us would tire and turn off

the light on his or her side of the bed, saying, “Goodnight.” We slept with our backs to one another, as if turning away from a problem we did not want to face.

After the first year the pace of videos fell off. Where before there were seven or eight videos each week in my inbox, now there were two or three, the questions half-hearted and redundant of earlier videos. And then one week there was nothing. I composed an e-mail to Stan, the Education Outreach Director for Ares Corp. “Hey Stan, no videos this week?”

About an hour later I received a reply. “Sorry, no requests this week. Will keep you updated if we receive anything.”

I thought that maybe I had done something wrong. Maybe I had been phoning it in lately, maybe the kids were getting tired of my shtick? I thought of different ways I could answer questions. My resources were limited but I could be more creative with what I had. Maybe I could make myself up to look like a Martian with the blue powder Cecilia uses to mark off transects. Kids love Martians and would be really interested in hearing about science from a little green man on Mars. But, er, we didn’t have any green powder. But a Martian could be blue, there’s no law saying that a Martian couldn’t be blue? Of course a Martian could be blue! This thing could be huge. The marketing potential for the Martian character was infinite. I saw my blue-dyed face on lunch boxes, backpacks, on little plush dolls parents would fight over in toy stores around Christmas. And the Martian could have friends, an entire posse of them to help the children learn. Like Bill the Robot, the Martian’s best friend; he could teach the kids about math. There were plenty of spare drone parts around to build a robot out of and it’s not like the robot actually had to work, it just had to look good on screen. This was going to be huge, marketing-wise. And

the Ares Corp. would own it all. I wouldn't demand any sort of royalties, because what would I do with royalties on Mars? It was brilliant, a real winner.

I took some of the powder out of the supply closet and smeared it around my face and then took a picture. It wasn't quite what I had envisioned but it was only a mock-up to give Stan an idea of what I was thinking. I attached it to my proposal: "Education Initiative: *The (Blue) Martian Kids Show!*"

I hit send and waited for Stan's reply to arrive praising me on my foresight and creativity in breathing new life into our education efforts. And I waited. After a while the powder began to sting and I washed it off in the sink. Four hours later I refreshed my inbox to find: "Re: Education Initiative: *The (Blue) Martian Kids Show!*" I opened it, excited to get approval to begin the next phase in educating the world's youth.

"Interesting proposal," it said. "I don't think we can use the blue dye or drone parts for non-mission critical projects. I will run it by Control and Logistics and see what they think. In the meantime you should really wash your face. Toxic-wise I'm not so sure it's safe to have that stuff on your skin."

The (Blue) Martian Kids Show died an early death as both Control and Logistics ruled it unfeasible and nonessential to the mission. I was dejected but I was still in charge of making the videos for the classes until one day I received an e-mail from Stan: "Sorry buddy, Education Outreach has been shut down due to lack of interest. Been fun. Stay safe up there. Goodbye."

I never met Stan, never saw a picture of him even, but I felt his loss and missed his weekly e-mails. I was bewildered too. I knew that

eventually we would stop being news; that people would get used to the fact that we were on Mars, but I was surprised at how fast it happened. To us, Cecelia and I on Mars and seemingly the people in mission control, what we were doing was still the most important thing in the world. But perhaps we were too close to it. Since we had left, new wars were being fought. New politicians were rising and falling. New celebrities were fighting for their fifteen minutes of fame.

I fell into a deep depression, some days not even bothering to get out of bed. I fell behind on the drone maintenance, the only duty left to me. It didn't seem to matter. The drones still performed their little drone functions without interruption. While Cecilia was out, I would lounge around the colony munching on corn flakes and reconstituted milk solution watching old episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost in Space*, imagining myself in their adventures, instead of the tedium of my own space story. If Cecilia noticed a change in me, she didn't let on. She seemed just as busy as ever with her samples and reports.

One day I opened my inbox to check on my fantasy baseball team and saw a message: "Hello from Hoopes Publishing!" I opened it.

Hello, Dr. Ricci-Wu,

I'll make this quick as I'm sure you have a very busy schedule. Hoopes Publishing is always on the lookout for new talent with interesting, unique perspectives and we have been desperate to reach you. We would like to produce a book about you and your experiences on Mars. Please let me know if you are interested.

-Alex

Attached was a business card with a photograph of a blond woman, early thirties, reading glasses slightly down off her eyes, an infectious smile spreading from her lips. She looked like a model for a dating website, enticing but attainable, attractive but not overt.

I replied, "I'm definitely interested."

In my defense I didn't plan on having an affair when I began e-mailing Alex. It started off very professionally. She wanted to know everything about me: where I was born, how I was raised, what my interests were growing up, etc. etc. etc. She was voracious, always coming back with more questions about me and what I thought of the world. Our messages grew longer and more frequent. I would jump out of bed in the morning to check my inbox for the latest and the exchanges wouldn't stop until just before I turned off the light while in bed with Cecilia.

We batted around ideas for the type of book we wanted to make together. Perhaps a book comparing depictions of living on Mars to the actual experience? An anthology of sci-fi criticism? A memoir?

"What about a novel?" she offered during one of our brainstorming sessions.

"I've never tried writing fiction before. I don't think I'd be very good at the creative stuff."

"But you're so smart and clever! And you are creative! I bet it would come naturally to you if you just gave it a try."

"I don't know about that," I said. I told her about *The (Blue) Martian Kids Show!* I even attached the picture of my stupid blue face.

A few hours later she replied with a picture of herself, her face covered in blue powder. She still wore her reading glasses. The caption read, "I believe in you!" The top two buttons on her shirt were loose,

revealing the slightest bit of cleavage. Later that night I requisitioned some facial tissue from the storage closet. While my wife slept next to me in bed, I jerked off to Alex as quietly as I could. Lying amid the piles of crumpled, soiled tissue I didn't feel ashamed at my onanism. I felt liberated.

In the weeks that passed I began taking notes. The project would be huge. It would tie together the themes of corporate capitalism and alienation in the age of technology. I wanted to contrast science fiction with the mundane nature of actual space exploration. The work would say a lot but it would also be about a character, a person. He, it was always a he, would be a man who, by a set of circumstances outside his control, finds himself aboard a mission to deep space. It would be a heady tale, like Arthur C. Clarke rapping rhapsodic on the origin and ultimate fate of the human race in a universe more mysterious and massive than can be comprehended. At the same time it would be funny, a little Douglas Adams sprinkled throughout. And it would be an adventure tale! It would have it all.

Alex loved my suggestions. Every e-mail contained at least three exclamation points. But she wasn't a sycophant. She probed the reasons behind my choices, trying to get at their basis. She debated with me, she made suggestions, but always she listened.

“Why all the references to androgyny?”

“Well androgyny is used as an ultimate state in a lot of science fiction. Like in *Dune* where Frank Herbert uses it to explain the main character, Paul, as a type of superhuman who displays aspects of both the feminine and masculine. Or *2001: A Space Odyssey* where the Star Child, while originally a male, becomes a sexless, human archetype in the form of a baby.”

“So that’s why the main character loses his penis?”

“Exactly.”

“Wow, this is going to be a heady book.”

In our correspondence, our relationship developed a different, less professional aspect. We joked with one another. We sent each other weird news articles. We posted funny cat pictures we found. We mocked corporate memos that flooded our inboxes.

Then she began sending me photographs. These weren’t the made-for-public-consumption photos we had been trading previously. There were lips and breasts and thighs and underwear and not underwear. Whatever concerns I may have had about pictures of my penis being beamed 140 million miles to Earth didn’t stop me from transmitting them. In those months we ran out of facial tissues and suddenly I was cleaning socks four times a week. Our conversations teetered to the sentimental.

“I feel like I know you,” she said. “You’re millions of miles away but I feel like I’ve never been closer to anyone in my life.”

“I know how you feel,” I said. “You’re amazing. I wish I would have met you while I was on Earth.”

“Star-crossed lovers, I guess Dr. Ricci-Wu.”

“Ha!” I said, and then added, “Call me Carl. I love you.” I looked at the words on the screen for a few moments before hitting send. Cecilia was in the bathroom getting ready for bed. By the time she came in the room I was already rolled over, my light off.

The next day I woke to find Cecilia already gone. She was getting up earlier and earlier for the fieldtrips, not even staying for breakfast. I lounged in bed a moment before remembering the previous night’s e-mail. I turned on the screen, opening my client. Everything was gone. All of the

e-mails, the pictures, my notes. Erased, as if it had never happened.

I searched through the computer, looking through file after file. It was weird, but computers had done stranger things to me. I sent a message to Alex, “Weird. All my stuff is gone. Do you have backups? Did you get my e-mail last night?”

A few minutes later there was a message in my inbox from IT. “Your E-mail Could Not Be Delivered. No Such E-mail Address Exists.” I composed half a dozen e-mails, different variations on Alex’s address. Each one bounced. I went to her profiles on the social networking sites. All of them were gone.

I wrote to IT: “Files and e-mails missing. Please help.”

I paced around the colony, running scenarios through my head. Maybe she got freaked out by the love thing? How could she not, I mean I’m on fucking Mars! It was a stupid thing to say. I’ll apologize and tell her that we can still work together and she doesn’t have to change her e-mail address and take down all of her online profiles. It would be a simple fix. I loved her, it was true, but it was an impossible, selfish, thing to say. We could be friends, and that would be enough.

Then IT e-mailed me back: “The files you refer to have been archived by the Ares Corp. in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin’s Psychology/Neuroscience Department.”

“Those were personal correspondents. I would like have them back.”

“The files are part of a study done in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin.”

“What study? What the hell are you talking about?”

It took a few hours for them to get back to me. “I’m sorry Dr. Ricci-Wu. Mrs. Dr. Ricci-Wu is on-site project manager and any of your questions can be directed to her.”

There were no more replies. I paced around the living quarters. Did Cecilia know about Alex? Was she mad? Did she arrange to have me cut off from her? What would it mean if she found out I was having an affair, even a digital one?

She came home just before the sun had crested the horizon, just as always. I barely waited for her to clear the airlock before confronting her. She was still sweating from the close atmosphere of the recon suit.

“What is this about the University of Wisconsin?”

She seemed not to hear me. Or she was ignoring me.

“Cecilia, what’s going on?”

“The AI study?”

“Alex. Did you have me cut off from her?”

“The AI study. Carl, Wisconsin has developed an artificial intelligence that they wanted to test on a subject.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Alex is a computer program.”

My mind did a thing where it goes blank for a second and I forgot to breathe.

“It’s a modification on the Turing test, a way for them to find out if their program is sufficiently intelligent enough to make a human believe it’s real. They approached me about it a couple of months ago. The potential to advance computer science was too good. Plus I know you haven’t got a lot on your plate since you lost your kid videos, so I thought this would be a good way for you to contribute.”

“Cecilia, Alex wanted to help me publish a book.”

“No Carl, Alex was a computer program. I helped the Wisconsin people craft her to be as appealing to you as possible. Love is the hardest emotional response to get from someone and if they could prove that their computer program could do it the implications would be enormous. It would be a very important advancement.”

I looked at her. There were new lines around her mouth and eyes. Her face was set, a mask that didn't offer compassion, or sympathy, or apology.

“You fucking bitch,” I said. “You fucking miserable bitch.”

“Carl, I understand you're upset but in order to get the data we had to keep you in the dark.”

“You made me fall in love with someone, someone who wasn't even real. You used me as a goddamn subject in a fucking experiment.”

“You're upset. I understand. But we did get clearance from the IRB, I assure you that we followed every precaution to ensure you weren't irrevocably harmed.”

“You didn't get my clearance. You didn't consult me. You know what, fuck you. Alex may not have been real but I loved her. I loved her more than I have loved you in years, more than I ever loved you. Go to hell.”

“We got our IRB!”

She was still talking, but I walked away, not listening anymore.

That was weeks ago. There were many fights that followed. Most of them hitting upon the same themes: I was ungrateful, I was immature, I had no right to criticize her. After all, I was the one who had the “affair.” But I had stopped holding up my end in the fights. She could “win” and

I could “lose.” Whatever. I could stand being the asshole. I realize that it was inevitable.

Had we not come to Mars the relationship might have been safe. We could have floated along on the goodwill of our friends and careers back home. We could have been safe in our mutual interests and the distractions of daily life to give our relationship form, strength. But being alone, together, I realized we had never been in love in the first place, or if we had, it was a passing thing. I think about her and how it must have pained her to see me struggle in my career. She deserved an equal but what she got was an appendage that she was forced to look after. Our coming here was a negation of life, a closing off of possibilities. Were we back on Earth I could have divorced her, moved on and maybe found happiness. But that is not the situation we had chosen.

I think to say something to her before I leave but don't.

Working the control panels I disable the alarm for the airlock. The wind outside has died down and I hear only the soft hum of the life support systems. I look at the weather report and see that a new pressure system is moving in. I turn off the screen and go into the airlock and put on my recon suit. I bounce around for a moment, preparing myself for the added weight. I work the airlock controls and wait for the green light to tell me I'm good to go. A lump catches in my throat and I turn around to see the empty control room. The screens are in hibernation but little LED lights make the room glow incandescent, like an abandoned disco.

Green light.

I walk towards the low mountains east of the compound. It's a straight shot and the terrain is gentle. An oxygen alarm sounds and my

HUD lights up red telling me that I've only ten minutes of oxygen left. I ignore it and keep on moving.

At the top of the nearest peak I can see the endless desolate expanse of the Martian landscape. Rocks of many hues, mostly grey and brown, jut out of the blood red soil. There is nothing green or blue here, but the landscape doesn't lack for beauty. And then, all at once, the sun rises over the horizon. Not a red sunrise at all, but silver and somehow cold.

They will probably say I died a hero. The Ares Corp. will make sure of it, turning me into a saint that they can sell to the public. I may get that high school named after me. Maybe they will make a movie where my character will get to say his final, teary goodbye to a sleeping Cecilia. Maybe.

Another alarm sounds, but I hardly hear it through my laughing.

MEGAN RICHARDSON

When I started writing I wanted to write a piece of creative nonfiction about a time period in my life that contained a lot of emotional content. As a freshman in college I had drafted a story about when I started having panic attacks and I thought I could turn that into a longer essay. As I expanded the manuscript I ran into a large problem. There were a number of scenes and some good emotion but there was no story. There was no reason to keep reading. In order to make my story one worth reading I had to find a purpose.

I attended the AWP writers conference in Seattle, Washington where I sat in on a panel about incorporating faith into memoir. Adding that element to my story had never occurred to me, but as I began to think about it, I realized how much my faith played a role in my view of mental illness. I am a strong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but there are many ways in which my Mormon upbringing made me feel guilty for having panic attacks.

I struggled in telling my story with the amount of doctrinal content to include. My first few drafts didn't include any concrete quoting of church doctrine, but I found it somewhat necessary to explain why Cultural Mormonism worked the way it does. I began weaving scriptures and church teachings into my story more and more to emphasize what Mormon beliefs are and how Utah culture magnifies them in sometimes unhealthy ways.

The first draft submitted for workshop contained very little reflection. People told me I needed both the voice of innocence and the voice of experience. I fought that idea. I thought just portraying the voice of innocence showed an immediacy that made it more important. One fellow student even told me to write it in present tense, which would allow no room

for significant reflection and I thought it was a great idea. The more I got in to writing it, however, I realized there were many details that needed to be contextualized and clarified if I wanted to make a statement. I began incorporating reflection on many different things that were not happening at the same time as the panic, but had contributed to it.

