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A MOST UNLIKELY REFUGE

written by
KERRI SWAN

What have you been taught by all those
Changes all those years?
Did they multiply your knowledge
or increase your fears?
Ahhhh your bench is your center of serenity
There all alone.

Alex Thompson, *The Bench*

I walked by the park as I usually did, but this time I decided to turn back and go in. Sitting idly under a maple was a small park bench. I glided over to it and sat down to think about a few things. Surprisingly, one of the first things that came to mind was my setting. A park bench under a tree—a very typical image, yet one I hadn't experienced myself. I began to think of some other images of benches and how they'd fit into my situation.

We've all seen it. The old man sitting quietly on a park bench with a pipe out the corner of his mouth and a newspaper opened crisply in front of his face; the prim and all-too-proper young girl sitting with her hands folded neatly in her lap; the old beggar woman lying in the fetal position trying to conserve any warmth she may have left.

All of them use a city's bench as their own personal space in which to think and reflect. In a world of constant chaos and disorder, an empty park bench can be a welcoming sight for anyone who wishes to take a step back. Notice the word empty, however.

Think about the last time you sat beside a stranger on a park bench. Most people probably couldn't remember the last time this occurred; for many it's never happened at all. That's probably because when you, like me, sit on a bench, you would personally prefer the space all to yourself. You sit on a bench to temporarily relieve yourself from the commotion of your immediate surroundings. If you wanted company, you would sit on the subway.

A city's park bench can offer an array of emotions to its users or onlookers, such as relief, opportunity, or maybe even discomfort. I know from my own experience, seeing a poor or homeless person sleeping on a park bench has made me feel upset, saddened, and most disturbingly, uneasy. An object that was one used as a seating place for the upper class is now attracting people from the other side of the spectrum. This sight, visible in nearly every city, can arouse thoughts.

"This might not be the best area," said my friend on our last outing in New York City, "Maybe we should walk somewhere else."

Thus got me wondering—why do they come here? Why did this man choose this bench?

My friend's feelings were not single-minded, however. Nancy Hormann, executive project leader of Raleigh's new construction of benches stated: "It's a perception issue. If people are sleeping on the benches all night long, it really doesn't give a good feeling about this street and where you are and makes you feel a little uncomfortable about walking around."

Although this may be true, one must look from the eyes of one of these individuals to find out why they pick benches as a place of refuge:

"You're surrounded by beautiful buildings, people that walk by," stated Robert Brethauer, a homeless resident of Raleigh, "they're nice people."

Nice people. Sitting on a bench in the midst of a city has become a place to observe, relax, to sit in the stadium that is the world around you. People come and people go—yet although

many will pass, almost none will stop to enter this little space of yours. Although they might never directly connect with you, you can still enjoy the company of all these nice people.

A young couple passed me, walking ideally with a small dog on a leash. They saw me, glanced over, smiled softly, and went on their way. A few moments later, an older woman, perhaps fifty-five, with her small blonde grandson stopped next to me to feed the ducks in the lake. I felt content, I felt a sense of belonging. Although I had never seen these people before, or knew anything about them, I felt a strange yet comforting connection with them. I was sharing this lovely day with them. They were seeing what I was seeing, feeling what I was feeling. I was a part of their world even though I knew nothing about it.

Everyone knows that Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump continuously sat on a bench and discussed matters of life with strangers. People that walked by and just happened to sit on his bench usually got an earful of his opinions and quotes about life "being a box of chocolates," allowing themselves to be immersed into his world by just sitting beside him. So, really, these two people are "perfect" strangers—involved, yet detached.

In the film *Finding Neverland*, the bench served as an observatory for the protagonist: a place to look into the lives of others and to place himself in their world while at the same time being on the outside. The same thing goes for Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. My roommate recently told me a charming story about her and her grandmother. When she was young, she and her grandmother would sit on the same park bench week after week and "people-watch." They would watch the strangers as they passed, and make up names and create lives for them. In a city, millions of strangers will pass by a single point on any given day. A park bench offers a place outside the commotion to sit and take in all that a city has to show you.

The word "seat" originated in 15th century England, derived from two meanings: "a thing to sit upon," or more interestingly, "a residence or an established place." A park bench, for some, can be that little cube of sanctuary, specifically those who live or work in a city. In New York City, Central Park is the oasis in the desert. A specific detail that anyone will tell you about Central Park is that it is riddled with benches. There are more than 9,000 benches scattered across the landscape, giving New Yorkers a rarely found place to rest. In a recent article about Central Park's benches, it was stated that, "Many regular Park-goers have a favorite bench, and for some, that bench can become a home away from home."

I recently asked my father, the manager of a do-it-yourself home improvement store, what sort of people typically brought or looked at the benches throughout the store. He told me, "Almost every type of person you can imagine buys benches. It's true that their economic status has an effect on what type of bench they buy, almost all classes and categories of people buy benches: contractors, home owners, public land owners, middle class people. The only reason I can give for it is that everyone needs to have a bench somewhere around them. It always has a good purpose."

A place of comfort usually goes hand in hand with some form of privacy and personal space. Although in many movies and other forms of media a park bench is where people meet the love of their lives, or their best friend, or a friendly stranger, it just seems to be out of reach in reality. Rudolph Valentino once stated, "I really believe I was happier when I slept on a park bench in Central Park than all the years of the 'perfect love' stuff." When most people look at a park bench and see a person on it, even if there is still plenty of room, they'll consider that bench "occupied," and will not sit there. When I asked a group of my friends what they would do in this exact situation, only two out of eleven even said they would sit on an "occupied" bench.

Sitting on a park bench ensures a certain privacy—a pleasant privacy that allows personal space without isolation and loneliness. Whether it's in the middle of Central Park or simply on the side of the road, a bench can offer a small sanctuary for you to step back and enjoy the people around you. You stop, you sit, the world still moves.

I arose slowly from the bench, pondered over what I had discovered. As I walked away, a woman standing against a statue peered out from behind her book and cautiously walked over and sat on my bench.

WITH A CHERRY ON TOP

written by
LAUREN HOOPER

I was only eleven, but I felt all of twenty-one. Although I felt grown, I was asleep on the sofa within an hour with one sock on and a smudge of chocolate on my elbow (though I don't know how it got there). The next morning, I woke up to the smell of bacon grease and sunblock. My parents arrived in the middle of breakfast to pick me up. I finished what was on my plate and gathered my belongings. While my dad took my things to the car and my mom used the bathroom, I had a minute alone with Aunt Betteann.

I didn't know how to say what I felt, so I said, "I'm sorry you're sick."

She laughed gently. "Me too, bubbalou. Don't you worry about me. I'll be around."

I felt guilty when I didn't cry at Aunt Betteann's funeral. I sat in the row left of the center aisle in an Atlantic City Baptist church watching the preacher but never actually hearing him. He delivered a lengthy speech at rapid-fire, as preachers always seem to have the talent for. To his right, the choral members' mouths formed wide O's as their arms swayed in the sleeves of their navy satin robes. I knew encouraging words and melodious hymns were being produced, yet I did not experience either. I could think, I could feel, and I could see, but I could not hear a word. I felt as though I had sat on top of a television remote lost in the depths of sofa cushions and pressed the mute button by mistake.

But rather than perplexing over my new handicap, I chose to embrace it. I took great interest in watching the congregation. Luckily, at the beginning of the ceremony, I had chosen an end seat in the last pew of family members.

July, 1999. Brigantine, New Jersey. She lived in the mint green house three blocks from the beach. At a young age, I decided that my favorite color was that specific green. I even convinced my dad to paint my bedroom mint green when I was in the seventh grade. To my disgust, the color on my wall wasn't the exact shade of Aunt Betteann's house and my bedroom window didn't let in enough light. The paint on my walls should have been named "Mom's uncooked broccoli." The next day I convinced my dad to repaint the room tan. I came to appreciate going to visit Aunt Betteann even more.

Once every summer we would drive a half hour between Jersey shore towns to Brigantine for a "family dinner." This was a nicer way of disguising the real reasons for going. My dad and his brothers would play a huge pinochle tournament for money and my mother would take the kids to the beach with Aunt Betteann where they would quietly rate the lifeguards and surfers on a scale of one to ten. The ladies always had mimosas with them while we all romped around the beach in our tie-dyed one-piece swimsuits and hibiscus flowered swim trunks. My mother was more discrete about hers, so she kept the alcohol in a water bottle. Aunt Betteann, however, brandished hers in the champagne glass that left her hand only when she slept.

Despite the strict rule of no alcohol on the beaches, Betteann was never questioned. I wouldn't have wanted to instigate an argument with her, either. Something about her was more powerful than her physical body. Maybe it was the way she carried the whopping five feet and 100 lbs. Or maybe it was for the same reason as my cousin Gary, who used to be afraid of her because she screamed when she talked. In my

opinion, she was so fierce because of her arms. In one hand she held a mimosa, and in the other, a lit or unlit cigarette. In the crook of one arm, she held her grandson, a small black boy named Zachkey. She was hard to read and nearly impossible to predict. That is why no one ever approached her. They already knew they would be unprepared for her retort.

Sometime in August we usually visited Aunt Betteann for the day. In 1999, we went on the last Friday in July. No real explanation was offered for this change in routine. The morning before, I was home alone and the phone rang. "Baby, it's Aunt Bet. Can you tell your mother and the jackass that I'm going to be bored tomorrow, so I'm having everyone over for dinner?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll tell them."

"I know you will. Can't wait to see you, lovebug."