I acknowledge that I do not explain exactly why I had panic attacks. Many people have asked me why my panic attacks started. Perhaps that will be made explicit in another story, but not this one. I began to write about it, but discovered that wasn't really the story I wanted to tell. I am a firm believer that stories tell the writer how they should be written to a certain extent. Part way through revisions I realized I wanted to address the social stigma of mental illness, especially in LDS culture so I began to take my essay in that direction.

During my quest to portray the stumbling blocks that led me to believe I was being unfaithful I faced the challenge of being true to the facts. There are some parts with my dad I tried to portray as accurately as possible, but worried he would still have a hard time with. I was surprised when he gave me the go ahead to publish it after the way I had represented it. When I ran a draft through my mother she reminded me that some of the way I remembered experiences with people who had harmed me may not have been exactly true to life and offered suggestions on how to save face a little and admit I didn't think some of the people set out to do me harm, but that was the way I had interpreted it. Doing this also gave me some piece of mind in knowing I had written this story as accurately as I could in a way that would offend as few people as possible.

I set out to prove that it's okay to be religious and have mental illness, an idea I think is highly under represented in society today. What follows is my journey through doubt and fear of sin to a place of healing and comfort where my story can be heard.

THE OPPOSITE OF FEAR

It was the first weekend in December and my family was at a Christmas devotional for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I sat next to my two little sisters and my parents on a bench barely long enough to fit all of us. We were gathered to hear apostles and prophets speak of the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but although I loved the Lord with all my heart, I couldn't think of Jesus. I kept thinking about how anxious I was, then condemning myself because I had been taught by family, friends, and the culture surrounding me that the more fear I had, the less faith I had. I didn't want to be a sinner.

"It is a season of rejoicing! A season of celebration!" the speaker at the pulpit exclaimed. I hung my head. My eyes penetrated the floor as if I could see past the fibers down to the wood. As the choir rose in their long, white robes I looked down at my sateen skirt and started rubbing my hands up and down my thighs. The fabric was soft and comforting as my hands went back and forth with the grain.

My thoughts jerked in different directions, guided by the bob of a metaphorical needle. Sometimes the needle pierced the middle of my thoughts and other times it took my thoughts as close to the edge as they could come without careening over into self-destructive territory. Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright.

I studied the hair of the woman in front of me. She was brunette with barrel-curved hair. I wanted to yank it and see if it moved. But why? She was a complete stranger. So tender and mild. I wanted to hit myself. Maybe it would knock some sense into my brain. Maybe it would just get out the energy coursing through my veins.

At seventeen I was like a five year old in a mall who had no idea where her parents were, except Mom was right there, I wasn't physically lost, and we were in a church, not the heart of consumerism. I wanted a security guard to turn to, somebody to help me find where I was supposed to be again, but the mall in my brain just kept sending me up and down escalators, then making me run around the merry-go round when I didn't want to go.

I felt like I had no control and I felt like a sinner for it. The Book of Mormon teaches us that men and women are free "to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day." By giving in to the dark thoughts of depression I thought I was letting myself be acted upon. Children in the church are given CTR rings to remind them to choose the right and many adults as they grow older purchase designer CTR rings as a continual reminder. At the core of our beliefs we believe Satan was cast out of heaven because he wanted us to be compelled to return to our Father's presence, whereas Christ wanted us to always have our agency and the opportunity to choose right from wrong. Freedom of choice is engrained in us.

The interesting thing with mental illness is that patients cannot always just choose to be happy. Although I can take medication and use coping techniques, as Elder Holland, one of the latter-day apostles, said in April 2013, mental illness is "a crater in the mind so deep that no one can responsibly suggest it would surely go away if those victims would just square their shoulders and think more positively." If all members understood this doctrine I don't think I would

have doubted how faithful of a member I was being, but at that time I didn't understand the doctrine either.

My thumb and pinky finger came together. The rest of my fingers curled into my palm a tiny bit. My whole hand shook. My body swayed forward and backward, although not enough that it was noticeable to anyone else yet. I bent my head downward. My lips pursed together then came apart for a split second. Mmmmma-mmmmma. The sound was so quiet the person next to me couldn't hear, but it echoed in my own head. Sinner. Sinner. Sinner. Why are you afraid? You're supposed to have faith, Megan.

Mom glanced over at me, grinning. I couldn't grin back. Couldn't she tell I needed help? I honestly don't know.

My mom is extremely perceptive, but when she married my dad she married into his way of looking at mental illness, a way that didn't involve sudden anxiety attacks. When my dad was growing up, the big family secret was his siblings' mental illness. When neighbors asked my dad where his brother was he told them Steve had decided to live with their other brother, but would never state why. His sister was institutionalized and deemed psychologically unstable. Dad liked to think of himself as the strong one of the family who didn't break down or end up in a mental institution even though he inherited a tendency toward depression. When I was three he saw a family doctor and was put on Zoloft.

He thought what depression he had inherited was manageable and as long as he was taking his medication he could have a normal life. He understood he needed a little bit of help and started therapy

when I was five. He thought he could handle whatever life threw at him as long as he kept going to therapy and taking his medication. In me, he saw signs of both himself and his family. My parents took me to “play therapy” when I was in first grade, “anger management therapy” in fifth grade, and to a general therapist in ninth grade. I started taking Zoloft when I was a sophomore in high school, but we all assumed that as long as I popped the pill I could be a typical teenager.

Nobody can say that before this incident we weren’t aware of mental health problems or that we weren’t working to solve them. We became so accustomed to mental illness being a dormant aspect of our lives that when my panic attacks manifested themselves my senior year in high school Mom didn’t recognize the signs and neither did I.

I looked at the clock. Time wasn’t passing the way it should. My stomach clenched. Thoughts zipped by and with each one I sunk deeper. I felt like I had to hold on to each thought, try to figure out what was going wrong, but thousands of thoughts assaulted my mind, none of them staying long enough for me to sort through them. Scholarship deadlines were—Preston said God didn’t want us to be together any—there was a loose thread in my—a toddler was jumping up and down next to—I had to do well at the next debate tournament or—do you think they were having cake for—when I study during rehearsal—why wasn’t I good enough for—I must be a horrible daughter of God to keep—why are my hands shaking? My jaw clenched, my muscles tightened, and my heart pounded.

The meeting drew to a close with the dawn of redeeming grace and I could hear a freight train in my ears, coming closer and closer. I

thought it would run me over but the sound just kept getting louder. I dropped the hymnbook and cupped my hands over my ears. Mom gave me a questioning look but kept singing. Jesus, Lord at thy birth.

As soon as the prayer ended, I reached over and tugged on my mom's shirt. "Mommy, can we go?" We walked over to where dad was talking with our neighbors. "Dad, I need to go." I stood somewhat still for a couple minutes but I couldn't hold out any longer. Please Heavenly Father, let me go, let us go, make him go. I wanted to sprint outside as fast as I could and not stop until I reached our house, but I was no runner and I knew I would collapse on the way if I tried. I turned back toward my ally and pleaded her with my eyes. "Mommy, I need to go." We stood there, waiting for my dad to finish talking to the neighbors. I couldn't stand it anymore. My voice laced with frustration, anger, and anxiety I leaned over to my dad. "Dad! I don't feel good. I need to go home." Sometimes I wonder if my dad sensed my emotions and ignored me on purpose.

I am a very emotional person and Dad never liked that. When I was in third grade we moved to a new city and I faced a tear stained year without friends. My father was raised in a family where emotional outbursts, as he would put it, were to be dealt with privately. He would come home to me crying and order me to my room. There's nothing too unusual about a parent sending a child into time-out, but I felt like he did it whenever he couldn't handle my emotions. He would follow me to my room, then sit outside the door so I couldn't get out. I would cry for Mom to come help me but he would tell me I needed to stop crying before I could talk to Mom. A few times my Mom was able

to reason with him, usually when both of us needed dinner, but most of the time I sat and cried until he decided to let me go.

I created a safe place in my closet where I hid a pillow and a blanket. I would run there when he would lock me in my room. I laid on the carpet, covering myself with the blanket, looking up at the clothes hanging above me. He discovered my pattern and would sit outside my closet doors sometimes. He would try to reason with me from the other side of the brown sliding doors. "If you quit crying you can come out but we can't have you crying like this at the table." I would push on the doors and they would rattle back and forth. Every time he said something I would cry harder.

Instead of crying this time, I was quiet the remainder of the ride home. We passed a cemetery on our left. I wanted to launch myself out of the car and hide behind one of the headstones. I don't know why I thought that would be comforting but a granite angel spread its wings over one of the headstones, beckoning me.

When we pulled into our garage. I was the first one out. I walked to the couch, semi-paralyzed. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Mom came in behind me. "Are you okay?"

"No, Mommy, I don't know how to explain it but I just feel really, really scared and I don't know why." I sat on the tan leather couch, my gaze directed into the kitchen through the walnut stained Chippendale chair, so when Mom looked to see where I was looking, there was nothing unusual for her to see.

I had run into a different world than the one in which my mother sat next to me. It was as if I was playing night games in the

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cemetery and somebody kept “booing” in a wave-like crescendo, only there was nobody there and I knew it. I started glancing furtively around, expecting something to be amiss, only it wasn’t. My eyes got bigger and bigger, or at least they felt like it. Please God, just help me. I don’t want to be like this, I promise. I’m trying really hard not to let the darkness in but I can’t...

I wanted to suck my thumb, and curl up like a baby. My brain wasn’t functioning normally. In the few minutes it had been since I sat down my brain had sunk deeper into confusion and I could no longer talk. My brain and my lips weren’t moving at the same speed. God, deliver me from the hands of evil I repeated in my mind, since my lips couldn’t say the words. Mom reached over and pulled me into a hug that should have made me feel safe. I was still scared. “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

“What’s going to be okay?” I yelled, the backs of my hands slapping the air. I was taught that fear was the opposite of faith. I thought if faith could cast out fear then fear could cast out all faith, and yet I kept pleading to the Lord to save me from the darkness. I didn’t feel solace from my religion, but I never doubted it was true. I think my chemical imbalance was so bad that the peace the gospel offered me was overshadowed, but I always knew there was a God and that He loved His children.

“Everything, honey. Everything is going to be okay,” Mom said. I shook my head, curling into the fetal position next to her and she put her arm around me. I nodded and buried my head in her shoulder. There’s a picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus, holding him against her

chest, cradling his head into her shoulder. I don't want to risk being sac-religious but I felt like that little helpless child, being held up to my mother, only Christ was pure and clean and I wasn't. In my mind, Christ was always a peaceful child, although I'm sure he cried just as much as normal babies do. I, on the other hand, was nowhere near peaceful. I was terrified.

Mom must have wracked her brain, thinking of people who might be able to help calm me when she realized I was too riled up for her to be able to calm me down alone. My dad had come home and disappeared downstairs, unable to deal with my emotions and Mom didn't even ask for his help. Even though I was taking Zoloft, I hadn't started seeing a psychiatrist yet, not to mention the fact that at 8:30 p.m. no doctor's office would be open. I wasn't seeing a therapist at the time either so she turned to a woman in our church.

I connected with Carly when I started babysitting her autistic son. Carly also struggled with panic attacks. I didn't realize until later that this was a fact that never bothered me about her. In an interesting spin on Cultural Mormonism I was not labeling her as unrighteous, but I was labeling myself as such.

Mom asked me if it was okay for her to call Carly. I nodded my head as she picked up the phone and dialed. I remember her words on the phone. "Well, she's kind of freaking out for lack of a better word. She's just kind of in her own little world."

When Mom got up to get the door I curled up as small as I could on one of the couch cushions. "Hey Megan. You doing okay?" I shook my head and Carly sat down on the couch next to me. She

turned to my mom. “Emily, how long has she been like this?” She looked at my mom with a questioning and sympathetic look, seeming to say, “I’m sorry this is going on. How can I help?” without saying it.

“Since we got home.” Mom looked Carly in the eye, calm as usual, but there was a sense of desperation in her voice as well.

“Ok.” Carly turned back to look at me. “Hey Megan. I’ve been through this. Is your heart beating really, really fast?” My entire body swayed forward in answer. “Are your muscles really tight?”

“Y-y-yeah. Mmmm, mmm, my legs.” I couldn’t get any further than that. My brain and my lips weren’t moving at the same speed.

“Are you having a hard time breathing or is it just hard to talk?”

“T-t-t-talk.”

Mom just stood there, watching my symptoms get worse and worse but Carly nodded. “Ok, your brain just needs to calm down. I want you to tense your legs as tight as you can, then count to ten, and release them.” I did so and my breathing sped up. “It’s okay. Try it again.” I never questioned what Carly told me to do. Looking back I can see she was a woman of faith who had mental problems so when she helped me I didn’t feel condemned. I was glad that somebody understood and didn’t seem to be blaming me for it. She coaxed me all the way through the panic attack, which lasted about another hour.

Her patience with my mental illness contrasted sharply to the mindset of most of the LDS people surrounding me. One of my friends explained the viewpoint of Utah Mormons by saying, “They think because the gospel is perfect they have to be perfect. Because they are well off spiritually they expect to be well off in everything socially and

chemically too.” This idea is projected onto all members. Having the gospel should equal being happy. That is the end of the equation. Yet anyone who has studied mental illness knows it can never be viewed through such a simplistic mindset. Depression is not just a faith crisis, although I was led to believe that was the case over the years.

It is important to distinguish between LDS Church doctrine and Cultural Mormonism. I belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in which members are under strict commands to keep the Sabbath day holy by refraining from certain activities, never swear, never have sex outside the bonds of marriage, dress modestly, pay 10% of their income to the church, attend services every Sunday, visit the temple regularly, read scriptures on a daily basis, and pray several times a day. No one will be excommunicated (told to leave the church permanently) for breaking one of these commandments, but they are almost certain to be looked down upon by other members in the LDS church via Cultural Mormonism, a system that judges people on the level of righteousness and commitment to the church.

The LDS Church has never taught people that the church will fix everything in their lives or that mental illness is equivalent to sin. In April of 2013, Jeffrey R. Holland’s conference address stated, “there should be no more shame in acknowledging [mental illness] than in acknowledging a battle with high blood pressure.”

Even now, though, some people ignore that counsel because the tendency to blame the darkness of mental illness is so engrained in Cultural Mormonism. Utah leads the nation for the highest number of antidepressants prescribed per capita, at a rate twice that of

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California or New York. Many members gloss over that statistic, preferring instead to make their congregations appear happy and content, presumably because they are dependent on Christ for their happiness.

Weeks before my first panic attack, I had sought solace from my seminary teacher, Brother Grant, regarding my depression. Since I saw him everyday and he was in a position of authority in the church it made sense for me to turn to him with my doctrinal questions before I turned to others. He always greeted me with a smile and never gave me a reason to dislike him or disbelieve anything he said. Because of that, I took what he said as doctrine in a way I shouldn't have. I do not pretend to remember every word of what he said, but I do remember how condemned I felt. I don't think he set out to make me feel unrighteous or unworthy of God's love, but it hurt nevertheless.

When I told Brother Grant about my mental illness his response was similar to the views of many of the people in the church. I'm not saying it is the doctrine of the church, but many individuals believe the things he told me. "You shouldn't be so depressed all of the time," he said. "You have the gospel. You know the plan of happiness." He waved his hand in the air as if to say "You don't really have a problem."

"Sometimes it's still hard to be happy even knowing that." My eyes never strayed from the floor.

Brother Grant relaxed back into his leather swivel chair, turning toward the window. His finger tapped his wedding band while he talked to me. He was between forty and forty-five with a receding hairline and a suit coat that made him look older.

He had on a perpetual smile he said was because the gospel always made him happy. Our church teaches that we live, die, and become resurrected beings, calling it the plan of happiness. At the beginning of each year Brother Grant asked everyone to write a doctrinal question on a piece of paper and put it in a box. He said he would look through them and find a scriptural answer to every single one of them. The first year I had him as a teacher I scrawled on the paper “If this gospel teaches the plan of happiness why am I not happy?” The question never got answered. The next year I asked “I’m reading my scriptures, praying, and doing all the stuff I’m supposed to but I still don’t feel God’s peace. What else can I do?” He never answered that question either.

That day as I sat in front of his desk telling him I was having a hard time his advice was, “Heavenly Father doesn’t want his children to be depressed. If you go to him he will ease your burden. You can be happy, you just have to put all your trust in Him. Christ suffered for all things. Read your scriptures more, pray with real intent, and He will not leave you comfortless.” I nodded. I had been taught that all my life. I had just been looking for more or deeper of an answer from this man who I had called my seminary teacher for the past two years. “Give in to depression and you have given in to the devil. The adversary wants to get in your mind and play games, telling you nothing will ever work. It can only stay there if you let it. You are giving evil a home.”

The last sentence was the one that burned in my mind for years to come. Guilt flooded over me. I was unhappy because I thought I was letting Satan in. I had never done anything terribly wrong. I had never stolen, cheated, or told more than white lies. I’d never slept around,

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tried drugs, or had a sip of alcohol. I had straight A's in school, my parents had every reason to be proud of me, and I thought that applied to my Heavenly Father as well, but if I was letting in my Father's enemy there was no way he could be proud of me. I fought back tears. "Okay." I didn't trust myself to say anything else without bursting into tears so I turned and left Brother Grant's office.

I dragged myself out the doors of the building and sat down with my back against the exterior brick wall, my mind in a sort of haze. What had I done? All this, all this anxiety, depression, it was my fault. Tears came to my eyes and I pulled my knees into my chest, letting my head rest on my knees, crying into the denim. I looked up when I heard the snap of a twig breaking and saw someone coming toward the building. I didn't know him, but I didn't want to answer a stranger's prying questions if he asked if I was okay. I rose, turning so he couldn't see my face, hastily wiped the tears from my eyes and gave him a smile when he passed.

As funny as this sounds, that simple act represents the entire Mormon Culture in Utah. Wipe the tears away. Act like everything is okay. Hiding emotions is not a problem unique to LDS culture, but I have seen many men and women hide problems based off of their take on church doctrine. The church teaches its members to "become a light on a hill to all," telling them to be good examples for both members and non-members to see. Too often, this is interpreted to mean members always need to be pleasant and happy. They think the face of the church, which is taught to be every single member, must be happy. The poster-child never frowns. The model never breaks down.

I fought to be a good example and worked harder to be a better Mormon—to not let Satan in. I went to the temple to get some respite from the raging emotional storm. With scriptures in hand I prayed for over an hour for guidance in the place I had been taught was the closest I could be to heaven. I found some comfort, but there was still a weight on my shoulders I couldn't shake. I had been told to turn everything over to the Lord so I returned to my car and prayed aloud. "I don't know how to give thee everything. I've never been very good at it apparently because all this stuff just keeps building up and I don't know what to do with it. I don't feel like I can handle the pressure anymore. I know thou wilt make my burdens easy and light, but I don't know how to give them up. It seems like every time I try I'm still holding on to something heavy." I broke down. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do to be happy. Please show me. Please." My mind was still very ill at ease, and when I returned home it was with a heavy heart, thinking I had failed at even being able to give my burdens to the Lord.

My boyfriend, Preston, was Brother Grant's son. I fell hard for him when we were both called to be on the seminary council together. We spent hours every week working together. I loved how righteous he was and how determined he was to always do the right thing. When we started dating, it was natural for our hang-out spot to be the seminary building. We would be there during lunch, after school, whenever we had a chance. A few weeks after talking to his dad about my depression, I walked up the steps to the seminary building to find Preston waiting for me.

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“Megan, I’ve been praying a lot.” I nodded. He was pacing back and forth, his flip-flops making an annoying “flllp” sound as he walked. He was fidgeting with the ring on his hand, something he did often, but today it seemed like he was fiddling with it more than usual.

“I think God wants us to break up.”

I was stunned into silence.

“I think He has other people out there we are supposed to meet and date. I don’t think He wants us to be together any more.”

“Are you sure that’s what He’s been saying?” If that was the way God wanted it why hadn’t I been getting these promptings?

“I just feel like we drag each other down. You’re depressed a lot and when I’m having a bad day, it just makes me feel worse so neither of us are happy.” That was totally different than the idea we were supposed to be seeing other people. What was really the problem?

“This depression rut is something you need to learn how to get out of and I don’t think I can help you any more. It just never makes a difference what I do and I can’t handle feeling like my efforts mean nothing.” He paused and looked at the ground, unable to look me in the eye. “You need to figure that out for yourself but until then you’re kind of bringing me down.”

Preston had been my first boyfriend and the hardest part for me was that he said it was God’s will we broke up and then brought up my depression. Looking back, I think he was just blaming the break up on the gospel because he wanted a way to get out, but at the time I believed I lacked faith in some way. I immediately began thinking I wasn’t good enough for him. He was after all a seminary teacher’s son

so perhaps he was more spiritual than I was. Maybe he was right: I was too depressed and just dragged him down.

That evening, like every other girl who has just been dumped, I went home and cried. I bawled. I called my friend Heather and we watched movies with absolutely no romance in them late into the night. I cried for the loss of Preston, but I also cried to my Heavenly Father asking him why everything was going wrong. Why wasn't I good enough to date? Why couldn't I be happy? Had my depression chased him away? If it had how could I stop being so depressed and anxious all the time?

The Book of Mormon teaches not only that actions are sins but that "our thoughts will also condemn us." I have pondered on this scripture and thought about how many members have used this to condemn themselves for thoughts that don't require condemnation. I do not encourage people to fill their brains with thoughts of pornography or things of the kind. I do want to encourage members to not make depression worse by feeling guilty about it, however.

Not long after my breakup the panic attacks really started and the guilt got worse. The first one was at the Christmas devotional and the panic attacks didn't get better after that. They got worse. I was having two to four every day, each one lasting for a couple of hours, me running through darkness, trying to find a way out, crying, kicking, and biting. Mom didn't have a job and her full time job became taking care of me, as if I was a toddler that needed constant babysitting. I did. If I was left alone I tried to hurt myself.

About a week into my panic attacks I was talking with my mother on the couch. My shoulders were slumped forward creating

a crooked cane with the rest of my spine. My elbows were hooked around my knees. My head bobbed, my neck hanging like a floating jellyfish, the wisps of hair around my face forming the tentacles. My heart felt hard. I wasn't happy. I wasn't sad. I existed floating through space and time, exhausted. My last panic attack had just ended and I was left deflated and defeated.

"Mom, I don't know what to do anymore."

Mom laughed and sighed at the same time. "Me either."

"Aren't moms supposed to be able to fix everything?" I asked, somewhat jokingly.

"Sometimes we can't, darn it." She didn't sound frustrated, but she did sound regretful.

She tried. She really tried. If my mom could have had open-heart surgery to save me, she probably would have. The next day she was on the phone with every psychiatrist we could find, but the earliest appointments available were at least a month out and patience was wearing thin on both Mom's end and mine. Our family doctor increased my Zoloft prescription by a tiny bit, but didn't even want to see me in his office. We thought that maybe if the chemicals in my body could stabilize a little with the new Zoloft dosage things would be okay and we were definitely on the right track. It took some higher prescription drugs than Zoloft to help me but I think a lot of problems could have been avoided if we had been able to see a psychiatrist when my mom started calling people in the first place.

"Are you going to be okay?" Mom asked one night as one of my panic attacks seemed to be winding down. "I'm not sure I can wait up with you too much longer." I had been staying up late with panic

attacks night after night. She was always by my side and she was nearly as exhausted as I was. We both headed to our respective bedrooms. All the lights in the house went out and Mom fell asleep, but I lay there, staring at the ceiling, trying to calm my thoughts.

I got to a point I can only describe as numb. When you first shut your finger in the door it goes dead for a minute before you yelp. My head was that finger, first shut in the door, only I didn't yelp out loud. Unable to sleep I trudged up the stairs.

There was a small guest bathroom connected to our kitchen on one wall and a door to my parents' master bedroom on another. The light from the bathroom fell across the marble countertop. Its wooden edges seemed commanding and regal, the knives it held polished and gleaming. I pulled a knife from the block, selecting the steak knife with the dullest blade I could find, just scraping it against my left wrist.

I've heard it said that women have more failed suicide attempts than men because they don't dare do it as violently. I can understand that. I would down a bottle of pills much faster than I would ever pick up a gun. I hurt myself carefully, deliberately.

It's an odd sensation to be completely in command of things and yet out of your mind at the same time. I just wanted to feel some sort of emotional release. I cut deeper, pushing the skin from one side to another as I sawed away at my skin, the sensation feeling an odd sort of wonderful. I saw blood oozing and squeezed the wound, watching it run faster and faster. It wasn't gushing. It was never gushing, but it trickled down the side of my arm like water when it gets to the very end of the spring.

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Once I knew what it felt like I craved more. I wanted a bigger release than what the steak knife afforded me. I pulled the chef's knife from its sheath and held it in my hand.

The door behind me opened. Mom's eyes were barely open. She's a pretty light sleeper so she had heard me and traipsed in, t-shirt and black sweat pants on. She had no idea what was going on but wanted to see if she could help me with something. "Can I help you?" she said as if curious why I would be eating cheese-its after everyone else had already gone to bed.

Then in one second her eyes were wide-awake. "Megan!" She wasn't mad, but she was scared. "Megan!" The knife trembled in my hand. "Give it to me, Megan. Give me the knife." Her tone was flat. Even in this situation Mom never lost her cool.

I shook my head. Control. I needed control. I couldn't control my panic attacks any more, but I could control the marks on my arm. Mom laid her hand on my forearm and reached for the blade, pulling it out of my hand centimeter by centimeter and I didn't move. I was numb again. She could do whatever she wanted. I didn't care. I stared at a blank spot on the countertop as mom deposited the chef's knife into the sink.

As far as I can tell the church has not made a statement on self-harm, but they have made several statements on how our bodies are temples of God that we should not defile. For a long time I blamed myself for the steak knife graffiti on my arm, telling myself I had destroyed the precious body God had given me. It didn't help that during my teenage years I had been socially conditioned to look down on

those who had tattoos, piercings, track marks, or purposeful physical scarring. The church preaches acceptance, but Cultural Mormonism is not so kind. The thing I had to keep in mind was that I would not have done it if the chemicals in my brain had been balanced correctly. In a way my body had worked against my own body but I had to learn to accept that and not condemn myself for it.

The ER room was small but big enough that Mom could sit on the plastic chair on the side of the room while the intake worker asked me questions. “Are you isolated or withdrawn?” Lately. “Have you ever wanted to harm yourself or others?” Duh. “Have you ever been suicidal?” Yes. “Does anyone in your family have a history of depression?” Yes. “Do you feel like you are easily frustrated?” I’m getting easily frustrated with your ten page long questionnaire. “Do you think you should be admitted?” I nodded.

The psyche person looked at my mom. “What kind of patterns have you been noticing?” He asked her a list of questions too. The last one was “Why did you feel it was necessary to bring her in today?” I watched my mother shake her hands for emphasis, her voice quivering and her eyes filling up with tears. “Because I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how to help her.”

I was transported to Wasatch Canyon Mental Health, where I sat in the lobby area next to my mother on purple plastic chairs until a nurse in red scrubs came over to us and handed me a clipboard. It had twenty pages or so of questions I had just answered at the hospital, but in more detail. I filled out the papers and the nurse collected the clipboard. “Follow me.” I got up and Mom started to follow,

but the nurse turned to her, “you can stay here.” My fear increased. Through all of this my mom had been my security blanket and now they were taking it away and I didn’t even know exactly where I was going or what I was supposed to do.

The nurse ushered me into a room where she took a maroon sweater off of one shelf and a pair of black sweat pants off of another. “You’ll need to change into these, but I’ll need the guard to come watch you change.” Watch me change? What did she mean? “We have to make sure there are no weapons hidden anywhere on your person.”

I was humiliated. If having panic attacks had made me feel like less than a daughter of God this certainly solidified the idea. Criminals had to do this. Another woman stepped into the room wearing a black button up shirt, black slacks and a triangular badge bearing the word ‘security.’ She had a duty belt on complete with radio, handcuffs, mace, and a taser. She shut the door behind her. I had never been this up close and personal with the law before. I gulped. “Shirt first.” I hesitated, but then scared of what she might do to me started to pull my shirt off. Sterile air hit my naked skin in a wave of humiliation. This wasn’t like gym class where you took off your shirt and changed into a different one for P.E. This was serious business. The nurse who had ushered me in took my shirt as soon as I took it off. “Bra.” I flushed bright red. The security guard grabbed my bra, turning it over in her hands, examining the seams, pushing on the cups to make sure no weapons could be sewn in. “Hold your hands above your head and turn in a circle.” This is what they made you do when you were arrested right? I complied and she handed me back my bra. “You can

put this back on, but then the pants and underwear need to come off." The ordeal was over when I was fully clothed in their sweatshirt uniform.

The nurse in red led me back to my mom. I wanted to bawl on her shoulder and tell her all of the horrible things they had just made me do but apparently they had already talked to her. When I came in she stood. "They said I can bring you a couple pairs of clothes for you to have over the next few days, they just have to examine everything first."

I nodded. "Can you bring me my scriptures too?"

"Of course." She gave me a parting hug. "I'll bring the things up tomorrow.

It was late so the nurse ushered me into a small room. Its walls were glaringly white. It was connected to the bathroom, but there was no door to it. "You can sleep on that bed there. You're not allowed to leave your room. Lights out is at ten thirty. There's a window in the door to your room so we can peek in at night and make sure you haven't suffocated yourself or tried anything stupid. In the morning come to the nurse's station to get shampoo and conditioner. You are required to take a shower but we can't have poisonous liquids in the room so you will receive only as much as you need for one shower. You can get toothpaste from the nurse's station as well. You are not allowed to have glue of any form in your room and all writing utensils can only be used in the commons area." The speech sounded rehearsed but it supplied all the necessary information. "Good night Megan."

"Good night," I repeated, not knowing what else to say.

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The next afternoon one of the nurses presented me with the set of scriptures my mom had brought me and during free time I went in to my room to study. I had always been taught that Job was the best example of enduring through trials as there could ever be, that he never denied God and always remained faithful, no matter what circumstances he was in. I don't think enough people focus on the fact he was human. The doctrine of the church is not that Job was perfect, but that he endured. As I read Job on the hard bed in my cubicle of a room I came across a passage that gave me hope maybe I wasn't a total screw-up. He wanted to die. He wanted to give up. He longed for death that didn't come. I read through passages, "Why did I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly...for the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me." I flipped the page, "my days... are spent without hope." I read on. "My soul is weary of my life." That was exactly how I felt. I was weary of life and the things I was most afraid of had come to me. It wasn't just me.