The next day after lunch, my parents and I quickly packed a communal duffle bag and got dressed to leave. Usually, a duffle bag is unnecessary for a day-trip and family dinner, yet we had to be prepared for food fights, water wars, and the like. We always arrived equipped with a change of clothes and shower supplies just in case.

Once I was comfortably seated alongside the duffle bag, my dad sped along the Atlantic City expressway north to Brigantine. The trip typically is supposed to take thirty minutes, but my dad always managed to get there in twenty. I used to think he was in a rush to see his oldest sister. Now I realize that he simply lives out his fantasy career as a Nascar driver at every opportunity. If I were he, I wouldn't rush just to see Aunt Betteann. She tore him apart every time an opportunity presented itself.

"Gar, did you dye your hair blonde?"

"No," he grimaced, the attention on him as soon as he stepped through the door.

"Looks it. I may be ancient, but you're 42 and that's about time mid-life crises start, isn't it?"

Spare me.

"Come hug me, baby brother."

That was the type of relationship my father and Aunt Betteann had. She was a little over ten years his senior and the oldest of the six Hooper children. Actually, she wasn't born a Hooper, but she was raised one. She was my grandmother's first child, and when Betteann was about two years old, my grandparents were married and my grandfather legally adopted Betteann. A six year age gap separated her from the next eldest child. Because Aunt Betteann was so much older than her brothers and sisters, she was viewed more as a caregiver and babysitter than someone to share toys with. She still nagged my father like he was a son. But you knew by watching that it was just tough love. They usually smiled while they bickered.

"And you!" she would point at me. "You, my dear, come here." She would then bring me to the middle of the room and have me lift my arms and spin so she could "check a broad out." She would squat down to eye level, kiss my cheek, and tell me I was beautiful and that I need to stop getting so old because I was making her look bad. I would giggle, tell her she still looked twenty-nine (which my mother instructed me at a young age to tell every woman who insisted that Poise pads and girdles were in the near future) and she would wink. It happened this way every year. We put on a show.

The visit of 1999 was no different. We performed all the familiar steps and, once we were comfortable, everyone went to their respective activities. Aunt Betteann and the other women loaded the younger kids into wagons and offered the older ones skateboards and we journeyed the three blocks to the beach. Something was different, though. She behaved as she usually did; she threw kids into the ocean and played soccer with the boys. It took me a while to realize the change, but then I noticed how her hands seemed awkward. They weren't brandishing a champagne glass or a cigarette.

I didn't think much of the difference at first, though something obviously wasn't right. As the day progressed to night, Aunt Betteann never slowed down, but I could sense she was growing tired by the way she bit her lip and sighed while she laughed. By the time we sat down for dinner, everyone must have noticed that she was acting out of character. Aunt Betteann detected the uneasiness as soon as she walked into the dining room. She didn't take a seat, but instead climbed onto her chair.

"Listen up!" she commanded, though the room was silent before she spoke. "I have heart disease. Now we're going to act like I never said anything and eat." She stepped down and took her seat at the head of the table.

The room was eerily silent for a few seconds as we all stared wide-eyed at the swirling patterns in the wood of the table. My dad broke the silence by joking about the quality of the food before us. The room immediately was filled with overdramatic laughter and loud chatter. I happened to glance at my Aunt Betteann and saw her mouth "thank you" to my dad. He winked back. They smiled gratefully at each other. I looked down in my lap and fought back tears.

The rest of the night went according to routine. Everyone acted normally, though obviously taken aback by the news. The men played their cards, the women gossiped in the kitchen as they helped with the dishes, and the children crowded around the single Nintendo 64 system in the living room and fought over the controllers. I played one game of Aladdin and then snuck into the kitchen.

"Can I stay here tonight?" I asked my mom. At age eleven, I knew better than to invite myself anywhere, but I didn't care. I wanted to be with Aunt Betteann.

"Absolutely not. You can't be giving yourself invitations."

I pouted. Aunt Betteann must have heard a snippet of our conversation because she interjected. "Invitation to where? I better get one."

"I want to stay with you tonight."

My mother's eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth to speak, or rather, scold. Aunt Betteann put her hand on my mother's arm.

"You can stay with me if you sing 'The Good Ship Lollipop' and dance."

I immediately broke into song. I tap-danced on the linoleum floor in my bare feet. Even my mom couldn't help but laugh. As soon as I had finished, the room roared with applause.

"Okay, you can stay, but you can't use my toothbrush."

In time, my aunts and uncles left with my cousins in tow. My parents said goodbye. Great-aunt Ola returned to her bedroom on the third floor. Aunt Betteann's husband, Uncle John, decided to lie down in the guest room. Aunt Betteann and I stayed in the kitchen, though. We were all alone. Us and Billie Holiday, that is. She was a favorite of Aunt Betteann's, so she was allowed to stay and sing just for us. Aunt Betteann spun me around the 70's-deco kitchen for hours. We worked a Saved by the Bell puzzle when our legs grew tired. She told me stories about my dad when he was growing up and some interesting stories of her own. When the clock made the chirping noise on the hour, I looked up. Midnight. Aunt Betteann caught my eye. I was sure that she was going to tell me it was time to turn in for the night. What she said next surprised me.

"Mint chocolate chip, coffee, or vanilla bean?"

Aunt Betteann's freezer amazed me. Never before had I seen so much ice cream. The freezer was crowded with at least six different flavors in clear tubs. Apparently, when she found out about her condition, she gave up her mimosas and Newports for ice cream. She didn't believe in a simple bowl of ice cream either. She believed in sundaes - complex ones, with hot fudge and caramel and whipped cream with nuts and sprinkles. Maraschino cherries were also a must. She had three

jars of them on the door of her refrigerator. We feasted.

I recall eating my sundae with a new appreciation for ice cream. I noticed the texture of the whipped cream, the bitter coldness of the ice cream the first time it hit my warm tongue, and the way I could never lick the spoon completely clean of caramel. As I ate, I sat poised in the straight-back kitchen chair, and took small spoonfuls. I had never felt so grown up. I was eating a sundae with my Aunt Betteann in the earliest hours of a Saturday morning. I was digesting my newly found freedom.

She didn't lie when she promised to stick around. She did for three more years. We received the phone call announcing her passing on my third day of high school. I cried then. I cried after we got home from her funeral.

During her funeral, however, I was calm and I know that she would appreciate that. From my seat, I had a perfect view of all my relatives — four rows of bent heads and hunched shoulders covered in various shades of black. All sobbed.

But I did not. I was thinking about ice cream.

THIS IS WHO I AM

written by
CASSANDRA WILKINSON

I watched my diapered little brother hit the floor. My dad had smacked him in the forehead with the heel of his hand, "Shut up, dumbass." This was nothing new; I had been "healed" many times before. Dad had probably already had a few beers that morning, but who was counting? Later, Dad would let the three of us—I have an older brother too—go play in the park by ourselves.

I remember cutting my leg there once. Dad's only words when I came inside were, "Don't get any blood on the carpet!" We hated being inside with Dad because we always got yelled at or hit. We were slaves to the words, "Go get me another beer." We thought we were normal kids with a normal family. Not until recently have I really considered the impact my Dad's behavior had on our development.

We left my Dad when I was six because of his drinking. We moved in with my grandparents on my mom's side; my grandpa is an alcoholic. Then, a year or so later, we moved in with my mom's new boyfriend, a recovered alcoholic. He no longer lives with us. My Mom's poor relationship history is framed by the fact that forty percent of separated or divorced women were married to or lived with problem drinkers (Narconon). The fact that my grandparents have been married for forty-one years is amazing. My Nana says that they would be divorced if she wasn't such a strict Catholic but, my Mom says, the truth is that Nan is as dependent on Pop's drinking as he is on her.

I could blame my Dad for all the pain he caused, but "My Dad" under the influence really wasn't my Dad. Let me explain. Some people think it is just a moral problem within the person that church can fix, while others think that something is psychologically wrong with the drinker. Both are inaccurate perceptions because there is not adequate proof to either of them. Most experts agree that alcoholism is a disease, although it is usually defined by its symptoms and behaviors. A disease is defined as "a pathological condition of an organ resulting from various causes, such as poison, and characterized by an identifiable group of signs and symptoms." Alcoholism is a disease that altered my Dad's mental state and made him a different person. He isn't alone: 1 in every 13 adults in America abuse alcohol (Adviware).

I always wondered what made him become an alcoholic. Part of the reason was his susceptibility—his parents were alcoholics, too. But why would he want to be a father who made his children experience the same abuse he had as a child? A few years before he started dating my mom, at around 15 years of age, he was in and out of re-habilitation centers. Nothing helped, so he never stopped drinking, and still drinks today. It probably never crossed his mind that he was doing something harmful, because his parents did it too, making alcoholism seem normal.

According to a child welfare professor and sociologist, Mrs. Mary Stengel-McNeish, there had to have been some sort of trauma for my Dad to turn to drinking. This addictive drinking is an unhealthy form of self-medication to cope with a traumatic event. The evidence I have found of trauma in my Dad's life was when his own father left, because he used to beat my grandma. Dad was left without a male role model for a few years and may have turned to drinking after his mom re-married.

In no way am I trying to make excuses for him, just giving some possible justification. People don't start drinking

heavily for no reason and become alcoholics. Maybe his proneness and belief in the normality of drinking are factors in why he continued to drink. Because I am the daughter of an alcoholic, I am six times as likely to become one, and my brothers have a slightly larger risk, since my Dad was also their male role model. Knowing this, I make decisions to avoid becoming my Dad; I don't want to become an alcoholic and hurt my family. I don't want my children to grow up like I did.

What I have recently tried to discover is how I was affected by my Dad's drinking. What traits do I now have that I may not have otherwise developed? According to the writings of Dr. Jan Williams, the Director of Loyola's Alcohol and Drug Education and Support Services, there are many traits that Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) may bring with them into adulthood. Some behaviors include: irrational thinking, passiveness, avoidance, and hyper vigilance. Most ACOAs also have trust issues, problems with being a people pleaser, finding it hard to meet their own needs, and dealing with a constant fear of abandonment. They may also commit to unhealthy relationships with unavailable addicts (not necessarily drugs), develop poor reactions for quick fixes, find it hard to be spontaneous or have fun, or may seek crisis situations to feel normal. Granted, these behaviors can stem from other causes, but most ACOAs exhibit many, if not all of them. I don't exhibit all of these behaviors, but I do own up to some them. Why, however, do I feel like I have some of them and my brothers don't?

It is hard to acknowledge problems within ourselves because they show our inadequacies. I always wanted to be "normal," but I have realized that being "normal" is relative. I am "normal" within the class of 2010 because fifty-three percent of the freshman class reported having alcoholism in their immediate family. Alcoholism is a three generational disease, which means that if your grandparent was an alcoholic, but your parent wasn't, you are still prone to developing the disease. That

means that there is a large number of people who share some of the same traits that I have.

The key, according to Dr. Williams, is to realize the negative behaviors and seek help to make them positive. For example, I catastrophize, which means that I blow situations out of proportion and get myself really upset because I am expecting the worst outcome. I need to learn to take the worst scenario into consideration but not to let it affect me in a negative way. I also have trust issues, which can be very hard to fix without outside help. These two attributes, among various others associated with ACOAs, affect me every day and have made me who I am.

The abuse inflicted by my Dad under the influence of alcohol has also affected my development. Abuse is divided into multiple categories, not just physical. Along with physical abuse there is sexual and emotional. Honestly, I am grateful that we were only physically and emotionally abused. Emotional abuse includes neglecting, threatening, criticizing, and rejecting. He is among the minority, however, because statistics show that only thirteen percent of drinkers abuse their children and only seven percent of all children are emotionally abused (Adviware). Each child is different and reacts to situations differently. Crosson-Tower, in *Exploring Child Welfare*, discusses how abused children respond to school. These children may be "unable to concentrate or do poorly without the necessary energy to learn. On the other hand, some abused children throw themselves into school as a way of coping with an unhappy home life. This child is the chronic overachiever, the child to whom a grade of B seems like the end of the world" (Crosson-Tower 192). My brothers never did well in school, and college is certainly not for them. My older brother joined the Army, and my little brother wants to join the Navy. I am the overachiever.

I still don't understand, though, why I turned to school and they didn't. I can make some guesses, though. I chose my mother as my role model, the daughter of an alcoholic and a

workaholic herself. I wanted to be just like her in every way possible. My brothers did not see Mom as their influence, but rather, Dad. Perhaps they thought that Dad's actions were characteristic of being a man: lazy, abusive, and unmotivated. I have to give my brothers a lot of credit, because even with such a poor role model they didn't grow up to be like him. My Dad never graduated from high school, a fact I recently found out from my Mom, since my Dad had lied about it his whole life.

My older brother graduated, went to a semester of college, and then realized he didn't want to go to school anymore. Maybe this is where my Dad's influence came in. My older brother is not a heavy drinker, though he does drink. He was abusive growing up but he's not as violent anymore, probably because he can release that anger during his army training. I don't think he'll be like my Dad, an abusive father; he wouldn't hit his little girl like Dad hit us. My little brother will graduate next year and we're still waiting to see what he does with his life.

It is probably true that not all ACOAs feel affected by their parent's drinking problem. My roommate's father is also an alcoholic, but she completely denies that it has affected her. However, I can see some of the tell-tale traits and behaviors, and I know that it has changed her.

She also has a different perception of alcoholism. She does not agree that alcoholism is a disease, but that it just passes through generations. She also doesn't believe that she is at risk for developing the disease. Because her Dad is a functioning alcoholic, she believes he does not have the disease. Perhaps this denial is her defense mechanism to help shield her from the reality of her family's problem, or maybe it truly never did have a negative affect on her growing up. Either way, it is interesting to see how someone in seemingly the same position as I interprets her situation.

So why can't it happen to you? A lot of people think it can't and won't. They think that because there is no alcoholism in their family history that they won't ever become one. It

has to start somewhere. No history means less susceptibility, but not immunity. More than half of current drinkers have a history of alcoholism (Adviware). In 2002, 2.6 million binge drinkers were between the age of 12 and 17. People who start drinking before the age of 15 are four times as likely to develop an alcohol addiction later in life, as opposed to people who start drinking at 21 (Perkinson). If you started drinking around this age, without a family history, your susceptibility just amplified. Your age and ethnicity also factor into your likelihood to develop an alcohol addiction. Whites and Native American between 18 and 29 are most at risk, whereas blacks and Hispanics in the same age group have significantly lower addiction rates. Men in this group are almost three times as likely as women to become addicted (NIAA). Although some of these statistics portray a bleak reality, they should always be taken into consideration when drinking.

Why my Dad? Why my family? Why did I have a less than happy childhood? Why did my Dad's disease have to play such a major role in my development? These all seem like legitimate questions, yet they will never be answered. A lot of children of alcoholics harbor resentment toward their parent(s) for putting such a burden on their family. Instead of blaming the alcoholic, it is better for us to try to make our lives better. Discovering the reasons behind some of our behaviors and developing new ways of handling our emotions are much healthier tactics than fueling aggression. I know I have taken the first few steps to understanding the history of alcoholism in my family, and how it has affected me, but there is still much more for me to learn. I know that I need to watch how much I drink and how often to prevent perpetuating the disease. I have to follow through with self-reflection and growth, so that the damaging effects that my Dad's drinking had on me will be less prevalent. Perhaps, eventually, there may be a real reason behind alcoholism; maybe they will discover a gene or, hopefully, a cure.

CONFESSIONS OF THE OTHER WOMAN

written by
ERIN O'HARA

I.

I let the heavy oak door crash hard behind me and giggled as I took off running down Main Street, past the old Victorian building where I took art lessons years ago, past brick storefronts, the thrift shops that were somehow always closed no matter what time I went, and the best pizza place this side of the Hudson. "Where are you going?" I heard in an only recently familiar voice. I stopped short, almost stumbling into the intersection as I turned to see his face, his freckles, his smile that didn't yet seduce me but would soon taunt from across crowded bar rooms for months to come.

"I... don't know." And I didn't. I was just running and laughing alone, an activity only forgivable under the circumstances - my first night out with my friends after weeks of wallowing in self-pity, swimming in a sea of goose down comforters littered with Kleenex, accepting the occasional visitor bearing gifts of Reese's Peanut Butter cups and pomegranate juice, my two favorite things, sobbing over movies that in a healthier state of mind I'd ridicule, vowing I'd never love again.

"This way!" He grabbed my hand, looking both ways as he rushed me across the street in another direction. "It's a short cut. We'll beat them." I laughed furiously and screamed, oblivious to the time, which I call late Wednesday night, Karaoke night, but the people sleeping in their houses called early Thursday, before dawn, before work. A sticky Hudson River wind whipped up the street from the pier and swirled around us as we spun between parked cars and front

porches. My hair untied itself but I didn't care. He didn't care. We beat them, though neither of our friends seemed to know that we had been racing when they waltzed through the front door minutes later.

"I don't like watermelon," he said as I approached him, holding some aimed for his mouth.

"Everybody likes watermelon." I clenched the jagged piece between my teeth, an organ stolen from the massacred body left dismantled on the black marble countertop behind me, splashes of bright pink blood everywhere. He took it from my lips with his, carefully, as though they might be electrified. I walked away and left him chewing the fruit he hates, fruit that I didn't yet know was forbidden.

There were nights when we stayed up drinking until noon: dancing in the dining room, kissing in the kitchen, smoking on the balcony. The main characters remained the same, though the supporting roles rotated weekly or nightly. He bartended in the back room, where the lights poured showers of neon rain through the darkness, where I felt so alone - because it was usually empty, and because the music was so loud that it trapped you inside your own skin, and even if you tried to speak the word stopped at your lips, thumping beats like cellophane over your mouth. We could barely communicate but we did our best with our eyes and smiles, with words delivered directly into ears like kisses, like secrets. I was completely smitten, and yet, I wanted nothing more.

II.

By the time we got from the door to the bar, our drinks were waiting for us. Three Bud Lights and three shots of Jack Daniels, as always. I was wearing a dress that was actually a nightgown and I felt prettier than I had in months or more, my pale skin by no means tan like everyone else's in late July, but just warm enough, my recently dyed dark hair finally

long enough to fall down my chest in straight chutes or loose waves. I looked around subtly and stopped where he was at the end of the bar, my excitement transforming to shock before my eyes, as he screamed at her, a pretty blonde girl wearing sweatpants. No one could hear their heated words over the music, but they managed to make a scene anyway. I stared with everyone else, and laughed out loud as the thought, or rather the truth, presented itself, the way sometimes you can't help but laugh at bad news or uncomfortable realities. He has a girlfriend.

They took their quarrel elsewhere, most likely down those same streets where we had raced and squealed, through that watermelon stained kitchen, down those hardwood stairs where he always carried me like a fireman over his shoulder, and into his big bed where he committed more sins than I did.

I stomped over to his roommate after they left. "Patrick has a girlfriend," I said matter-of-factly, a statement that probably should have been a question but I wasn't once doubtful of its certainty.

"Uh... yeah," he extended every syllable in an attempt to weaken the blow.