Why had I been taught to think righteous people didn't struggle with mental illness? Carly had panic attacks and trouble being hopeful and yet I had never once condemned her. Why had I blamed myself so much for all the thoughts racing around in my head?

I had valued what Brother Grant said to me so much that it was detrimental. I believe he was talking from his own experience when he gave me the advice he did. He probably did think praying and reading my scriptures more would bring me closer to the light of Christ and closer to happiness, but he overstepped church doctrine when he told me I was giving evil a home by having a mental illness.

The help I received from who I thought was the Lord's mouthpiece on earth blinded me to God's love and I don't think that's right.

God has not left me comfortless. My mom has been there for me, the hospital was there for me, but that doesn't mean God didn't or doesn't let me be influenced by a chemical imbalance.

I saw the doctor early the next morning. We were in a small room offset the main area with a door. It wasn't like a normal doctor's office with an examining table and machines everywhere, nor was it like the psychiatrists offices I would see in the future. I sat across a desk from him interview style in a small chair while he shuffled papers around, looking through my files. I felt like I was meeting with the principal, except there was a plastic bracelet around my wrist bearing my name, birthday and patient number. "Do you feel jittery Megan?"

"Yeah." I didn't know what this doctor was going to do to me. Were there wrong answers to these questions?

"Are you nervous the majority of the time or just with me right now?"

"I've been pretty jittery all the time. I just feel like my nerves are snapping—literally, like sticks inside me or something." I tried to reach for a way the doctor could understand what I felt like, although I have never seen anyone, doctor or otherwise appear to know what I mean when I describe my anxiety that way.

"Hmm..." He flipped through the clipboard with the answers to the questionnaire I had filled out the night before. I had heard some of the teenagers talking about lithium at breakfast. The idea of having metal in my brain freaked me out so I was crossing my fingers that wouldn't be what he prescribed. "Are you having trouble sleeping?"

THE OPPOSITE OF FEAR

I nodded. Evenings were the hardest for me. They were the times I literally wanted to pull my hair out or find a knife. My very first panic attack occurred in the evening and though I had panic attacks in the daytime, evenings and nights were always the worst. The shadows were things coming to get me, like the boogeyman when I was little or the monster that lived under my bed. The shadows have never been out to get me, but the shadows in my mind told me they were so often sometimes I believed it, and then dark shadows led to me trying to harm the boogeyman, only to find out the boogeyman was me.

I honestly don't remember what he prescribed. I know it wasn't lithium and I know I have gone through a large array of different psychiatric medications since then, but I know when I came out of the hospital I was a different person and an awful lot of that can be attributed to the fact that I received the medication I did.

As the week went on I saw the effects of the drugs the psychiatrist put me on. I did yoga therapy, art therapy, exercise therapy, music therapy, and counseling therapy while I was in there, but the thing that made the most difference was the chemicals balancing in my brain. I realized that if medication could make such a big difference the panic attacks and depression weren't my fault.

I am not saying prescriptions made my panic attacks go away because they didn't. They made them tolerable. I opened Christmas presents with my family weeks later with a smile on my face, even though a couple of hours later my hands shook a little from anxiety. Years later, I still have panic attacks. Sometimes I will have to excuse myself from classes or go home and let myself thrash on the bed for

a while to wait out a panic attack. The medications I am on help a lot, but nothing has been a cure-all.

There are two frequent misconceptions when it comes to mental illness, especially in LDS culture. The first is that you can just get over it if you try to be positive enough. The second is that if you take medication you won't have to deal with it anymore. After watching my family struggle for years with both, I can guarantee that neither one is true. Medication helps people achieve control, but mental illness is a beast, which much like cancer, is never fully eradicated. There is no antibiotic to heal it within the next ten days.

I have learned that God doesn't take away our trials, but he helps us make it through them alive. When the world would condemn me, God embraces me. The scripture "be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" has haunted me over the years. I thought there was no way I could be perfect and have mental illness. I've had to look at it through different eyes. I would never condemn a faithful father from a financially struggling part of the world for not being able to put bread on the table one day, even though the LDS church teaches that we are to provide for our families. He could still be a perfect father. Likewise, I believe in a merciful God who will not leave me comfortless in situations in which I have little control.

In the dark, in my small white room with a hard bed and security guards roaming the halls, I knelt before God once again and told him thank you. "Even though faith is the opposite of fear, thanks for reassuring me panic attacks don't mean the devil is inside me. It just means I have a chemical imbalance. I'm still a loved and cherished daughter of God."

THE OPPOSITE OF FEAR

- i* 2 Nephi 2:26
- ii Holland, Jeffrey R. "Like a Broken Vessel." Ensign November 2013.
- iii Packer, Boyd K. "Do Not Fear" Ensign May 2004.
- iv Conversation with Cory Shimatta April 2014
- v "Holland, Jeffrey R. "Like a Broken Vessel." Ensign November 2013.
- vi Brown, Victor L. "A Light on a Hill" Liahona June 1981
- vii Alma 12:14
- viii Job 3: 11, 25
- ix Job 7:6
- x Job 10:1
- xi Matthew 5: 24

DAVID STONE

Writing, for me, is nearly as enjoyable as reading. A good book or story feeds and stretches my imagination. The process of writing isn't always enjoyable, but I write for those short moments when ideas flow and I feel like I am tapped into the positive energy in the world.

I am reasonably new to the writing field. I haven't always considered myself a writer. The first story I felt was really solid included the main character of this story. Guy Simpkin is loosely based on classic detectives like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. It has been an interesting challenge to write with intrigue and suspense. It has also been fun creating a person with real vices and intents. I'm not an alcoholic, so creating a person with a weakness I don't understand, but can sympathize with is challenging. Everyone, fictional or real, has desires and motives. Simpkin has to deal with relationships and a substance. I often wonder how a certain scene will play into the next few scenes. I get wrapped up in worrying if there's too much information, or not enough.

I enjoy the process of writing a scene, wandering through the characters minds and desires. After a scene is written I contemplate whether that scene is really necessary, and what might happen in the story before or after that. Each scene has to be valuable, do something, be worth something. I wrote one scene that didn't make the story. The detective, Simpkin, was drunk and being followed by a man under cover as a woman. He wasn't aware of the disguise until the man stumbled, forcing physical contact with Simpkin. Because of his inebriation, he wasn't really sure if the woman was really a woman. Eventually I felt the scene didn't say what I wanted about Simpkin and his relationships or alcoholism. Sometimes the scenes that are most valuable start out being

really simple and underdeveloped. Thinking about the value of each scene forces me to tease out why I wrote it, and what the main character or other characters really want or need.

Guy Simpkin has always been a multiple story character to me. I don't know if the stories will ever arc together into one big storyline or if they'll just be different adventures pulled from his lifetime of crime fighting, and the struggles he faces in his own personal life. So far there are two stories including him. The stories aren't chronological, so it's great having the freedom to add to his life story. Sometimes when I write a story, I have a specific aim, something I want to write about. Other times I'll see something that will make me laugh, or wonder about humanity and individual character traits, that needs to be written. In this story there are two scenes that I actually saw happen in the last 6 months.

Both of these scenes happened at or near restaurants. I have a pretty strong connection to food and restaurants, and love watching how things develop between customers and workers, and between customers and other customers. As a writer, I have the freedom to write what I want how I want; use language and imagery as I see necessary, it is critical that I address the reality of the world around us, and how we interact with each other. Facts and truths are important even in fiction. What we experience and desire is relevant and recognizable. That's how we determine whether we like a story or think it is garbage. If readers can't relate to the message of a story, they'll pass it by looking for something that they connect with. Truth can be love, hate, humor, music, tragedy, all of which are real world experiences.

JUST GOT BURNED

The match struck three times before igniting. A bright flash filled the room. Fire engulfed the desk and chairs. Fuel lingered on one hand.

The police precinct buzzed with illicit druggies and terrible tempers. The disturbance went unnoticed. Late and dark, businesses were closed; regular people were home, sleeping. The thin shadow moved quickly through the ruckus, dodging cops, trying not to be recognized by the prostitutes in the station.

Hodd, a round balding man, wasn't too popular with the ladies. His thick glasses and physique masked his ability as an officer. Being a street cop was different than paperwork. He was about finished for the day, one more report to go. The front desk sergeant was busy booking two irritable blondes. The phone pierced the din in the office. The desk sergeant ignored it. Hodd slammed his pen onto the desk, "Fine! I'll pick it up!" He seized the black receiver, "Police Dep-" He shouted, "Officer Hodd speaking." Hodd paused, listening to the voice, "There's a what?" He dropped the receiver and grabbed for the jacket on the back of his chair. He pulled open the door. The heat singed the hair on his face. Hodd shielded his eyes from the brightness of the fire and ran down the aisle toward the front door, knocked over a coat tree and tripped, sprawling. A desk stopped his fall, bruising his knees. He cursed under his breath, slammed the desk. He ran and pushed the glass-paned door. Something in the building behind him exploded, propelling Hodd into the street.

The old man crouched, hiding from something, or someone, in the corner of the dark abandoned building. He wasn't shivering but his white frosty breath puffed out of the shadow and into the moonlight. The narrow

brim of his worn and dirty fedora covered his eyes. His short white whiskers poked out of his cheeks and chin intent on providing some insulation.

Guy Simpkin looked from the man to his watch, biting on the unlit cigar.

He pinched the cigar and spat into the snow, "It doesn't look good, especially the week of getting reinstated. Why does public transit have to be so irregular, especially this early in the morning?"

He shrugged; *I get my car back today. I hope it's not wrecked too badly. Things are definitely smoothing out. Out of the filing cabinets of probation and back into the streets. I can't wait to get back to what I know.*

Simpkin stuffed his hands into his deep wool pockets, shivered and shrugged, trying to shake off the chill. He looked down at his feet and stomped the snow making a little circle on the white sidewalk.

Simpkin reached for his breast pocket, *I could sure use a drink. Cut the bite in the air.* The flask wasn't there. Simpkin shook his head, "I don't miss it."

A cough bounced across the icy street. Simpkin looked up the street again. A sedan idled at a stoplight. No sign of the diesel engine. The old man was the only thing moving in the dim, dismal morning. With a slight jerk his face came up, his bright eyes shone out from his dark face. His cheekbones were sharp and his lips were sucked in over his gums. Simpkin froze for a minute, staring. The face seemed familiar. He flashed through all of the mug shots he had recently filed. The face. *What is his name?* He couldn't place him.

He smiled, and Simpkin smiled back. It started to snow. The old man nodded, then his head dropped again, eyes snuffed out in the dark.

JUST GOT BURNED

Two more breaths escaped from under his hat. The breaths stopped. The whir of the diesel driven bus blew down the street toward Simpkin. The frosty chrome door popped open. Simpkin stepped into the bus and dropped his dime in the box. Simpkin plucked the cigar from his mouth and raised it in a loose salute.

“For the last time, good morning Sam.”

The bus driver nodded a confused smile, “Hey, what do you mean for the last time?” Simpkin spoke around the cigar, “Oh, I got reinstated. I’m going to be driving myself to work from here on.”

“You did it huh? You’re sober *and* a real cop again?” Sam scratched his forehead.

Simpkin chuckled, “Yeah, so you better keep on the right side of things Sam.”

Simpkin sat down, thinking about the old man. He looked back through the moving window. Where was he? The shadow was black, darker. Did he leave? The bus turned at the corner, headed downtown to the police department. He looked again and saw a shape fall out of the shadow, onto the sidewalk.

“The old man.” He yelled at the driver, “Hey Sam! Hold up! Sam, stop the bus!”

Sam was confused, “What are you saying Simpkin?”

They were already at the end of the next block. Simpkin ran to the front of the bus.

“Just stop, lemme’ off! Wait for me, I saw something...” Sam opened the door while the bus was still moving.

Simpkin jumped off and ran back to the corner. Out of breath he

slid to a stop on the sidewalk. He blinked. The sidewalk was clear. Just slush and snow covered the concrete. He sprinted to the shadowy doorway at the middle of the block. The old man was gone. The snow at Simpkin's feet was white and grey, and red. He spun around searching for movement. He was still the only person awake and out on this cold morning. He jogged back to the bus. Sitting in silence, he puzzled over how he knew those eyes.

When he arrived at the precinct, a lone red emergency light flashed on a hastily parked fire truck. Long wet canvas hoses stretched shiny puddles across the black surface of the street. Simpkin moved across the street toward the broiling rumble of voices behind the truck. The charred skeletal frame of the crow-stepped gable roof steamed. He searched the crowd for a familiar face. He noticed a fellow rookie and changed course.

“Hey Hodd!” Bruce Hodd started in the other direction and didn't turn around. “Hey Bruce!” Simpkin grabbed his arm and turned Hodd around.

“What? Oh, hey Simpkin, did you hear what happened? I mean did you see what happened?”

Hodd's eyes shifted from Simpkin to what would have been the precinct door.

“What do you mean Hodd? I just barely got here. What's going on? Do they know what happened?”

Hodd's right hand fumbled around in his jacket pocket.

“What do you have there Hodd?”

Hodd stared at the smoking roof.

Simpkin slugged him in the arm, then noticed Hodd's torn shirt.

JUST GOT BURNED

“Hey Hodd, are you okay?” Simpkin nodded at the hand still in his pocket.

“What? Oh. I cut my hand at a crime scene.” He nodded at the precinct, and then pulled his hand out of his pocket revealing a torn piece of shirt wrapped around his knuckles.

“Boy that looks awful, you ought to get that looked at, you don’t want it infected.”

Hodd winced, “Yeah, I’ll have the doc look at it today, its real bad.”

Simpkin noticed sweat forming on Hodd’s forehead, “Hey maybe you ought to go to the hospital right now, you don’t look so good.”

Hodd nodded.

“Simpkin! Over here!” The police captain waved him over.

Simpkin started toward the captain, “Really Hodd, get that checked out! Yeah Captain, what do you need?”

“I need you on this case. You’re out of the office now. You think you can handle that?”

Simpkin smiled and folded his arms, “Yes sir. What do you know?”

“Remember the fire at Fat Tony’s Black and Tan Club last week?”

“You think they’re related? How? What for?”

“Davis has gone missing. He was looking into that fire. He might have found something, but I haven’t heard from him in two days. You know how it is, chasing leads and losing time. I want you to see what you can dig up. You probably know, Fat Tony’s biggest moneymaker is Monks Inn, go see what you can find out.”

Simpkin took one last look at the charred building and left.

Captain yelled out, “Hodd, where’s Hodd! Get over here Hodd!”

The sun was high in the sky when Simpkin tried the front door to Monk's Inn. The parking lot was empty, but there were lights on in the dining room and a window washer was nearly finished with the big picture windows.

Simpkin walked over to the window washer, saluting with his cigar, "Hey pal, is there someone in the restaurant?"

The window washer half turned and shrugged. Simpkin stood confused for a second, then walked around the window washer with his bucket of apathy to the far side of the restaurant. He jumped and slipped through the knee-high snow between the building and the hedge, attempting to keep his socks dry. At the end of the building he found a delivery van full of produce. He picked up a box of almost red tomatoes, hoping to be inconspicuous. He looked down at the crate in front of him. He had pulled off the lid to a case that held tall glass bottles. Simpkin picked up a bottle. *No label.* He closed his eyes and held the bottle to his chest, sighed deeply, then put the bottle back in the case. "Huh, they're bootlegging."