"Cool. How long have they been together?" He looked at me as though to say "I wish you didn't ask that," then looked up, pausing, pretending to count.

"Like... five years."

Five years. I laughed again, despite those being the two least humorous words I'd heard in a long time. I should have felt guilty, or angry, or duped, but I didn't. I just laughed and drank and danced my way through the rest of the night, and didn't think much about him, other than cursing my ridiculous luck. He had me by a string that I could have easily broken away from if I wanted, but I didn't want to, and I wouldn't.

III.

We were mostly naked lying in his bed, a framed picture of the two of them on his nightstand next to us, when he told me he doesn't think he loves her anymore. "Then why are you still with her?" He didn't answer.

I would say I tried to stop seeing him when I found out about her, but I didn't. I didn't want to and I didn't feel guilty. I fell for him before I knew, but knowing didn't change anything. He was still so charming. And handsome. And strong. God, he was strong. He would pick me up and carry me around like I weighed nothing. A friend once told me that snowboarding on fresh snow is the closest to floating he'd ever been. I told him the closest I'd ever been to floating was Patrick.

"I don't wanna be a bartender forever," he said out of nowhere while we were talking about baseball. "Where'd that come from?" I asked. "You asked me why I'm still with her if I cheat on her. And I don't wanna be a bartender forever. I wanna get married and take care of my kids." I fidgeted on my barstool, and knew he was foolish to marry a woman he didn't love no matter how much he wanted a family, no matter how much he felt his time running out and may have been right. I worried for him, and for me.

"Come here," he said, his face illuminated half by his now-weakened smile and half by the dim light of the rising sun filtering through the translucent curtains of his basement bedroom where we hadn't yet slept that night. I sat up and joined him at the high windowsill, kneeling next to him as he skimmed his hand across my lower back where I hate being touched because I have too much hair there, where I love being touched because I feel it in every follicle. "Sunflowers." He pointed to a cluster of green stems just beginning to bud. "They're mine."

IV.

"Why don't you stop?" Kirsten asked me in a way that made me feel stupid for not having a good enough answer for her. He's never made me cry, I thought, though I didn't dare say it.

She didn't always understand, maybe because she hasn't been hurt as much as I have, because she likes women and women give love the way I wish men would. He never would have left his girlfriend for me even if we both wanted him to, but he never made me cry.

What existed between us was a long series of moments that have no real ending - when he sang "Thunder Road" at Karaoke and looked me in the eyes as he serenaded, "So, Erin, climb in." When we laughed so hard we cried as we mixed the most disgusting drinks we could concoct to see who would try them. When he danced in his robe and slippers wearing a cowboy hat and an American flag as a cape. When he told me I was beautiful.

I took a picture from the balcony on my last night there, or morning I guess, as the early light began to gleam over rooftops and fire escapes, and would soon shine on his sunflowers.

Unlike every other relationship I've been in, and maybe the relationship he's in now, even though we'll probably never be in those moments again, what we had can't end. I left at the end of the summer, and he stayed, but there was no breakup, no tears. His face lights up every time I'm home on break and cut through the dark room with the flashing lights to say hi. As he kisses my cheek, I hope he doesn't see the brief disappointment in my eyes that he's still a bartender.

PIECES OF A MARINE

written by
MATT ANDERSON

*From the halls of Montezuma
To the shores of Tripoli,
We fight our country's battles
In the air, on land, and sea.
First to fight for right and freedom,
And to keep our honor clean,
We are proud to claim the title
Of United States Marines*

It is funny we have the same naval terminology like deck, aft, military time, etc. That is so awesome some of the stuff we've done. It sounds hard, but real rewarding. Different from old BE, ey? Thanks for all the encouragement. I hope the best for you as well. I do the same as you...day by day, chow by chow...and remember: 'They control pain, stress, and all that bullshit, but they cannot control TIME' Semper Fi, , and hope to see you on the open seas.

— *Terry*

The death of a 21 year old Marine from Pennsauken, NJ, who was due to come home this week, has been classified as "non-hostile" and is under investigation, according to the Department of Defense. The military classification of non-hostile covers everything from illness, to suicide, to vehicle crashes, and accidental weapons discharges.

The last two times my brother has called me it's been raining. The last two times he called I was asleep and woke

up because of the rarity of the call. I would usually just let it ring. The last two times my brother has called he asked when I was coming home. The last two times my brother called, someone had died.

His parents spoke to him hours before he was shot in the head by sniper fire while on the Al Asad Air Base in the Anbar province. He was due home for good in four days.

The other day I was in a car on the way back from a movie, and we had four kids crammed in the back. We stopped at a red light and, when the light turned green, I told the driver not to go, because I needed to open the door to get my phone. As soon as I opened the door, a car blew through the red light and would have hit our car at around 50 mph. Thank you, Terry.

—prayer sent to Terry from a friend

I sat there in my chair surrounded by lamplight, watching the trees shift, watching the dust rise out of the adjacent dirt parking lot and thought about what his body may have looked like limp in the sand. I thought about the fellow officers and Marines kicking sand over blood-stained sand, lifting his body, and putting him in a coffin to send home to his parents. Last, I thought about graduation. It seemed like they were trying to scare us into staying alive, presumably so they could milk more money out of us in the future. The speaker said, "Look to your left and to your right. One of these people won't be here at your five year reunion."

I thought it was going to be the girl on my right, for sure. As we were leaving that day, I went to say goodbye to Terry. I knew he was a Marine, and the current world situation was almost definitely going to put him in some sort of danger. I looked at him before we left and said, "Terry, don't die." And he laughed.

...You give a little information about yourself and they give you a random Marine that's deployed. He was my random Marine.

... He was absolutely beyond nervous. We just went for a walk in the middle of the night, and he stopped me under a street light and popped the question...hiding her ring on the chain she wore with Terry's dog tags...was waiting for him in their new home at Camp Lejune...Katie Allen, now 18... now, a widow...

"Thanks for finding me. Thank you for writing into my life."

— *Terry*

In one of my favorite movies, *Man on Fire*, Christopher Walken says to Denzel Washington, "A bullet always tells the truth. It never lies." What is this truth and who does it tell? What if no one knows where the bullet came from? Who can tell its story? We can only wonder what the bullet whispered to Terry, and what truth he now holds.

...They were planning a big wedding celebration after his return from Iraq. Now his family is planning a funeral...

We had a fight club in high school. One-on-one brawls, no holds barred, no mercy, no grudges. Terry was a feared opponent. Just looking at him psyched out a lot of people. He was short, but he was lean, perfectly cut. His face was like stone—completely rigid until the competition was over. In one of many fights, the one that we remember most, Terry was fighting Joe—a tall kid, bushy eyebrows and glasses.

He looked like the kind of kid that was good at math, not boxing. The fight stayed surprisingly even for a little while until Joe laid a shot into Terry's temple. He blacked out. No one could move until Terry reappeared and laughed

it off. He chalked it up as a loss, and we all walked home relieved.

"We have no final answer," John Allen, Terry's father, said.

...Circumstances: Shot by a sniper while on the Al Asad Air Base in the Anbar province...

...Military officials said they could provide no additional details about the circumstances surrounding the death of Cpl. Terrence Allen, citing the continuing probe...

"Connie Allen, Terry's mother, said earlier this week that she had kissed Allen's head when his body was finally returned to her on the day before the service."

The bullet came from an unknown place. An unknown gun in an unknown hand. Someone said it was a sniper, but someone else says it wasn't. His parents were told their died from an apparent gunshot wound to the head, and the death was not combat related. An anonymous letter from an unknown sender.

Rev. Anthony Manupella indicated that Allen, in recent years, had become more involved in his Catholic roots. "His faith, I'm sure, was a great consolation to him in all the struggles of his life and the struggles of war."

The big question is Why? Why did he have to go to war? Why did he go back for a second tour of duty? Why did he have to die?

Glen McManus said, "He wanted to serve his country." His mother said, "He enjoyed the challenges of boot camp and the solidarity of the Marine Corps."

His service in Iraq led him to meet his wife to be, when

they connected through AdoptaPlatoon Solider Support Effort.

There should be no more asking of why? That was Terry's question to ask, and he had answered it. He had a wife, a new place for them to live, a promotion to Sergeant, and plans to become a police officer, like his father. Circumstances. We can't escape them, even if they are unknown.

To sand go tracers and ball ammunition.
To sand the green smoke goes.
Each finned mortar, spinning in light.
Each star cluster, bursting above.
To sand go the skeletons of war, year by year.
— Brian Turner, *To Sand*

MENTIONITIS: A CASE STUDY IN THE LOSS OF CONTROL OVER THE MIND AND TONGUE

written by
Lorraine Cuddeback

Introduction

Mentionitis is a tragic condition which affects approximately 10 out of 10 women between the ages of thirteen and forty-five. An often overlooked and dismissed disease, it is primarily characterized by the "mentions:" the constant repetition of an object of affection's name. Yet, Mentionitis has even broader effects: it can cause loss of control over thought patterns, resulting in large amounts of mental stress, making it difficult for women to focus and function in an everyday setting. The following is a study of what we believe to be a typical case of Mentionitis, and its progression and symptoms. It is hoped that increased study of this phenomenon can help illuminate its problematic aspects and begin to pursue viable treatment options for the hundreds of thousands of women affected every day.

Patient History

Patient X, a young woman, aged 21, reports having had a number of cases of Mentionitis in her past; though none, she insists, as severe as her current affliction. The subjects of Mentionitis have ranged from men in her classes whom she never spoke to, to one long-term relationship which lasted about a year. Patient X states that she usually made attempts to hide the Mentionitis, being too shy and intimidated to inform others of her condition.

Patient X reports having met subject of current Mentionitis (hereto referred to by initial Y.) when she was 18 years old:

I can't remember the first time we were introduced to one another...to be honest, we may not have been introduced - formally - at all. He was kind of at the edge of my social circle, you know, I knew people who knew him, but we didn't really know each other.

Patient X insists that this was not when her case of Mentionitis began. Rather, Object Y was more or less in the background for eighteen months.

Yet Patient X recalls that she always felt a need for Object Y's approval: a "vague sensation of being judged" persisted when X was in Y's presence. This, reports Patient X, took the better part of a year to overcome:

I often alternated between avoiding him and being, like, way too friendly. I can't really explain it, but I was afraid that no matter what I did, I was going to irritate him, even though we really didn't know each other at all....Then this one time I was at a party, and he shared his bag of tortilla chips with me. I, like, totally knew we were friends, then. Because of that, I stopped worrying whether or not I was just one of his roommates' annoying underclassmen friends. I let myself just be me around him.

It was after this incident that Patient X first recalls signs of "crushing" - but not a full-on case of Mentionitis. Patient X reports taking more notice of Object Y after it was determined that they would be living near one another one summer, thus increasing socialization. She came to admire him in a number of ways:

Getting to know [Y] over the summer, well, he just started to charm me on the spot. Early in the summer, we were at a friend's birthday party, and he was just...well, he was sitting there, cracking jokes and being sarcastic but kinda sweet at the same time...I looked at him, and I was like

"oh, so this is who [Y] is." Only, I was wrong, 'cause there's so much to him I don't even know where to start. But that was the beginning, really, when I realized how...well, totally charming he really could be. And we did things like go to lunch together — I really enjoyed that, actually, our Sundays. We always had a nice brunch and coffee at a local place with a few other friends, a nice walk, a baseball game. I just really enjoyed his company...

It can be concluded from this information that Patient X was "interested in" Object Y for a long time before displaying the symptoms of Mentionitis; but she was unaware of the extent of this interest on a conscious level. Subconsciously, he had penetrated her mind. This seems to be the highly insidious opening phase of Mentionitis: very hard to catch, and even harder to diagnose.

Phenomenology and Epidemiology

Stage One: The Mentions

The preliminary stage of Mentionitis is almost undetectable. It begins as a pattern of thoughts which the patient herself has very little control over. Patient X does believe that she can pinpoint the time when she realized the extent to which she had become infected with Mentionitis:

We were going out one weekend, the weekend of [Y's] big 21st birthday celebration - he called it the Extravaganza, isn't that cute? - and we went to this little local bar. It was fun, kinda relaxed, but [Y] seemed to be enjoying himself, which I was really glad to see. Then, at one point, [Y] put his arm around a mutual female friend of ours. And this...jealousy just flared up inside of me, almost from out of nowhere. I was totally ready to take that b---- out.

It seems that this moment of realization is followed by the immediate growth of several other more visible symptoms: obsessive grooming in an attempt to impress, laughing too loud or not at all at his jokes, finding irrational reasons

to visit him, systematically keeping track of his movement through tools such as AIM and Facebook, and the key symptom to this disease: a constant, repetitive mentioning of Object Y's name. Women afflicted with the mentions will even go to extreme lengths to conjure up their object's name. An example Patient X uses: "We were talking about a beach, and I said the ocean there is really blue, you know, blue like [Y's] eyes. Not one of my prouder moments."

Patient X does report that this particular case of Mentionitis was different from her previous ones. She felt no particular feelings of embarrassment when around Object Y - rather, she felt unusually comfortable around him. Though Patient X did not want to seem over-interested, or what in colloquial terms is known as "desperate," she also did not go to extremes to keep it hidden. This is a great change from previous cases of Mentionitis, where Patient X was reportedly "terrified" of letting others know about it.

Yet, Patient X stayed silent. She fully expected that this condition was merely temporary: "I have a tendency to be, like, a little boy-crazy. I thought this would fade like all the others." Patient X thought her crush would cease when the school year started, and she was distracted by schoolwork and other activities. However, to Patient X's surprise, Object Y joined a theatrical club she was involved in, the result was that she would see him nearly every day for close to ten weeks in a row.

As a result, the friendship with Object Y began to deepen; since a number of Patient X's close friends were overseas for a semester, she found herself turning to Y to find relief when she was stressed or upset. She would often try to arrange time to spend with him, either asking his help on an application, watching a game, or a mutually-liked television show. Of these times, Patient X says she:

...loved them. We would have these great, great conversations. We could just sit on a couch and talk for two

hours, about anything from Shakespeare to Harry Potter. I found that we thought and processed things very similarly, even if on the surface we were very much opposites - he's a little more introverted, I'm a little more extroverted, he's all about math, and I'm all about literature, he sticks to the rules of grammar and I totally ignore them all the time, he hates shopping and I love it...still, I liked talking to him.

Stage Two: Sign-Searching

In the next stage of Mentionitis, Patient X began to closely analyze Object Y's behavior, convinced that she could find some sort of sign that he reciprocated her feelings. She believed that his willingness to sit with her through Grey's Anatomy (a popular television series) marathons, the ease with which they could talk, or even simply sitting next to her at a regular lunch meeting on Tuesdays and Thursdays were pointing to signs of a mutual affection. In retrospect, Patient X admits that some of these "signs" were far-fetched: at one point, Object Y made a joke about finding a girlfriend, and Patient X "totally swore it was a hint."

Such is the characteristic of this stage: every single aspect of interaction with Object Y is analyzed, from word choice to physical contact, to "meaningful looks." Often, other friends of the patient are enlisted in the observations and analysis; Patient X told us she had at least two male friends whom she went to with a lot of her queries, in an effort to "understand the male mind." Patient X also sought information from a close friend of Object Y, who, in turn, encouraged Patient X to speak up to Y on her own, in a mature manner.

With this advice in mind, Patient X began to seek the appropriate opportunity to let Object Y know of her feelings. This was a critical move for Patient X — never before had she dared to reveal her feelings to a prior object of Mentionitis.

Stage Three: Rejection

Had Patient X not spoken up to Object Y it is possible that her Mentionitis might have continued on at Stage Two for some time before dying down; instead, the subsequent events inflamed the symptoms to Stage Three, resulting in the regression of the patient to the maturity level of a pre-pubescent girl. As Patient X tells the story:

So, I've always expressed myself better through writing. One day, I just...wrote [Y] a letter, telling him how I felt. I wasn't actually going to give it to him, but then I decided I had to do it, I had to jump for it. So I set a deadline for myself, and wrote it in my planner and everything, and on the night of the deadline, I went to his room, gave him the letter. I...I remember the look he gave me when I walked in. I could have sworn there was this...glimmer in his eye, in his smile. Like he knew exactly what I was going to say, and was maybe even excited about it. Then he read my letter... and again, he looked up with this smile and said, in reply to my dinner invitation, 'I'd love to.' Love to. I thought - this is made. This is perfect. I was so damn proud of myself, thinking I'd earned myself, like, more than a few Feminist points for taking the initiative...

Unfortunately, as Patient X continues the story, there was a drastic miscommunication that really came to resemble a poorly-written sitcom's version of a Comedy of Errors.

The first day or so after I gave [Y] the letter, I was on the top of the world. I thought, hey, [Y] wants to go out to dinner with me, liked me. This must make me someone special...I don't know what I expected, really. I think I just wanted him to seek me out more, to be friendlier or flirtier after I asked him out. Instead he was the same...even colder, or more distant. Then, the first night we talked after I gave him the letter, he told me that he wasn't actually interested in a date. He just wanted to be friends. I was...disappointed. That's the only word that describes it. A deep, belly-twisting feeling of disappointment.

Object Y's ultimate rejection of Patient X's advances sent her into a downward spiral. Again, she analyzed every detail of the prior conversations with Object Y, looking for a time where she "went wrong." She talked about it compulsively with others, exponentially increasing the number of times his name came up in casual conversation. Patient X describes herself in this stage as: "emo-level pathetic."

In addition, Patient X would listen to music (often from genres labeled "emo," "chick-angst" or "angry-chick-rock") which contained lyrics about longing, would put up leading and/or pointed lyrics in her "away messages" for the program AIM. Patient X had essentially lost the maturity she was seeking to grasp in first bringing her feelings for Object Y to light.

Patient X reports trying to distract herself from Object Y with other friends, and other activities. Patient X was not, she says, above the occasional opportunity to flirt with Object Y, but on the whole she tried to back off in her open pursuit. Patient X tells us that, now, she has given up all hope for reciprocation from Object Y, and tries, with varying levels of success, to conduct herself as such.

Treatment

There are a variety of possible treatments for Mentionitis, though none guarantees a cure. The treatment option with the highest success rate is that of the patient entering into a relationship with the object of the affliction; as seen above, however, this is not possible for Patient X.

The other treatment possibility is to switch the object of her Mentionitis to a more viable option, in terms of founding a relationship. This, however, is one of the riskier options, has a very high rate of side effects, and can intensify the effects of the condition in the long run. In rare cases, a woman will lose her very identity into the relationship, and friends, especially single female ones, will abandon her.

The best treatment option for Patient X is letting time pass. Mentionitis does eventually fade away; though it may be many months before the afflicted individual is able to speak an object's name without blushing. This is a cure which requires large doses of patience, something in short supply, and can therefore really tax the resources of an individual; hence its unpopularity among the medical community.

There are, however, some long-term effects of having Mentionitis, which Patient X will probably have to face for the rest of her life. Among them will be a continual, irrational desire to impress Object Y: "His opinion will always matter to me. I want him to respect me as much as I do him. It's silly, I know, but I still seek his approval."