He left the case of tomatoes and went for a box of parsley. He walked through the service door acting invisible. Cooks moved about mechanically, chopping, scraping and stirring through steam and smoke. A man in a long white apron and chef coat was busy bickering with the produce vendor. Out of the corner of his eye, the chef saw Simpkin walking through his kitchen. *So much for blending in.* Simpkin dropped the parsley on a table and rushed toward the red-carpeted dining room.

"Hey, you!" The chef pointed with his knife.

Simpkin stopped and turned to face the chef.

JUST GOT BURNED

“What are you doing in my kitchen?” The chef dropped the knife to his side.

“I’m looking for Mary Dawes, Fat Tony’s girl.” Simpkin held his breath.

“Dumb jitterbugs. That girl is in there.” The chef pointed with his large knife. Simpkin called over his shoulder, “Thanks!”

She was sitting at a table, her back to him bare shoulders exposed. Simpkin stopped and cleared his throat, “Excuse me...I know you’re probably not too happy with...”

Light wisps of cigarette smoke floated above the table in front of the dark haired woman. Recognizing the voice, she turned around and glared at Simpkin.

Simpkin took off his fedora and sat at her table. “Hello Mary. How are you?”

She pulled at the fingers of her elbow length evening gloves, avoiding his glaring eyes.

“I’m looking for a guy called Davis.”

The woman crossed her legs and sat back, holding the cigarette away from her body.

“What’s this, Guy? Months go by, you don’t call or look in? And you get straight to the questions? Don’t you miss me? What gives?”

Simpkin traced the elegant curve of her arm from wrist to elbow, to neck, “Mary, I know things got pretty sticky with us but I can’t swim in that muck any-”

“Swim in that muck? My muck? Why, because I used to live on the street? Because I used to work as a call girl? Because I live under the same

roof as Fat Tony? You just want to get him back for playing you.” Mary rested the cigarette in the ashtray and crossed her arms.

Simpkin clenched his teeth, his eyes narrowed, “I’d like to get back at Fat Tony. I’d like to get back at you too, but I’m trying to take the high road! I cared about you! I wanted you to get away from that crazy menace! Remember? I know I went off the deep end, but you just up and left.”

Tears started to patter on Mary’s blouse.

Simpkin hesitated, “You were important to me, you were.”

Mary smiled.

“But you shredded my nice shirts, and my cigars. I FOUND MY CIGARS IN THE TOILET!”

They sat in silence for several minutes.

“Look Mary, you don’t owe me anything. I dropped outta your life pretty quick. You hit me below the belt, but I can forget about that. I got a case I need to figure out. I just need to know if-”

“Can I at least buy you a drink?” She bit her bottom lip. “You always give in, Guy, I know how I make you feel.”

“Look, I don’t need a drink! You don’t know anything about me. I’m just looking for a man called...” He thought for a second, and shot a look at the bartender, “Make it a Gibson.”

The bartender nodded.

Mary uncrossed her slender legs, slowly crossed them again in the other direction, watching Simpkin’s eyes, “I don’t know any Davis. What’d he do?”

Simpkin leaned forward in his chair, elbows on the table. “He didn’t do anything. He’s gone missing. I can’t go into details.” Simpkin paused, hesitant to reveal too much. “Fat Tony ever let you sing?”

JUST GOT BURNED

Mary pouted and crossed her arms, “I’m sorry, I can’t go into details.”

Simpkin watched her face, “What do you know about the fires?”

“What fires?” Mary’s face was blank.

“You’ve heard about the fires around the valley. All labeled arson. The first two were vacant buildings that happened to be owned by your Fat Tony. The third happened late last night or early this morning, at the precinct, my office.”

Mary’s eyes flitted up at the mention of the police station. The bartender brought the drink to the table. Simpkin nodded, “Thanks pal.” He held the glass in his hand, and then brought it up to his nose and closed his eyes.

Mary tugged at her gloves, “I don’t know anything about those. I’m always up late with friends. That’s all I worry about. Where to go and who I’m with.”

Simpkin set the glass, untasted on the table. “You’re not at all worried about Fat Tony? He doesn’t owe you anything. He pulled you out of the street, gave you a place to stay. You’re a real Orphan Annie, but your Daddy Warbucks is crooked. It’s what you owe him that has me worried. Fat Tony loves his plans more than you don’t you see it? If he’s not making money, he fixes things so he does. No matter who’s in his way.”

Mary stared at the glass on the table.

“I better go. I have another place I need to check out. Thanks for the drink.”

Simpkin stood up, plucked an onion from the drink and popped it in his mouth. He picked up his hat and started to walk. Mary stopped him with a soft hand on his. He held her hand, then dropped it.

DAVID STONE

“Now Mary, I’m leaving, and not with you. I’ll be back tonight. Keep your eyes open. If you remember anything, let me know.”

Simpkin took two steps, put on his hat and walked out the front door.

At a payphone a block away Simpkin rang for the operator, “Number please.”

Simpkin recalled the number, “South 1146.”

The stiff operator responded, “Connecting, thank you.”

There was a click and silence, “Daily Herald, how may I direct your call?”

Simpkin scanned the intersection in front of him, “Frank Menlo please.”

Another click, then static and something muffled and masculine, “Hello, who’s this?” “Hey Menlo it’s me, Simpkin. You busy?”

Menlo sighed, exasperated, “You get reinstated, and you think I’m your guy again? Some things have changed in the six months you’ve been driving that desk.”

“Well, I know you mention-...”

Menlo cut him off, “What do you want Simpkin?”

“Right, I’ll cut to it. I just hit something funny over at this dinner club. I got a missing cop, and this girl tells me she doesn’t know who he is, but get this...”

“Don’t tell me, your first case back is connected to Fat Tony. Didn’t you learn anything during your rehabilitation?”

Simpkin winced.

JUST GOT BURNED

Recognizing the silence Menlo started, “Okay Simpkin, I can’t get into this. Back up, don’t get mixed up with these guys, especially since you’re basically starting over. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone, not with these guys. They’ll mess you up, and then they’ll kill you. I can’t tell you anything.”

Simpkin jumped in, “Just tell me where they keep office. That’s all I want. Let me deal with these guys. I just need to know where to watch for Davis.” There was a short silence on the other end of the line. “Okay, meet me at American Burger in an hour.”

The line went dead.

Simpkin thought, “One hour, that’s noon. Good time for lunch.”

Simpkin arrived at the popular restaurant a quarter of an hour early. He scanned the small dining area from his corner booth. An old lady next to him had curlers in her hair that bounced around as she looked from the waitress to the food in front of her.

“This isn’t what I ordered.”

The waitress stood there, confused, and then realized, “I’m sorry ma’am, it looks like that new waitress switched plates with me. Again. I’ll be right back.”

The waitress took the plate back to the kitchen.

“Do I get my food? I don’t have to pay again do I?” The curlers looked ready to jump from her hair.

Simpkin smiled when the senile old lady looked to him for answers, “Why did they give someone else my food? I don’t have enough money to buy the food again.”

Simpkin replied in a soothing voice, “Ma’am, I’m sure they’ll have your order out and right in no time.”

The old lady pulled her thin housecoat close around her. “I don’t have to pay again do I?”

Every minute, Simpkin looked at his wristwatch. “Now it is 12:15, come on Menlo, you’re late.”

He looked up from his coffee cup. Menlo hurried in, scanned the room and rushed over.

Simpkin raised the cigar, “What’s wrong Menlo, you’re late and...”

“Can the beef Simpkin, you don’t know what you’re doing. I tried to get you to back off. I’m late because I hoped you’d give up, call it quits. But now, now you have to cooperate, take the deal.”

“Deal? What deal Menlo? You don’t work for them do you?”

Menlo leaned in, “There was a fire at the police precinct early this morning right?”

Simpkin plugged the cigar into his mouth, puzzled, “Yeah, what do you know?”

Menlo pulled a small wrinkled up paper bag from his coat pocket, “This was found at the scene, if you understand me. It has Bruce Hodd’s fingerprints in blood on it. You need to document it as evidence in the investigation.”

“Wait, you’re saying this isn’t really...Bruce didn’t...”

“Come on Simpkin you’re smarter than that. You’re the one who started digging. You got close to something they really don’t want you looking into. They know you talked to Fat Tony’s daughter. Don’t mess with this family. Do this, and they’ll forget about it.”

JUST GOT BURNED

Simpkin sat dumbfounded. “And what if I don’t...”

Menlo barked, “Don’t ask.”

Simpkin flinched in his seat, “What’s your cut in this?”

Menlo whispered, “Just do it.”

The corners of Menlo’s mouth drooped, “Digging, same as you, as this right now. But it got sweeter. Financially I mean. I still can’t believe I’m here, doing this. But I’m still alive. My family is still alive. Look, maybe you’ll figure out how to trip them up, or maybe you’ll end up a dirty cop, or dead. Look on the bright side. Maybe you won’t be dead. But get ready. Someone you love will be. That’s usually how it goes. I told you what I know, I gotta get back to work.”

Simpkin sat with the paper bag on the table in front of him. He pulled the corners of the bag open and peeked in. “A lighter. Of course.” His chin dropped to his chest and he sighed, “What a mess. And on the first day to boot.” Simpkin stood up and scooped the package off the table and slid it into his pocket. Maybe Menlo wants me to find where Fat Tony is. I have a lighter just like this one for my cigars it’s a Zippo. There’s only one store that sells these locally, Blaisdell’s.

“Davis is supposed to be dead in the river, now they’re breathing down my neck. How’d they find out?”

Fat Tony growled from behind his executive size desk. Cigar smoke curled out of his thick red lips into the long room. He clamped the cigar between his teeth, stood up slowly and hitched his belt up and over his rotund waist. His black satin shirt was flecked with cigar ash and mustard, remnants of his lunch of brats and beer. As he adjusted his slacks his .38 special peeked out from under his jacket.

He slogged over to Mary and questioned her honesty, “Did you get too comfortable? What did you tell him?”

Mary’s face went pale, “I didn’t think he was a cop, he seemed like just an old guy I’d seen drunk so many times at the bar. I didn’t know I swear Tony, I swear. I’m just a girl. I can’t help what I see.”

Fat Tony reached for his .38. Mary saw it coming and moved quickly, slamming a chair into Fat Tony’s legs. Fat Tony shot at Mary and hit the light hanging over the desk. Mary reached for the doorknob and pulled. At the same time the door crashed open gashing Mary across her forehead. Fat Tony aimed and fired again catching Mary in the chest. Mary stumbled backward, and fell, flat on her back. Fat Tony aimed one more time, dotting the exclamation mark on Mary’s face.

McKeen stepped over Mary, “What’s with all the yellin’ and shoo-tin’ boss? Oh jeez, boss. Oh jeez. Boss you shot Mary.”

“Shut up McKeen, just get rid of her.”

McKeen took off his jacket, shook his head and rolled up his sleeves. His long legs folded on themselves as he crouched down to roll up the rug and Mary. He looked like a spider wrapping its prey. He dragged the rug out into the hall and into another room and came back with another rug roughly the same size. Someone banged on the outside door down-stairs. McKeen straightened.

Fat Tony froze mid-puff on his cigar, “Get that rug square, and get down there. Keep whoever it is outside.”

Thirty seconds later Carey entered the room, followed closely by a police issue Colt Revolver, and the detective who carried it.

“Take a seat slim.” Simpkin pushed McKeen into a chair away from the desk. “Keep still or you’ll get yours.”

JUST GOT BURNED

McKeen bounced out of the chair, “The name’s McKeen you lousy drunk cop.”

Simpkin smashed the butt of his pistol right above McKeen’s ear, leaving a pile of lanky arms and legs.

“Alright Fat Tony, tell me where he is! Where’s Davis?” Simpkin’s nostrils flared, trying to get more oxygen than thick cigar smoke.

“I don’t know! He didn’t tell me where he was going! You’re acting like we were in on this together! He gave me the slip too you know! I want him dead too!” Fat Tony wheezed. His thick gold ringed fingers smoothed back the greasy black hair that was in his eyes.

Simpkin chuckled, “I don’t want him dead. He hasn’t done anything to me.”

Fat Tony scoffed, “He wasn’t moving in on your territory? He wasn’t after your girl?”

Simpkin’s forehead wrinkled, “My girl? You mean Mary? I was done with her when I quit drinking. Davis was a cop investigating a fire, but you know that don’t you?”

Simpkin pinched his cigar in his fingers and pushed his thumb into his forehead. “I just want you to go away. You need to move on, leave these people alone. Everyone you bring in, to do your work...I’m lucky to have gotten out. I see you for what you really are, and you’re going to pay.”

Fat Tony wriggled in his chair as Simpkin paced around his desk. Simpkin picked up a bottle. “No label Tony?” He pulled the cork out and sniffed. “Smells like high-class hooch Tony.” Simpkin took a swallow. He smacked his lips, leaned dow, pressed his revolver into Fat Tony’s plump

side and whispered, “You’re going to tell me where he is, and you’re going to take me there.” Simpkin’s jaw tightened, “Do. You. Understand. Me?”

Fat Tony turned, now face to face with Simpkin and spat, “What ever you say Flat Foot.”

Simpkin took his handkerchief out of his lapel pocket and wiped his face. “You always were a gentleman Fat Tony.”

Simpkin noticed the corner of a thick manila envelope sticking out behind a painting next to Fat Tony’s desk. Simpkin reached up and pulled on it, knocking the picture to the ground. Glass shattered and Fat Tony cursed. Simpkin undid the clasp and pried it open at an angle so light would shine into the opening. Simpkin laughed and dumped the contents onto the desk in front of Fat Tony. “Looks like we found a place to start looking Fat Tony. This seems to be a list of addresses in New York City, and a ring of keys. I take it you either own these properties, or have some interest in them. What are you doing with these properties Fat Tony?”

Fat Tony blushed, “Investing.”

“By the looks of the red sauce dripped on your shirt I bet this one here is one of your favorites. Why’s Monks Inn at the top of this list?”

Simpkin pulled into the packed parking lot of Monk’s Inn. The marquee flooded the lot with moon white light. In bold black letters were the names Sydney Bechet and Louis Armstrong Tonight! He pulled the sedan to a stop at the valet stand and quickly jumped out. He raced around to the passenger side and opened the door for Fat Tony. He stepped out, ran a fat hand over his greasy black hair and winked at the valet.

JUST GOT BURNED

Simpkin, nervous about his bluff, leaned into Fat Tony, “Now don’t forget. I’ve got half a dozen guns in here. They’re dressed like average guests. You won’t see them until you do something stupid. Then it’ll be too late for you. And try me, I’d like an excuse to get even.”

Fat Tony coughed, “Don’t worry pal, this night’s already out of control. I don’t care to mess it up any more than I have to.”

They walked through the bright chandelier lit lobby, across the gold and crimson carpet and right past the maître ’d. Simpkin found himself sitting at a Fat Tony’s regular table. Within seconds a waiter presented a large bottle of champagne. Fat Tony raised his hand to wave it away, then stopped, signaling for it to be opened.

“Surely you won’t slight me the opportunity to be hospitable in my own house?”

Simpkin froze. The sharp fragrance circled the table, “You can pour it, but I won’t drink it.”

“Well then, what will you have? We’ll have to wait until intermission to talk to my guy, he’ll be busy with entrees until then.”