Furthermore, Patient X will have to deal with mockery: oftentimes, friends of the afflicted person will make jokes about the Mentionitis. This are likely attempts to make Patient X view the condition in a less serious manner, but can cause irritation.

There is, fortunately, one great benefit to Mentionitis. Sometimes, the patient invests so much effort in creating a sort of relationship with the object of the Mentionitis that after the worse of the condition has faded away, a genuine friendship might remain. This is something which Patient X truly looks forward to in regards to Object Y:

He's a remarkable man: there are so many things about him which make [Y] unique. He's so totally willing to help anyone who asks it of him. He's really compassionate, and really smart. He's special, one-of-a-kind in the best way. I would be privileged to be considered a good friend of his, even if that's all. That's enough.

Conclusion

As it currently stands, Patient X is still somewhat smitten by Mentionitis. Object Y's name does occur regularly in conversation; this is most probably a combination of the

Mentionitis and the natural result of actually interacting with him regularly. Patient X is hopeful that Friendship will settle in when the rest of the more severe symptoms fade away.

One thing which Patient X is thankful for in this particular occurrence of Mentionitis:

I grew up, a lot, this year, because of dealing with Y. His response to me was a model of maturity, maturity I really needed to learn from. It's time I stopped being the shy girl who waits for the first move, and he taught me that even if that first move ends in disaster, something good may come of it. Even if it's not what I expect.

However, Patient X is at high-risk for another case of Mentionitis with a different object. We can only hope that, before that happens, the medical community as a whole will have taken note of this disease, and developed additional treatments for it. This is urgent; the sanity of the female gender depends on it.

100 LINES ON THE SEASONS OF MOURNING

written by
SIOBHAN WATSON

"You'll know what the sun's all about when the lights go out."
— The Black Keys

Stability.

I check the weather every morning before dressing for high school.

It's warm enough this October morning to wear only knee-highs and a short-sleeved blouse. I skip a sweater all-together.

I don't realize how quickly the weather can change.

I don't know how comforting the cold can be;
I only know the warmth of convenience:

The ease of spring, the carelessness of summer, the protection of a heated house.

No need to plan being safe, no cause for worrying about storm clouds or nightfall.

Denial.

My grandmother is a nervous woman, always picking at her nails.

The soft thhkt, thhkt, thhkt follows her everywhere, a noise shadow, or white noise—something to get used to and notice only in silence.

I don't think twice about her anxiety when she arrives at the store where I work.

"We've got to go home. I've got to take you home now."
Her voice always trembles like that, even when she's calm.

She steps into a strange gray car when we emerge outside, motioning for me to follow.

"Wh-whose car is this?" I ask as I open the back door with a shaky hand.

"Don't worry," she says. Thhkt. Thhkt. Thhkt.

While my uncle drives us home, I count how long I can hold my breaths.

It's dark, and cold as silence. I release that breath: 37.

I suck in more air and watch my uncle in the rear-view mirror.

There are too many cars in front of my house; are the neighbors having a party?

"Don't be worried. Everyone's here. Don't be scared."

I don't hear the thhkt that I know must have followed.

"Your father's had a heart attack. Your father's passed away." *Oh.*

Aunts and uncles swarm, their collective thhkts and sniffles overwhelming.

I exhale without counting. My first thought is that I feel silly wearing jeans.

I glance at my mother, whose open mouth reminds me of a fish.

I sit on the edge of an uncomfortable chair I've never noticed before. I don't whisper a word.

I hold a tissue in my fist like an insurance policy.

I sit and sit and wonder when it would be appropriate to leave the table.

I look at the ceiling, my nails, the door—anywhere but the eyes focusing on me. I count the cracks in the walls and the hangnails on my fingers.

I rise without warning or ceremony and set in the dark of my room.

My aunts respond like tides, swelling and churning;

my uncles sink into their seats and watch the movement.

My face is still—no creases or wrinkles dash my brow,

and no matter how hard I squint—
I can't cry.

Isolation.

I press each digit of my boyfriend's phone number with special emphasis.

He says, "Hello." I say, "My dad's dead." And what else is there to say?

After a few moments of naked silence I ask, "How's the weather there?"

He tells me that there's going to be an eclipse tonight, and that I should go look.

I run through the mist of tears, through the fog in my living room, and press my face to the glass door. It's cold on my cheek; my breath leaves a cloud.

I can't see the eclipse, and I can't open the door—
not just because it has gotten cold and I am jacketless,
but I was here, looking out of this door earlier this day—
looking for my father.

I came home earlier that day expecting to see him, but found only a silent house.

"Dad, I've got to go to work."

I peeked in and out of rooms and echoed down somehow unfamiliar halls.

I looked through this locked door, and got my mother to drive me instead.

But while I was at work, laughing, complaining,
my family invited 911 to join in the search.

It was here that the firemen walked through with their axes.

But they didn't find fire in my shed; they found ice:
my father lay, as still as the horizon, among the gardening tools.

I abandon the eclipse and consciousness all-together.

I swallow chalky blue pills in the hopes of clearing my

mind, but it doesn't help. I can't dream of stars without seeing the black beyond them.

Anger.

I still check the weather faithfully, though I've no where to go.

The sun still insists on shining every morning that I wake—

"Lo! The most excellent sun, so calm and haughty..." rings as the light burns my eyes.

I drag around his sweatshirt as though it were his ghost;

I put it on the seat next to me and tell it about my day, ask about the cotton industry, talk about the weather.

I don't expect it to respond, but I can't help but remember in the stinging quiet:

"In the history of language
the first obscenity was silence."

Depression.

Moving through my house in the days after learning of my dad's passing

(which is a word used only by those who have not seen death) is what I imagine walking through Hiroshima would be like.

Still, still, still—even the dogs have stopped barking at the squirrels

and neighbors bringing shining fruit baskets and green-gray casseroles.

There is no breath shaking this house, and the walls shrink in response.

Cards are crammed into the mailbox's shallow mouth, spilling onto the steps.

Deepest sympathy for your Loss. These are Hard times for Us All.

Sympathy cards are punctuated and capitalized in unusual ways.

Bargaining.

I watch my ceiling for clouds and, when night falls, stars.
The white is unchanging, but when I stare long enough,
I swear
I can just make out my father's face. I blink in disbelief,
and he's gone.

My grandmother emerges out of the kitchen: thhkt, thhkt,
thhkt.

"Do you know where your mother is? We can't find her.
She isn't—"
I blink in disbelief, but she's already gone. Thhkt, thhkt,
thhkt.

I close my eyes and try to picture Van Gogh's faith in what he
could see:

"When I have a terrible need of- shall I say the word -
religion.
Then I go out and paint the stars."

Acceptance.

I keep the weather channel on through the day—
The local weather is on every ten minutes: 12:08, 12:18,
12:28...changes take forever like that.
But finally, I hear it: "Cold front, rain moving in by tomorrow.
And for the first time since my father's death, I cry—
even droughts end.

Stability.

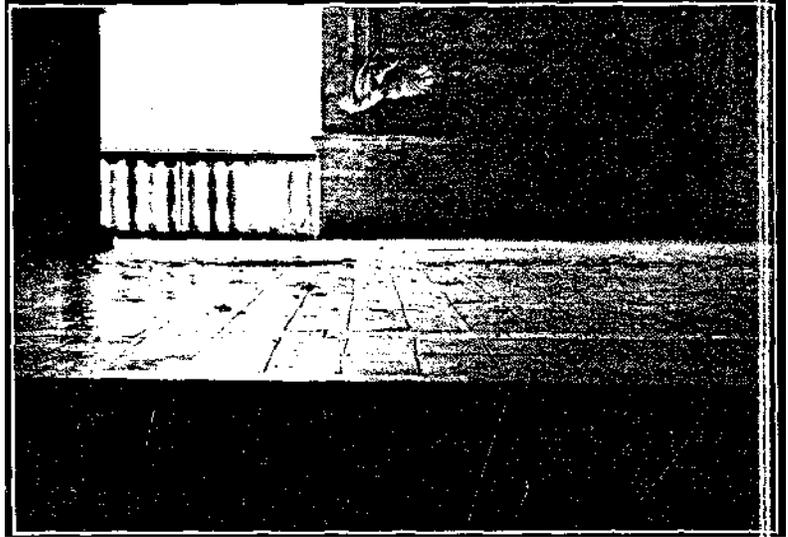
Spring will always return; the sun never sets without rising
again.



KRISTIN BOISE '09



ALLYSON CARROLL '08



ALLYSON CARROLL '08



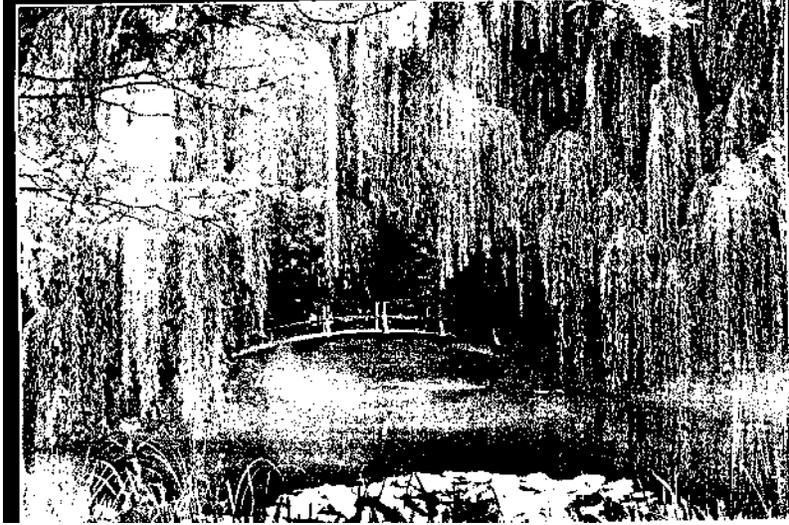
ALLYSON CARROLL '08



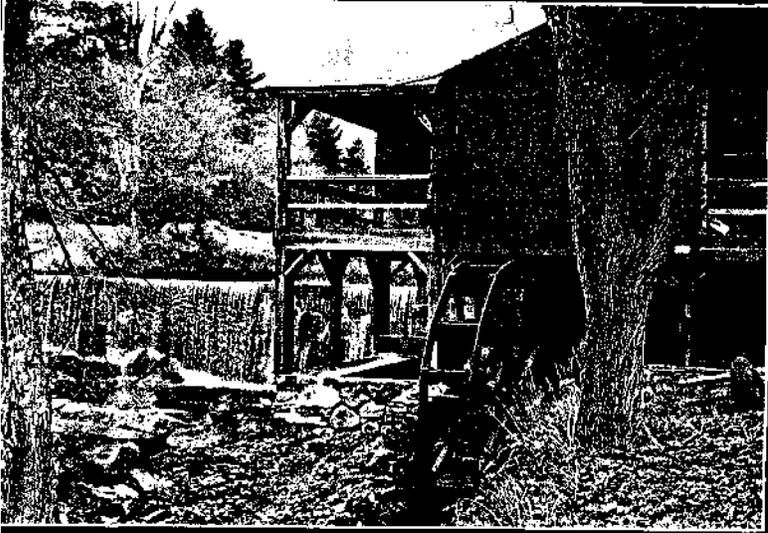
PAULA MORRIS '10



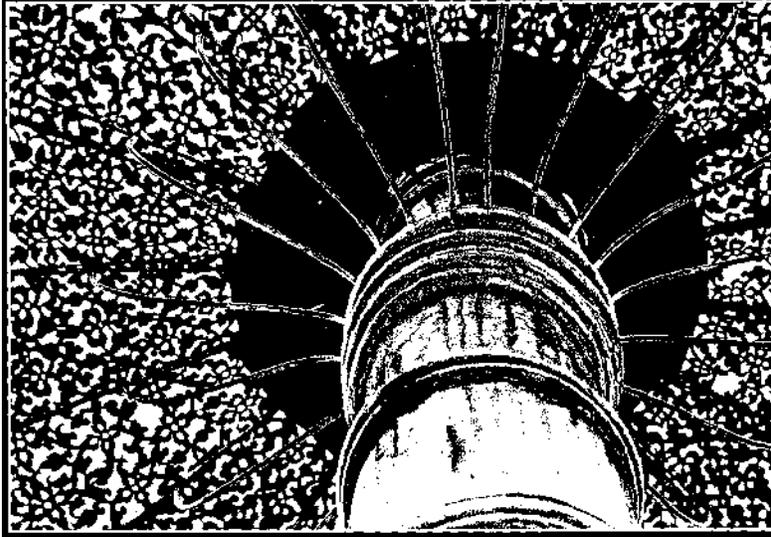
JESSE DEFLORIO '11



LAURA EMERSON '10



LAURA EMERSON '10



MICHAEL BOYLE '09



MICHAEL BOYLE '09

THE WONDER YEARS

written by
COURTNEY CARBONE

*What would you do if I sang out of tune
Would you stand up and walk out on me
Lend me your ear and I'll sing you a song
I will try not to sing out of key*

When I was growing up, one of my favorite television shows was the "The Wonder Years." The show detailed the everyday life of Kevin Arnold, an awkward prepubescent teenager growing up during the revolutionary late 60's and early 70's. The show focused on his family life, love interest Winnie, best friend Paul, and his eventual maturation to adulthood. Set against the harsh background of the Vietnam War, the show sensitively dealt with deep issues like pain, death, loss, and heartache, while still nurturing a small spark of hope for the future.

The show aired for six seasons before being cancelled. It's impossible to get the boxed set, so all I can do is hope that I am able to catch a random rerun every once in a while. It's the kind of show that has kept me thinking for years afterward, and no matter how much time passes, the depth of the feelings I once felt stay with me. At the end of every episode, the narrator, a voiceover by Daniel Stern, summed up everything I ever needed to know about life. Over the years, I have written down these quotes on little slips of paper, pulling them out every once and again to remember what they mean to me.

I remember a house like a lot of houses, a yard like a lot of yards, on a street like a lot of other streets. I remember how hard it was growing up among people and places I loved. Most of all,

I remember how hard it was to leave. And the thing is, after all these years, I still look back in wonder.

The first time I referred to college as "home," I thought my mother was going to cry. That's just the way it is. I spent four years making good and bad decisions, hoping that the two would balance each other out. Or at the very least, I hope people won't remember the bad ones so much. I often think about all the expectations I had for myself. All the things that my family and friends thought I was capable of. I marvel at how quickly the time has passed: how in the middle of it all I am unable to change it, stop it, or even slow it down a little.

Next semester will be my last semester at Loyola College. Four years of papers, finals, midnight breakfasts, sailing practices, newspaper columns, and sliding down banisters just for the hell of it. What did I do in college? Well, I did everything there was to do. Still, I cannot help but have that numb feeling in my gut that makes me wonder: was it enough?

When you're a little kid you're a bit of everything; Scientist, Philosopher, Artist. Sometimes it seems like growing up is giving these things up one at a time.

I came into college thinking that I was going to be a business major. I was going to be a professional and successful corporate entity, with passion, dedication and commitment to economic theory and financial planning. The first time I met with my advisor, all that changed.

"You don't want to do business, Court. Business is numbers." I remember thinking, *what's wrong with numbers?* Sure, my math SAT was over 100 points lower than my verbal, but that doesn't mean I couldn't hack it in the business world. Look at those guys. There's nothing they had that I didn't. Well, excluding career goals and post-graduation job plans. I let my self-doubt convince me to stick with what came easily: an English major.

Still, I'll go out with my friends on Thursday nights to Fed Hill, soaking up the attention from all the young urban professionals that have stumbled into our corner bar. This one is an investment banker. That one works for a hedge fund. They talk about nothing but company buy-outs and signing bonuses. Even buying me a drink somehow becomes a joke about supply and demand.

I could have done that. I could have been like them. I could have sold-out to what I once heard referred to as the "abusement park" of corporate America. I look back at that conversation with my freshman year advisor and think, Thank God. If it wasn't for my advisor, I might actually have turned out just like them.

All of our young lives we search for someone to love. Someone that makes us complete. We choose partners and change partners. We dance to a song of heartbreak and hope. All the while wondering if somewhere, somehow, there's someone perfect who might be searching for us.

As she and I stood applying mascara in our bedroom mirror, my older sister, Jenna, once told me, "You always have to think, 'Maybe tonight I'll meet the man of my dreams.'" I have always kept this advice tucked up in heart. Not a day has passed where I haven't thought it to myself with at least a little glimmer of hope.

Kevin Arnold's parents, Jack and Norma, got married right out of college. So did my parents. Actually, most of my friends' parents did, too. This has left my generation with a little bit of relationship anxiety. It's nearly graduation and I haven't met anyone that I would even think about spending the rest of the semester with, let alone the rest of my life.

Not for lack of trying: I have dated my fair share of college guys. Just last night I went to Little Italy with a boy I met at my Christmas party this past weekend. He asked me for my number and I gave it to him because he was friends with my

roommate. He then asked if he could take me out to dinner and I agreed. Why not, right? He and I talked and danced for the rest of the night. When it got really late, he thanked me and my roommates for having him and then gave me a hug good-bye before slipping out the door into the cold night.

The door closed behind him and I heard my sister's words echo in my head.

I looked at my roommate, Kristen, and asked her, "Should I run after him?" Her eyes blazed with excitement as she pushed me toward the door, "Do it!" So I ran to the front door, slipped through it and barreled down the stairs barefoot. He must have heard me coming because he turned around as I approached him, "Hey, what's-"

I kissed him before he could finish.

Then, turned and ran back up the steps.

In your life you meet people. Some you never think about again. Some you wonder what happened to them. There are some that you wonder if they ever think about you. And then there are some you wish you never had to think about again; but you do.

Kevin Arnold's best friend was Paul, an awkward, Jewish boy with bad luck and bad allergies. Throughout the series, the two were inseparable. I've met a lot of people in my time at Loyola. The three girls I live with, my best friends, Meg, Krissy, and Ash are not going to be living together after we graduate. Ashley wants to move to Thailand to teach for a year abroad. Kristen will be staying in Baltimore, probably accepting a job from one of those Morgan banks, either JP or Stanley (I don't know the difference anymore). Meg will probably move back home to Pennsylvania and work at the medical device company she's been at for years. As for me? Well, I don't want to get a job before I know where I want to live. I don't want to decide where to live before I travel. And, of course, I can't travel before I get a job. So I can't commit to anyone or anything, not even myself. I can't agree to live

with Krissy in Baltimore or Meg in PA. I would consider going to Thailand but if I'm going to live in a different country, it's going to be Australia.

Change is never easy. You fight to hold on. You fight to let go.

I met a boy the first week I got to Melbourne, Australia. He was my Senior RA, a sun-streaked true blue Aussie with the accent and everything. I can say without reservation that he was the most strikingly handsome boy I'd ever met: I was smitten with him instantly. We casually started seeing each other that first week.