Simpkin glared at Fat Tony, “Water.”

Fat Tony signaled to his waiter, “Water for my friend here.” The waiter nodded.

The lights dimmed, the red velvet curtain parted and the crowd applauded as music filled the hall. Simpkin sipped his water, and the room went dark.

Simpkin woke up in darkness. He couldn’t move his hands or feet. His tongue tasted clear. No whiskey, no gin, no cigar. He tried to talk.

What did I drink? He blinked trying to clear his vision. He strained to see some light, anything. *They must have put a sack on my head too.* He heard voices, and then felt a car door slam. The trunk lid opened and cold air washed over him. Exhaust fumes snaked around his head. Simpkin started to panic. His eyes darted in the blackness, looking for a way out. Strong hands picked him up by his feet. Another hand grabbed his elbow. He felt weightless, floating out of the car. The exhaust dissipated and crisp sea air filled his nose. Simpkin was dropped to the ground. He tried to act dead, or at least pass for knocked out. The black sack was pulled from his head. The footsteps got fainter until all he could hear was the ocean.

It was still dark. Simpkin could see a single flashlight beam wave and bob near a small rowboat at the edge of the water. He felt something soft next to him, dark hair, soft skin, and a bullet hole. Simpkin whimpered, “Mother.” His eyes filled with tears. She wasn’t his mother. *Mary, what have you done? What have they done?* Simpkin sobbed, feeling like the five year old Simpkin, hiding under his mother’s bed, hearing the screaming, shaking, hiding from the man with the gun.

Simpkin took a breath, blinked his eyes, and took in his surroundings, looking for his escape. They were just outside a small boathouse. His feet were bound with a couple of loops of rope. He looked over at Mary’s feet. They were in a bucket with something solid and gray covering them. *Cement? That’s Fat Tony’s way of getting rid of rivals and cops.*

Somewhere out of sight, Fat Tony barked out a few more inaudible commands, “Get some water, we’ve got another bucket of shoes to mix.”

Simpkin started to struggle. *I wanted you to bring me here Fat Tony, but not like this.* He shifted and bumped, trying to get loose. A lump

formed in his throat, his eyes and nose started to sting. “Come on Simpkin, keep cool.” He knew they’d really be in trouble if they were both wearing cement shoes.

There was a crash inside the boathouse. A door opened and the bound Simpkin went limp. Feet shuffled, kicking sand in Simpkins face. Someone stepped on Simpkin’s leg. Simpkin grunted but went unnoticed. Everyone was focused on getting the awkward bundle to the small row-boat. The grunting, cursing men finally got far enough away from the boathouse. Simpkin looked around and saw a broken windowpane leaning on the side of the boathouse. He rolled to it, grasping for a loose piece of glass.

“Hey Simpkin.” *He must not have heard me.* “Hey Simpkin!”

“Hodd, is that you?” Simpkin twisted around, his hands still pinned to his back. “Help me get out of this mess. How’d you find me?”

“I’ve been watching you all day, you’re pretty reckless. You better learn how to watch your tail or you’ll find yourself in one more situation like this, and then, you won’t be so lucky.”

“They must have all gone to see Mary off. I had plenty of time to cut the cords and get away.” Simpkin rubbed his red wrists.

The captain shook his head, “It’s a good thing you got away. You would have been next, but I have to know one thing though.”

Simpkin nodded, “Yeah what?”

The captain paused, “I thought Mary was Fat Tony’s daughter.

Why would she torch the precinct? And where the hell is Davis?”

Simpkin pulled a lit cigar from his lips, “Davis, I don’t know

about. He could be in the water too, you'll have to look into that one.” Simpkin puffed a ring of smoke at the hanging light. “Mary though, that’s easy enough. I learned real quick how jealous and needy she gets. She didn’t grow up with money. Fat Tony did her a favor, and she never said anything. I could see her doing something crazy with all those fellas hanging on her. She’d really fallen for me, and when I broke away, she lost it. She must have thought I was in the building that night. She’s seen from the inside, from Fat Tony, what to do and how to get away with it. Add to that, she was wearing gloves. She never wears gloves, she’s not that proper. My guess is she needed something stable. Mary was too needy. Jealous. She just got burned.”

MATTHEW WERNER

The best and most memorable stories were always told around the pine table at the cabin in Maine. That table was the place where I learned that storytelling is important. When the adults got loose, so would their lips and stories would take shape.

“That’s not the way I remember it,” one might say, revealing a truth. The longer the adults stayed up the more they drank, and the more they drank the more revealing the stories became. Stories were told that made fists slam the table with laughter. I paid most attention to, and find myself most intrigued by stories of masculinity, man’s triumph over the harshness of the wilderness, or bad relationships. Stories of hunting and survival, or fistfights. Stories that my mother says I had “big ears” for their stories. I’d stay up past bedtime, pretending to be asleep in the bunk beds and I’d hear things my parents wish I hadn’t because they’d give me “bad ideas.” This may be true, but it seems those “bad ideas” encourage adventure, and the ability to make stories and memories worth telling and remembering.

I’ve noticed each summer and winter when I return home to visit and drive up to the cabin in Maine that I find myself at the table, and have created enough of my own experiences in the west that I too can share my stories with my family, instead of having big ears for them.

I’ve found that if you want people to listen to your stories you have to sit them down at the table. There are times in my life that stories are swapped, whether it’s around a campfire or a table. Here’s my chance to tell them on paper.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

One

Big Time In the Nevada Desert

“Turn that down. You hear that?” I yelled to Max, bobbing his head to the music.

“Hear what?” he said, looking at me with his brows pointed inward.

“That crash.”

I looked down at the rev counter on the dash of my truck, and when I saw that the needle was redlining, foot immediately left the gas.

“Damn. I think I just dropped my transmission,” I said without believing it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the truck won’t shift out of second gear. How much farther to camp?”

Max looked down at the map, and looked for a mile marker on the road.

“I don’t know.”

“It looks like we only made it about five miles from Wells,” I said gazing through heat spirals rising from road tar at the mirage view of the town’s gas station.

“Roughly forty miles,” he said after glancing at the map.

Even though he was a couple thousand miles away, my father was the first person I called. My father, Adam is a mechanic, and the only one I trust. He warned me that I was running my truck into the ground since I left Massachusetts with it. This scenario is something my father would never have to endure. He’s too smart and too calculated have something

happen like this. If it were in his control, the transmission wouldn't have gone in the first place. I strive to be as smart as my father, but I do not wish to be as careful, planned and preventative as him. I plan things enough, but leave room for adventure. This is where my father and I differ. Its good to be smart, but cautious? He even reminded me right before the trip that despite us working on it, the transmission was not shifting correctly. The issue was bound to happen, but couldn't have been at a worse time. We've spent countless hours together, he taught me his craft and getting myself into this situation made me feel as if I learned nothing.

I pulled off into some sparsely settled sagebrush alongside the foothills of the Ruby Mountains to check if the truck was losing fluid. Everything looked tip-top, but I knew that didn't matter because it was clear something was seriously wrong internally. I tried unhooking the battery, as my father said; in some hope that it was a computer malfunction rather than a mechanical one.

"We can't make it, I'll end up blowing the engine too," I explained to Max. I remembered when we were driving around in Wells looking for a liquor store only a half hour before, and saw a small auto repair shop a few buildings down.

In first gear I turned the truck south, and back into town at a limping pace.

"God...hopefully he sees us," said Max.

"Who sees us?"

"That rig barreling down the hill behind—pull over some more, he's hauling!"

In an instant the truck was right on us, and it passed so close that the noise,

commotion and force of the passing semi violently shook the cab of my crawling truck.

The owner of the shop kindly let me keep the truck in one of his bays, but unkindly charged me seventy-five dollars to plug his computer into my truck and look at the screen for a few moments, and tell me he couldn't solve the issue.

Max's father Jeff and uncle Chuck picked us up about an hour after reaching the shop and brought us to where they had set up camp. Max had told me before that his uncles like to camp comfortably. I was not prepared for the excess of that comfort. Pulling in to their camp was like arriving at a compound set up by a survivalist colony after the third world war. There were tents and canopies in every direction. Most impressive though, was the temporary kitchen and attached bath they had set up. The kitchen had a stove, grill, tubs filled with snack food, and coolers filled with rib-eye steaks, stews, chilies, or anything else one could possibly imagine out of what seemed to me like a newly established Ruby Mountain Grill. My camping is limited by whatever you can carry in on your back and a tent, a poor man's way of escaping. Their spot was heaven by camping standards. In awe of the compound I forgot to introduce myself to Max's two other uncles, Chet and Jon. Jon was the man I'd be fishing against. Weeks before, Max warned me of his seasoned spin-fisherman uncle's competitiveness. There is always sub-surface competition when you fish with another angler. It's hard to say as a fisherman that you're not competitive when fishing even with a friend. Of course you want other anglers who are friends to get into fish, but there exists in any fisherman that remarkably obvious feeling when fish suddenly come easy as the river praises

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

each of your casts, and your partner only fifteen feet down river is getting tangled, missing strikes as the river mocks each of theirs. I'd never been in a competition in this unofficial and macho way. I can say it added a new spectacle other than man vs. fish, or man vs. wind, it became man vs. old man, and their very different approaches to the river.

“So you're the fly-fisherman?” Jon asked.

I shook his weathered hand, and nodded.

“Well I'll be up at five tomorrow,” he said.

“I'll be up, I think I'll go check out that spring creek I saw on the way in tonight.” I said.

“Good Luck,” he said with a smirk.

I arrived back at camp that night with no fish to show or tell. I only had a few moments of time fishing the water. I spent the rest gazing at the vastness of the Ruby Mountain Range, and the entirely uninhabited valley of similar size to the overly populated Salt Lake Valley.

“No fish huh?” Jon said, looking up from the fire in a relaxed manner with the back of his head resting in the woven fingers of his hands.

“Not yet.”

After a steak dinner, I set up for bed, and instead of sleeping in one of the many tents, I decided to hunker under the stars of the warm Nevada night. The idea of hooking into a large Lahontan Trout kept me awake longer than I wanted, along with the immensity of the stars.

I awoke in the dark to the grunts and ruffling of Jon rising from the bed of his truck. My watch read the exact time he said he'd be up, and I transferred from my sleeping bag to my waders. He walked over expecting

to have to wake me up, but I was already waiting at the picnic table. “By George, He’s up!” Jon whispered heavily.

On the drive to the spring creek, it became clear that Jon wasn’t as competitive as Max made him out to be. In his late sixties, Jon still works as a foreman for large-scale building projects across Nevada. It seemed the competitiveness was induced by the family pride of his brothers, and them wanting Jon to pull more fish than me. Jon is the oldest of the Giesler brothers, and is certainly the quietest. His silence around the campfire told more about his past than if he was to share his stories. He listened and laughed while his younger brothers told stories around the campfire. I can tell because of his wisdom, and relaxed demeanor that Jon had stories that could one-up his brothers, but he remained silent. It’s possible that Jon isn’t a storyteller at all, but somewhere in there, he has them. His eyes had seen enough. They were tired eyes, and he didn’t feel the need to share or brag about his past probably because he wouldn’t know where to start. People like this who have a story or two behind them but keep quiet, and listen to story-jousts going on around them without ever flipping down their iron mask, are characters that I have the most respect for.

That first morning of fishing started slow. Jon and I rigged up, and fished a slow bend in the creek. Each of us had a strike we both missed. I fished ahead of Jon because I found the fish to be easily spooked, and two shadows spook more than one. Even from twenty feet away from the bank, I’d watch the trout’s darting shadows speed upstream, creating a domino effect with others. Still, I went upstream upwards of thirty feet from the banks and saw a deeper pool ahead. Jon was fishing vacated water behind me. I said nothing. As I approached in a slow crawl, I saw a few of the

largest trout I'd ever seen feeding subsurface. Without spooking them, I urged Jon over slowly. I could have tried to catch one of the monsters to prove myself to Jon, but I wanted another angler to appreciate the beauty of those large trout flashing and rolling as they fed on nymphs. I didn't want to spoil the chance just to watch them feed for a while. As Jon approached he was walking fast in excitement so I whispered, telling him to slow down and get low. He crouched next to me and said, "my god look at those fish."

I tied a few nymphs onto my line and cast them into the pool without luck. I couldn't figure out what they were feeding on. I tried an array of summertime nymphs but none were working. I resorted to my winter box and pulled out a WD-40. First cast with that bug on my line, I hooked into a Lahontan trout. It jumped revealing its size. First I saw a large head and jaw, then the vivid colors of its flank. The fish was maroon, and silver. Soon, Jon and I were a team and our opponent was the powerful fish. Jon pulled the net out of my vest as I carefully fought the fish away from an irrigation channel set by a farmer. It saw Jon, and took off upstream. My reel screamed, and I felt both my rods go limp when the line snapped.

"Shit!" yelled Jon as he looked over at me. "That was the largest fish I've ever seen." He said. Dismay overwhelmed me when I felt the rod bounce out of tension, but that feeling of loss was cut short by the strange urge to laugh, so I did, hysterically. It felt right to laugh after losing the fish of a lifetime. A cruel joke played by an ecological system that I was infiltrating seemed fair, so I laughed. Inside I was devastated, but there remained a satisfaction that I saw the entire fish as it leapt from the water, and I couldn't show any form of weakness to Jon, who seemed more disappointed about the lost fish than I. The laughter came from my chest,

repaired stress and intensity of a fifteen second fight with a fish that refused to be caught.

It was high noon, and the fish tucked themselves into shaded areas of the lagoon as the sun heated the water, morning insect activity slowed down. I'd been fishing since seven that morning, without any luck and was then stuck in the mid summer Nevada sun that the fish were hiding from. I sat down, and began my gazing when the sheen of binocular glass caught my eye. At a distance of maybe three hundred yards, was someone watching me fish was planted on an access road, hugging the foothills of the Ruby Mountains. I became irritated, so I waved in a sarcastic and unfriendly gesture. Shortly after, I hooked and landed my first rainbow trout on a Zonker. I remembered that Max's uncle Chuck wanted to me to keep a trout, so I harvested this one. Normally I kill the fish by flipping them upside-down and whapping the top of their heads on a rock. Since I was fishing a spring creek, there were only soft banks. I resorted to Stinson's tactic, holding the fish and rapping it with my knuckles, but when I hit it I lost grip of the fish and it began floating down river. I pursued but slipped on the slick inner bank and fell in. I probably looked like such an idiot through those binoculars, like I had no idea what I was doing. Frustrated, I gathered the fish and myself and began gutting. I knew there were fish cleaning stations around, where anglers were required to dispose of the innards, but I chose not to use them. I like to clean the fish straight away, so not to spoil them, and the nearest cleaning station was a mile walk in distance. I'd rather give the guts to the ospreys and eagles, than to the mouth of a trashcan.

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Walking back to camp, I saw the rooster tail of dust made by a car on the access road. I followed the dust cloud, until it was fully visible on the road I was traveling on. Soon, the green truck was right on top of me and as it slowed and flanked me, I read the badge decal on the side. *Federal Wildlife Officer*. Immediately I regretted waving off the mysterious stalker as his window rolled down to a thud. He stared at me through the heavily tinted glass of his shades, and I stared back waiting for the mustache he couldn't grow to quiver.

“Was that you up there watching me?” I asked, gesturing with my free arm, to the place where I had seen the glare.

“Yes,” the officer said in a defeating tone.

“Aren't there poachers you are supposed to be chasing around?” He looked at me with challenge in his eyes.

“Catch anything?” he asked, hoping I'd say no.

“Yea, one rainbow.” I said, knowing there's a chance he saw me fall in.

“Can I see it?”

I pulled the fish from my backpack, and dangled it closely to his window.

“I saw you gut it on the banks.”

“I like to gut them str—“

“Don't do that anymore. Are those beers I see in your pack?”

“Want one?”

“Don't let me see any of that again.”

The window rolled back up, and the dust cloud continued on down the road. I was pleased both because he let me go, and also that the confrontation was a short one. What lingered though was being confronted

and challenged in an environment I see myself strongest in. The idea that another man, who happened to have a badge, maintained significant power over me. It's a weakness I had trouble coping with for the rest of the trip. I had to be submissive to another man in my element, because he was an enforcer of the law.

The Wildlife Officer had only me to harass because I was the only one fishing. Throughout the four day trip, I'd I ran into the officer a few times, and he'd ask if I'd kept anymore. I'd developed an unwarranted acquaintanceship with the lawman, and because of this I became more and more comfortable that he wouldn't arrest or fine me, and so I naturally I pushed some boundaries with him. I became less and less intimidated. I did things like poking fun at his growing up in America's shit factory, New Jersey, or telling him that I refuse to use the fish cleaning stations. It was my way of getting back at him slowing down me, and my fishing.

Before Max's uncle Chuck and his father drove us back to Wells, Chuck wanted to fish the lagoon for the large Tiger and Lahontan trout one last time. Soon after, my buddy the federal wildlife officer pulled up to check our licenses. He checked their licenses, and checked mine again. I was becoming accustomed to being stopped while I fished so all that bothered me about the situation was how overly cooperative and cowardly Chuck was toward the lawman, who was at least twenty years younger than he was. Having respect for the law and enforcers of the law is nice enough, but Chuck answered each of the officer's questions with, "yes sir, no sir." Watching a man cower before a boy in a situation as laughable as this one was flinching to watch. The officer then put me in handcuffs, although I knew he had to be playing a joke and Chuck just about had a heart attack.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

I remember a story once told by my Dad around our pine table. It was about my great uncle Joe while he was in the service. He punched out his commanding officer at the card table for calling him a liar. They sent him to the brig. I often wish my family were on these trips with me. I wish I could experience these stories along with their company, so that we could tell them around the table together. I like to imagine if Joe and my father were there, having been heckled by the lawman, that they would have been a part of something more comical, more hard-ass. Maybe that alternative would have made for a better story.

The nearest active tow truck driver for AAA was in Elko, Nevada, about an hour wait on the southwest side of the Ruby Mountain range. Max and I were stranded in Wells, Nevada. Wells has a gas station, liquor store, and brothel. The brothel was closed, the next best option was for Max and me to get a case of beer, sit in the back of my broken down truck, and watch the truck drivers reactions as they approached the entrance to the brothel, only to find out it was closed. At about noon, the yellow AAA truck pulled up. We flagged him in, and he pulled alongside us.

“You boys the ones who called in for a tow to Salt Lake?” he yelled over the diesel engine.

“Yes sir,” I said because he is my elder and is doing me a service.

“Well let’s get her winched up and have you fill out the paper work.”

Max gestured with his eyes and head toward the liquor store. I nodded saying, “It’s a long ride, and we’re not driving.” I would spend three hours in the truck with this driver and still I can’t recall his name,

so it will have to be Jed. Jed looked more like a rancher than a trucker. The Nevada sun carved features of experience into his face. Jed's hair was white and his teeth yellow from smoking his pipe. Its tough guessing the age of a man whose weathered appearance told stories. It seems more appropriate to wager the age of a man like Jed in the number of things he's done rather the number of years he's lived.

By the time my truck was fastened properly to the flatbed, Max was back with a gallon of spiked orange juice.

"Try that," he said.

I took the jug out of his hand, and gave it a swig. The concoction tasted the same I'd imagine as jet fuel. My choice would have been whiskey, but the gallon sized screwdriver seemed a fitting enough beverage for our excursion across the Salt Flats.

"Gotta fill up," said Jed, walking up behind us as I took my first gulp of Max's cocktail.

"Right," I said as we hopped in in the cab and drove over to where the truckers top off.

Before getting on Interstate 80, Max and I had already downed a few. From about this point, until we reached the LDS church parking lot across from my house in Salt Lake, I have only hazed images of white sand and distant mountains, and a select few conversation topics with Jed. My highway-long conversation with Jed began with the discussion of my trip, and undoubtedly a detailed and one-sided account of losing my first and only chance at a Lahontan Trout. Max fell asleep in the back of the cab, so I sipped the gallon by myself, not knowing how to stop. I probably went on and on justifying the loss of that fish and I can imagine

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Jed seeing me as a ratchet jaw---trucker slang for a lonely driver who talks too much over the C.B. radio. I did feel an obligation to entertain Jed. If this situation happened to me back east, if down in the Allagash, the remote northwest corner of Maine, it would have been the truck driver who was drunk and talking too much. When I finally gave him a moment to talk, Jed never made eye contact. He was quiet in the way he told his stories, and there was meaning and truth to every word he spoke. I watched as his eyes strain, with focus on the road, and as he sifted through his memories. He told me stories of catching fish as a child on Pyramid Lake and was willing to share his seasoned spin-fishing tactics. One of these tactics was hard to forget.

“We would spray the lures with WD-40. Made them trout go crazy.”

I’m sure I overreacted in making the connection between the fly and the application of WD-40 lubricant on a lure as I strained my drunken mind in an attempt to illustrate what I saw as a groundbreaking discovery to an unenthused Jed. My understanding before my conversation with Jed was that the fly got its name from being tied with wood duck feathers. It was clear that my impromptu speech on the effectiveness of the WD-40 nymph imitating an array of western insect hatches in the winter months, to the paralleled effectiveness of coating a lure with WD-40 was not entertaining to Jed, so I woke Max to tell of my findings. As he woke, his eyes darted in drunken confusion, until they caught the empty liter of cola rolling around in the empty space between my seat and Jed.

“Son of a bitch, you drank all the OJ!”

Max was bitter about all the booze being gone only halfway through the drive, and I was unjustly irritated that he didn’t care to hear

about my drunken epiphany, so naturally a fistfight broke out inside the cab.

I can remember Jed's calmness. He didn't become upset or even flustered. Without saying a word, he pulled over and let us settle things on the flats. First though, I needed to piss. Max held me up, as I drained the desert wizard, spinning like a coin just before it comes to rest on a table.

The rest of the ride I cannot recollect, except for waking up with my head out the window, as the desert whizzed by. I pulled my head back into the cab, and looked at Jed who was resting his forearms on the steering wheel. "Did I blow lunch?" I asked. He laughed for the first and only time and said, "No, you were leaning out the window smiling like a dog for about an hour, then you just fell asleep with your head out there." Though my sunglasses were smudged and peppered with bugs, probably from the clouds of brine flies we drove through, it was clear that Jed was smiling.

When I woke up later that afternoon, finally sober, I walked outside to unload my broken down truck then noticed the sun was setting behind the Oquirrh Mountains to the west. I imagined somewhere behind those mountains before the sun, the lost Lahontan trout hanging in a current, Jed driving all the way back to Elko, and pieces of my transmission laying on hot pavement in red oil.

Two

Sweet Melissa

When the sun sank behind the canyons of red rock, the fire was lit and the fun began. After a few drinks and some laughter, I heard the sound of a four-wheeler. I hadn't ridden one for a while, and the ringing of the four-stroke engine brought memories of barreling through the mountains near my cabin in Maine. I rose from the log I had planted myself on for an hour and a half, and searched for the machines headlights. The rider of the recreational vehicle pulled up only a few yards from the campsite. The lights of the machine corrupted my vision of the rider. For an instant I froze, thinking the machines operator was a lawman. With my eyes still adjusting, I couldn't quite make out the individual's face.

"Can I take it for a spin?" I asked.

"Yea but not by yourself."

She scooted to the rear part of the seat and I assumed the driving position. It rattled and over-revved as I sped around the washes and dunes of the Utah desert.

Over the noisy engine I heard her yell, "Rides over!" I made headway for the glow of the campfire. The other motoring enthusiasts in my group Dan and James were waiting in hopes of a ride.

"Can I have a beer?" The stranger asked.

Being a drunken gentleman I replied, "Sure. Come on over." The closer she walked, the more her face illuminated under a campfire light. The first thing I noticed was her teeth. Some were blunt and others were sharp where they shouldn't be. I curled my lips around my own, hugging them both an action of cringe and resentment of the idea that she had

ground them together. I then got the sensation of having soft, worn teeth with sensitive roots, and shuddered. Her hair was thin and patchy, and her face riddled with deep pockmarks and blackheads like braille. My overwhelmed and automatic response could only be, “and what’s your name?”

“Melissa,” she said with a crack in her voice.

Melissa had the gruesome features of a meth addict. I thought right away to not judge her appearance by who she may be, because the scars on her face indicated a timeframe of healing.

“What are you doing way out here?” I asked.

“This is what I do now.” Her voice sounded empty and slurred.

“They sent me to Bicknell to get me out of Salt Lake—away from people that were hurting me.”

By now she had finished her first drink, and was reaching past my hip for another. I hadn’t touched mine—I wasn’t merry enough around a person like her. I was stunned by her first comments, and so was my friend Dani, because she slipped away upon hearing what meth head Melissa had said, and began petting her Golden Retriever as both a way of comforting herself, and finding a way to excuse herself from the conversation.

“That’s a big change, from the big valley of Salt Lake, to this small town. How many people are in Bicknell?” I asked.

“Not many. People that aren’t like my brother and ex-fiancé—they had issues.” By this time, Dan and James had gotten back from their ride, and I turned to watch their arrival, and gain a few more seconds to think of a response to the negative nature of the conversation I wish hadn’t started. “Sounds like Salt Lake isn’t the place for you, it’s great that you moved here—you know—away from it all.”

“I didn’t want to leave from ‘*it all*,’ she said in a challenging manner, as if to quote my rudeness. “I was picked up and driven down here, and guess what? My fiancé followed me down here so I haven’t escaped from ‘*it all*’ it all followed me.” Her tone put me on edge and I thought in frustration:

“Well I wish you weren’t here ‘at all,’ and the fact that you, an angry sand dweller is mocking my trying to be polite makes me want to take that beer back, though I wouldn’t drink it, nor give it to the dogs, it should be wasted to the sands of the desert, same as you.”

Dan and James arrived, and only Dan noticed the tension, though I think he noticed her features first. I took my first sip of beer and glanced at Dan, the ultimate conversationalist—who was silent. James walked by without a comment, his eyes fixed on the beverages behind me. “Ok Melissa, thanks for the rides, I’m about douse this fire—we’ve got a long drive in the morning.”

“I just opened this one.” This was her third beer in the five minutes I had been standing with her, having a conversation I wished wasn’t happening. She was bingeing harder than us, and not in the cheerful way, that we were. We were celebrating an adventure, she was squandering that, but surely was becoming a part of it.

“Alright well, I have to finish mine too, but after that—

“I get it I’m leaving.” Melissa interrupted me, and took one large gulp then threw the rest of the beer on the ground.

“Yes that sounds good.” I said in anger of her sudden change in mood, and the waste of a perfectly good IPA.

“Is she gone?” Mumbled Dani from the safety of her tent. I listened for Melissa’s departure, and heard the machine take off, but stop somewhere in the distance and turn off.

“Yea, just heard her take off, goodnight Dani.”

The night was warm, so I thought to sleep in the bed of my truck with Remington and Brule’ both Labradors; one chocolate and the other black. I couldn’t get come to terms with the experience I just had with of Melissa, I repeated the conversations with her in my mind, debating whether or not I handled myself correctly in a situation I had never encountered. Coming from a small town in Massachusetts, I can say I was sheltered from hard drugs and the species of people those drugs create.

I was happy that the experience was over, but also that the experience happened at all. What a crazy story I could tell. A story that has built my past. Looking up at the stars I began to slip away from consciousness, synchronizing my breathing with that of the two sleeping dogs, until my view of the stars was obstructed by the face of Melissa attempting to crawl over the side of my truck and hop into my sleeping bag. Standing up, I yelled “You’ve got to go—what are you trying to do?”

“I’m making your bed for you,” she said in a crazed, delusional voice.

“Matt, tell your friend to leave! shouted Dan from his tent. The dogs awoke to raised voices and began barking into the sky.

“I’m not the only one who went for a four-wheeler ride for Christ-sakes!” I yelled back. I turned to Melissa whose eyes appeared empty, like someone shut off her pupils. Scared of the dogs, and staring at me with a blank, and drained expression she said, “I’m leaving.” This time, I walked over to the four-wheeler with her and demanded she leave immediately.

She took off yet again, but stopped and killed the engine of her machine only a few hundred yards from camp. I hoped she would leave, but couldn't make her leave the whole ten-acre campsite. She was after all a local, more familiar and more native than I to the area, so what was I to do? I hopped over the side of my truck and into the bed and tried to sleep again, this time less comfortable than the last. I could hear her crying, but tried to forget she was around. Then I heard Dan yell again from his tent, "get that crazy bitch out of here!"

"If you want her out of here so bad get out of the tent and help me." The tension of our argument put the dogs on edge again. I grabbed my flashlight. Dan crawled out of his tent, and grabbed his light as well.

"Okay, where is she," he asked.

I could hear the horrible sounds of her crying and now vomiting, but I could not find her in the maze of small red-rock formations. I began calling her name, which felt odd I because I was calling for someone I didn't care to find. She had gone from a somewhat coherent, yet problematic odd person to meet in the middle of the desert, to a complete psycho in a time frame of a half-hour. I located the ATV with her shoes placed neatly next to the front tire. Not being able to find her I became frustrated and started her four-wheeler up, revving it, in hopes that she would think someone was stealing it.

"Get away from my wheeler!" The voice sounded awful, like she was gargling, and she emerged from some of the larger sagebrush behind her machine. "Ah, there you are. Get the hell out of here," yelled Dan, shining the flashlight in her face, around her cracked lips was covered in a thin film of vomit, "You gotta leave." I then shone the light on her feet,

which were bleeding heavily with cacti stuck on every square inch of them.

She didn't say a word to me until she got back on her machine and stated in a scratchy voice, "I called my fiancé and told him what you did to me."

"Did what to you Melissa? What did I do?" I had lost my temper, and felt threatened for things I hadn't done.

"He's coming out here with a gun." My heart sank, and I put together that her fiancé is the one who followed down to Bicknell, and probably brought the drugs she was on. How else could she be acting this way? How else could she have gotten heavy drugs in a small Mormon agricultural town?

Dan and I brought the news to the rest of the group. Everyone seemed in favor of leaving that part of the desert. Though I didn't say or show it I felt defeated. I let a crazed tweaker, manipulate me to the point that I had to leave a beautiful area. Driving through the desert night, I thought about Melissa. I thought about her sanity, and how it changed so quickly. She had shown me how crazy people can be. An uncle who I respect greatly told me before my drive out west to trust no one. I learned the hard way, and was toppled that my instincts couldn't for see the events that happened that night. This was not an experience I wished to endure while exploring the desert. A woman had frightened me. That was all I could think of as I drove while others slept, to a distant plateau. It stunned me then, but I find now that it was not her I feared---it was her addiction's unpredictability. It would have been appropriate to face natural dilemmas like running out of water, or being bit by a snake, I was instead faced with a woman with a synthetic addiction.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

We were then en route to the Aquarius Plateau, atop Boulder Mountain, which we had decided would be safer to drive up in the morning. Melissa changed that plan, so at three in the morning we began our ascent. The 4x4 road was extremely rugged. When we began traveling up the road, everyone was shaken awake by the large boulders I had to crawl over. The rest of the ride was a maze of careful driving. My tired mind imagined what the plateau would look like at sunrise.

Three Stinson's Trout

“The selective trout is that uncompromising creature in whose spirit the angler attempts to read his own fortune.” – Thomas McGuane

As we crossed state lines into Wyoming, I remembered why I didn't think going to that particular river would be the best place for a float trip. At that time, the U.S Federal Government was shut down because of a disagreement between two parties. Stinson and I were en route to a National Wildlife Refuge. Trespassing on federal land means a fine, or jail time. Due to the remoteness and unpopularity of our destination, I was confident that we could float through undetected. As my thoughts raced alongside the disappearing highway, I realized that everyone employed by the Federal government was furloughed, which includes the officers, so there wouldn't be anyone to enforce the law. I abide by the law, with only a few I can justify breaking. I'm not cut out to be the Sundance Kid, but when the law interferes with a lifestyle I then lose respect for that law and will disobey not because I get a rush from breaking laws but because it would be unnatural not to. If I were truly spooked by the event of being arrested and fined while floating harmlessly down a river in fifty-year-old drift boat, I would have gone home. Though I think a situation like this would be funny:

“Pull over that boat!” I imagine the Officer yelling with grunts of frustration between words as he struggles through the thick vegetation guarding the edge of the river.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

“For what?” Stinson would yell back as he makes a nicely looped cast to rising fish.

“For trespassing on federal land!”

“We’re fishing, not trespassing,” I might say.

I’d have to nose the boat in the bank to where the officer would be standing with a stale look on his face. He’d be in his power stance with one hand resting above his gun and the other on the radio as he informs dispatch that he’s got, “Two suspects trespassing in an old wooden boat.”

“Are they armed?” Dispatch would ask.

“Copy, consider suspects armed and dangerous, they have two five weight fly rods, a flask of whiskey and a filet knife.”

He’d then inform dispatch of another trespassing party; a grazing sow moose and its yearlings.

Stinson’s personality is most easily identified when he’s on the water. It seems the river brings out his attributes and often times, malfunctions to the surface. A hard working fisherman, one who won’t give up until he’s found what the fish are taking, one who doesn’t give up on people either. It is easy to become discouraged when fishing for trout, especially when they’re not active, but Stinson is the fisherman who encourages new tactics, gets things rolling again. Stinson’s game is not dry flying, his game is all sub surface, and it becomes valuable to have a fishing pal like him. He brings an awareness of what might be happening below the river’s surface onto the boat.

There is wonder, and a blind sense of adventure when arriving at a new and unfamiliar place in the dark. Being unaware what the surroundings look like, what to expect, is given to imagination. I try to

plan all of my trips to a new place this way. There's mystery that adds to the excitement of tomorrow as I unpack the truck and look out over the outlines of mountains, basins, and their vegetation.

"Man it's cold out, bust out the whiskey," said Stinson.

"Read my mind."

I clawed through my backpack in search of the bourbon, but with no luck. The thermometer on the dash of the truck read eight degrees Fahrenheit, and I palmed my forehead in disbelief that I had left the warming remedy on the kitchen counter.

Once settled and in the tent, I said to Stinson, "What's fishing going to feel like without the hangover?"

"One less thing we have to deal with, I guess."

I awoke for the first time since I can remember on a trip without the dry and stale taste of last night's bourbon in my mouth, then I heard the rumble of the river that put me to sleep. I unwillingly de-cocooned myself from my frost-covered sleeping bag, and rose from the frozen misery at that first sign of light. The fog was heavy. It dampened everything. I was hydrating simply by inhaling. To warm up, I jogged and whirled my arms on my way to find a place to launch the boat. When I got to the riverbank, the first thing I noticed was how high the east bank was compared to where I was standing. It leaned over the river, a natural subway, but instead of the commotion of speeding trains and cramming of people there was rock fall, and a dipper hopping about the rocks, looking for scuds and other insects to eat. In those few moments of watching the far bank, I witnessed the river carve away small boulders, and watched chunks of sediment fall and cloud the river. The place was very much alive. Then I saw fish rising.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

Trout fish too. A trout feeds because it has to. It feeds where pursued by fisherman in beautiful places carved by a river. The ambience in which a trout feeds is as important to that fish as it is to the angler. Ambience can be ruined for a trout when a size 12 wading boot steps in its hole and kicks up sediment on the river's floor. Or when the shadow of a sixteen-foot drift boat engulfs the trout's sun. Think of it the same way the ambience of your dinner out with a lover can be churned up when you notice his or her previous partner is glaring at you from across the room.

Stinson broke down camp, and I cooked up some breakfast. As I was prepping the boat for the trip, I heard the crunch of snow under a set of truck tires and figured we were busted. My eyes darted through the trees for a white DNR truck. Who else would venture into twenty-degree weather on federally closed land? Then I saw two other fishermen launching their boat into the river and things made sense. I approached the two men, asking if they saw the large No Trespassing sign.

"Must have missed it," said one man smirking as he loaded the boat with his fly rods.

"Yea, so did I. Tough to read with it frosted over," I said.

The man introduced himself as Mert and said, "You know what, that really pisses me off." Mert was an average looking fisherman. It was cold as hell out so he wore a hat, I would wager that he was bald. He told me he didn't give a damn about what the law says, because he's "just fishing." Mert then went on a moral tirade about how law is taking what's ours to the protection of the river we were on, then to issues with fish ladders and the migration of salmon in Idaho. Mert's ideas were justified though. We were after all, catch and release fishing, virtually harmless to the fish and their environment. I sometimes believe fly-fishing to be the

most delicate way of observing and being fully apart of a river system, and it is that sense of connection that inspires many fisherman to become stream and river activists.

Mert was knowledgeable and enthusiastic in his speech, which seemed rehearsed and could have been because Mert was involved politically as a spokesperson for the restoration of “his,” rivers. He’s the kind of fisherman whose enjoyment of rivers encouraged a campaign. The kind you see at a fly-fishing exposition with table set up looking for signatures for rights to private water or the deconstruction of dams. This gave me respect for Mert because I don’t have the courage or charisma like he does to do campaign as he did and I don’t think his fishing partner did either because he was rolling his eyes leaning on the boat, wanting the spiel Mert had probably told a thousand times before to be over so he could fish.

Mert’s spiel went on, he told me that he’d been coming to this section of river for more than thirty years. He warned that the fishing is tricky, especially in the cold weather. Mert told me that the river is ever-changing and that there are times when he floats all day and doesn’t catch a single fish, and that for his first three years coming to the river he never caught one. I was greatly discouraged by this, but eager to prove that it shouldn’t take three years to catch one on a healthy fishery like this one. He told me that it would take time, but after you figure out the secret behind the river, that every fish you catch will be a fish to remember both because of the size of fish this river produces, and the ambience in which you catch them.

It was all so convincing, like getting information from a local guide shop. As they were prepping their boat for the trip, I took a few casts with a dry fly along with Stinson and in the first few attempts we were

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

simultaneously hooked up with two small brown trout. Mert glanced up from removing a bungee cord and said, “in your first casts, you guys have caught more fish than in the three years I’ve fished this place.” I reminded him that those trout were only six inches. He replied, “those are still fish.”

I found Mert more a conservationist conversationalist than a fisherman. Maybe he liked the idea of fishing because it remains the best approach to experience the outcomes of his hard work as a protector of waters. His genuine nature and dedication to rivers stressed to me that he wanted to have the river remain a secret, so I have not named the river, or the plateau it exists on.

I caught a fish, so I then could disregard the idea that I’d have to put in years of work to bring one in. I had new hope that Stinson and I would hook into one of the large trout this river is known for.

This was my first time ever floating in a drift boat. Instead of seeking advice from the conservationist I asked his friend, the quiet oarsmen who seemed more of a fisherman, for some pointers on reading water and controlling the boat. He told me to follow his lead for the first few miles, and that I’d figure it out. So Stinson and I did, we launched at the same time and I mimicked his every dip of an oar. After a mile or so I had the basics down and Stinson wanted to try rowing. I then had the chance to fish and in some miracle, on the first cast out of the drift boat I caught a nice sized rainbow trout on a prince nymph. I heard Mert yell, “get out of town!” from upriver.

Finally, some warm light punctured through the tight pockets of the low hanging white blanket that chilled even the warm wood of the drift boat. But with the sun, my experience on the river turned into a day when trout become selective but are feeding actively right before a fisher-

man's straining eye. That fisherman will throw every imitation he has in his arsenal of flies and not a single one will work. Sort of what Mert was getting at. On days when standing in a river with no luck, one can justify in a fit of madness and frustration that the trout are toying with him. At this point they've reached a mindset so drowned in discouragement that it makes them believe it's not only the weather, the fish, the river, but rather the entire universe working against them.

Stinson put his rod down and watched from the anchored boat as brown trout, or the occasional Kokanee salmon as they rose for pale morning duns—he was conducting a field study. Hands off learning. I imagined he was seeing each brown head rise, studying the aggressiveness of one trout, and the un-athleticism of another. He knows which of those rising fish are the large ones, because they take flies with delicacy. The ones that make to much commotion on water's surface are the fish eaten by birds of prey. On the Wyoming plateau Bald Eagles and Ospreys pluck rowdy fish.

After rowing for a good while, it became natural, and my mind wandered away from rowing, and into my own thoughts. I tried to justify myself in the eyes of the law if we were to be caught. There's an odd sort of security that you are a fly-fisherman. It's alright that you beat up a couple of drunken punks with your fishing buddy outside of a bar in Park City, Utah, because that's not who you really are, but rather what you turn into when you're not fishing. The police won't care either, because they'll know by looking at the flies stuck in your hat, that in the morning you'll be as harmless and delicate as ever as you cast an October caddis under hanging branches to rising brown trout. They'll know that you are more spiritually in tune with the world around you, because in the morning

through those red eyes, one probably black, you will be closely observing life.

After navigating the river for a few hours, and watching Stinson fish for too long, I had the idea to bank the boat, and fish a nice hole on foot. We had drifted a good portion of the river, and I had wanted to fish for a while. I tied on a large prince nymph, and casted it into a shallow rip. I was sort of half ass fishing because I was doubtful that the large imitation would fool a fish in the hole. Then I noticed a large fish hanging in softer water, closer to the bank of the river. The Rainbow trout was flashing and rolling sub-surface—feeding on nymphs. I put a bug right under its nose. This is when you lose consciousness of everything around you except the fly-rod in your hand, the airborne line sliding through the eyes of your fly-rod and a feeding, camouflaged trout you've been straining your eyes for so long to observe. The sound of a nearby rapid echo's down to nothing more than a buzzing in the back of your head, and the only water you hear is the water flowing through the gills of that fish you're observing so intently. The words of a nearby fishing partner become as intelligible as a babbling spouse, and the instinctual response to that person is a softly mumbled "yea," so not to break the concentration you are so deeply focused on. Fly-fishing, much like any outdoor lifestyle becomes a greedy one, even while you fish next to your best friend. Taking trips, especially solo trips, means you leave others in your life behind if only for a few days. You leave because you want to experience something for yourself regardless if there's a friend or a few friends with you. It is you who wants to catch the most and the largest fish, though you'd be happy if others had the same luck.

When anglers begin to consistently catch fish, fishing becomes less about the excitement of the fish on the other end of their line, and more about how and where you tricked that fish into biting your imitation of an insect. Stinson says, “the tug is the drug.” Encapsulating his idea that catching fish is catching fish, no matter the tactic. I mock him with the phrase, “dry fly or die.” Stinson likes catching fish. He’ll tie on any fly to get a fish on the end of his line. Without sounding too purist, I’m more interested in catching a fish with the exact insect they are feeding on because it is more rewarding to observe a hatch of insects on the river, and imitate that hatch with accuracy. The San Juan worm fly pattern works extremely well for rainbow trout. We both know this and will resort to the “dirty worm” if fish aren’t feeding aggressively. Any frequent fisherman can drift their imitation of a trout’s dinner in a hole they’ve fished over and over, and land a good trout. When you complicate things for yourself, as any artist will do, you learn more about the art. The act of fishing even without getting into the entomology of insects, species of fish, understanding weather patterns and water temperature is already a way one can complicate their life. I don’t need to fish, fishing only layers more complication onto my life. I do it because fishing adds an addicting complexity. This complexity though, doesn’t take a toll on my living it rather becomes a lifestyle. Fish and their environment, whether its the ocean or spring creeks running out of the high desert, do invite the angler to breach his own abilities, and make a life out of those challenges.

Fishing for a consistently rising large fish, whose presence can only be seen in a dull dusk light indicated by the slightest of ripples, tucked into a grassy bank is a complicated fish to catch.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE FLY-LINE

On the last section of river, we passed some free-range cattle grazing close to the river's edge. For no real reason Stinson and I began yelling at them, I think it was some crooked means of relieving the frustration of losing a few large fish to light tippet and poor communication. At one point I even yelled, "Fuck you, cow." Strangely enough, this immature and random assault on the self-esteem of the cows greatly raised ours, as I encouraged Stinson to tie on some heavier line and try again. Only a moment later, Stinson was into one. He was on the fish, and I was on the oars, navigating past sleepers and shallow rapids, all while keeping the bow directed at the fly-line, taut by Stinson's fish. The communication between us two anglers was organized and calm. Without saying, we knew how large the fish was, because we hadn't been able to bring it to the surface for over a half hour. Eventually Stinson said, "she's finally giving up." I replied, as calm as I could, "I'll keep the boat where she needs to be." For another fifteen or so minutes, I watched Stinson. I was confident we would land the fish. Floating backwards down a lazy section of river, my view panned as the boat spun and I saw through a window created by the arch of the fly rod bowing from Stinson's trout, the sun falling behind red-rock pinnacles miles away. A feeling of our insignificance became overwhelming. We were just a sixteen-foot boat at mercy of the flows of a green gash in the desert. What we were doing was suddenly tiny; a moment that forced a realization that fishing isn't as big as I make it out to be. It is turning into my lifestyle, but the vast view I saw through that frame brought it all back in. We were only fishing.

The glare of red sunset on silver caught my eye. I saw its flank first as it rolled under the river's surface. At the first breach of the big bastard

I netted it, though it didn't fall in the net. Its size refused fit inside, so the fish instead balanced on the wood frame over the mouth of the net, until I was able to grab it with two hands. I passed the powerful rainbow trout to Stinson, whose lit face I won't forget. Our situation became big again. It wasn't the fish's size that made it big; it was the roar of virility that came from both our chests. A roar that clamored through sagebrush, and over those pinnacles. It echoed our dominance over the plateau. It was the fish's beauty, the patterns and stripes painted camouflage onto its flanks and speckled its fins, a product of the place it lived. Just as Mert called it, a fish to remember. Those few vivid moments were a time when the greed of fishing disappears, when awe, execution and happiness slows the flow of living into frames that engrave themselves into a fisherman's memory.