One night when we were out at a bar, there was this man following me around. He introduced himself as Paul, but my friends would later refer to him as "Tracksuit," because of the Kelly green sweat suit he had chosen to impress the ladies with that night.

"Tell him to leave me alone," I begged my Australian.

"And how am I meant to do that?"

"Just kiss me so he knows to back off."

"If I kiss you right now, in this bar, in front of everyone, then that will mean we're together," he told both me and himself.

I bit my lip. It was the longest minute of my life, until finally, his lips met mine. We were together for the next 5 months, from that very moment until he drove me to the airport and said his last good-bye in the terminal.

I never knew until that moment what it was like to lose something I never really had.

Kevin and Winnie didn't end up together in the end, either. A person can change a lot of things, but not their nationality. Not where they grew up. Not where the people they love most live. It's tough to come to terms with the fact that life isn't a TV show. That's why I loved "The Wonder

Years" so much. It was more than 30 meaningless minutes rolled out between commercials and lines of production credits. It was a lot more.

All we could do was close our eyes, and wish that the slow song would never end.

I know that six months from now I will know better where I am going, what I am doing with my life. My life will hopefully have some kind of sensible trajectory. When my big dreams and great expectations fall short, I'll eventually need some kind of medical insurance, a stable job, real world experience. Like Kevin Arnold, I will need to understand that life isn't a fairy tale sequence of events, but rather an overlapping and complex collage of love, pain, laughter, and heartache. Things and people come and go, but it's the memory and feeling in your heart that remains.

Things never turn out exactly the way you planned. I know they didn't with me. Still, like my father used to say, 'Traffic traffic, you go where life takes you...'

And when all is said and done, all I can do is try not to sing out of key.

"The Wonder Years." IMDB. 13 Dec. 2007
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094582/>>.

SILVER SUNS AND PAPER MOONS

written by
PETER BARTELS

At 5:30 in the morning on the last day of March, I find myself (almost literally), sobering up in the Paper Moon Diner across from Johns Hopkins University. If Baltimore harbors a more baffling environment for such an experience, I find it hard to imagine. The diner's exterior calls to mind the set of a trashy 1960's horror set mashed together with a Sesame Street background gone awry. To get to the front door, one must first pass through a bright yellow pagoda, past a tree suspending a mannequin from its gnarled branches, and around an old bathtub with another dummy—bright red—buried up to his chest in dirt. The interior is no less confusing: the pastel colored walls are lined with one-eyed dolls and action figures, toy cars and Pez dispensers, buttons, G.I. Joes, thousands of pennies, lace, twigs, leaves and vines. Christmas lights hang from the deep blue ceiling. No two tables or chairs are the same. Nothing I've seen since I've come to Baltimore has offered anywhere near the amount of character that now assaults my bleary, overwhelmed eyes. I've lived in this city for almost eight months, and, watching the sun come up behind Mary as she convinces the waitress to fire up the fryer for some sweet potato fries, I know that I have finally stumbled upon a piece of Baltimore's texture.

When I was in sixth grade, my teacher Mrs. Larson asked us to write a short story. As far as I can tell, that was the first real creative writing paper I had been assigned. When the due date rolled around, I ended up turning in a couple of pages on an awkward sixth grade romance, which, not at all by coincidence, was loosely based on my own current experi-

ences. A couple days later, as I scuttled into class with my eleven year-old counterparts, Mrs. Larson pulled me aside.

"Peter," she began almost accusingly over her too-thick glasses, "I would like to read your paper to the class...I trust you do not have a problem with this."

"Ugh..." I answered quite articulately.

"Excellent, then please take your seat," she instructed while ushering me towards my place in the front row (damn the alphabet).

I remember a few things after she had finished reading my masterpiece. First, were my red ears and the love of my life, Anna, playing furiously with her hair a few desks down. Next in line though, was Mrs. Larson, slightly muffled through the newly discovered ringing in those crimson ears, explaining to the class what made my pseudo-confession a good piece of writing. And so it was that once I had cast off the blankets of embarrassment, I was left with a newly formed notion that I was, somehow, a bit of a natural writer. Like any person, I am defined by many things, but if asked about my identity, I will begin with the fact that I am a Midwesterner. When it came time to choose schools, I decided to head east to a part of the country in which I had never spent much time. Here, my friends are different: they're more sarcastic, they do things a bit quicker, they use a different set of idioms from my friends back home. According to my roommate, our 20" TV is "fresh" and Peyton Manning is (unfortunately for him) both "sick" and "dirty." The girls here are different: I've found them to be more aggressive and intimidating than my beloved Midwest girls, generalization acknowledged.

Aside from the jarring geographical and social shifts, college in general cultivates a different lifestyle from high school, regardless of how far away one goes. Since arriving here last September, I've made almost all of my own decisions, used my time for practically anything I want, and learned how to fix problems all by my nineteen-year old self.

This transition, then, from a high school senior in suburban Chicago to a college sophomore in Baltimore has molded me into a noticeably different person and, as a result, a different writer.

In my first semester of college I was lucky enough to have Lia Purpura as my writing professor. An awesome writer, teacher, and person, Professor Purpura was also one of the most demanding teachers I have ever had. Faced with both a strong desire to prove my worth to an established writer and also with the prospect of not getting a strong grade in a writing class, I wrestled with every paper as if I were Rulon Gardner, and I think that through my exhaustive grappling I had a bit of a mini breakthrough, a defining moment in my writing... career?

I had already finished a rough draft for our second paper, the topic being something that bothered us. I had chosen my brother. Patrick didn't bother me the way brothers usually bother each other. My senior by two years, Pat has lived mainly a directionless, passionless life for the last six or seven months, and I was and still am reasonably worried about him. That being said, I wrote a whole first draft on why he bothered me, but at the end I discovered I hadn't really said what I had wanted to say, or to put it better, I hadn't found what I had hoped I would find. My breakthrough came one night when I sat down and frantically wrote about and to him until I had nothing left. All the things I had wanted to say to him I spat out onto my computer at 3 o'clock in the morning. After finally coming up for air, I sent my frenzied dissertation to Professor Purpura that same night. By the next class, she had a printed copy of my less than coherent thoughts, and had commented on almost every line. Here I was, a barely nineteen-year-old writer, throwing out a loosely held together rant for an expert to read, and she had taken the time to show me what was actually in my mess of thoughts. Professor Purpura was able to unearth what I had been digging for, and ever since then my writing, if not improved, has at least been a more organic process.

In the movie "Good Will Hunting," Will takes a rather profound moment to explain to his girlfriend why he is so good at high level mathematics.

"Beethoven, okay. He looked at a piano, and it just made sense to him. He could just play. I look at a piano, I see a bunch of keys, three pedals, and a box of wood. But Beethoven, Mozart, they saw it, they could just play. I couldn't paint you a picture, I probably can't hit the ball out of Fenway, and I can't play the piano... But when it comes to stuff like (math, science, etc.) I could always just play"

In my life, there have been two areas where I have felt an inkling of what Will was trying to explain in that scene. The first is writing, and the second is drumming. Mind you, I am in no way claiming to be a savant like Matt Damons endowed character; I am not arrogant enough to make such a suggestion. I merely mean that both areas have always felt very natural to me, and I've always been able to "just play." But that doesn't mean that I am at all good at either one. In sixth grade, I could coast on raw talent, but not so in college. To become a better writer one must constantly work at complete self-improvement: as a linguist, as an observer, as a relater, as a documenter—as an artist of language. I know far too well that I am by no means an artist in anything that I do. Certain people create; I am not one of them. Only one who understands and has mastered his art can actually step back from his finished product and confidently say to the fellow artist, or to the critic, or to the professor, "I have created something."

I cannot draw. I took one art class the summer between before 7th grade, and somehow the instructor was able to coax a single acceptable piece out of me, but that was a wonderful one-time mistake. Despite this lack of artistic ability, I possess, as I believe all humans do, an innate desire to create (there's that word again) something worthy of existence. In

my life the only two arenas in which I have felt I may someday be able to create are the ones I have never really had to learn. When I play with my band, I feel like I'm on the verge of being an artist, and sometimes, sometimes when I write, I feel the same way.

Of course, the tragedy is that I have chosen to neglect both areas in my life, and have remained stubbornly comfortable with that limited creativity my whole life. I am, in effect, the same drummer I was when I first sat down at my friends set seven years ago, just as I am the same writer now that I was when I unwittingly professed my love for Anna to Mrs. Larson's entire English class. The breakthrough I experienced while working on my brother's paper was a very rare and isolated incident, and as a result I have grown deplorably little as a writer. If you're looking for a fantastic 6th grade writer, I'm your man.

At Loyola, I experience each day through three different lenses. The first is my own, shaped by my relaxed Midwest upbringing. The second belongs to my friends here at school, who are almost exclusively from New York, New Jersey, or, invariably, somewhere juuuust outside of Philly. The third lens I am treated to each and every day is of course Baltimore's very own.

For me then, creating an identity—as both a person and as a young writer—has been a bit confusing at college. I approach conversations slowly, and leave them having taken everything at face value. My friends, on the other hand, tackle conversations. Every exchange is filled with sarcastic quips that flirt along the precipice of blatantly offensive. Upon arriving at Loyola at the end of last summer, I was forced to adjust quickly to this new, combative style of interaction.

Of all the mini-morphs my personality has gone through in the past year, my newfound skill of war-like rhetoric is the most noticeable. Over the summer, my friends often greeted me with sidelong glances as I scampered to apologize for lines I had in the past never crossed. My four older brothers were amazed and impressed to find a baby brother that

could now go toe-to-toe with them not only physically but rhetorically as well. Loyola has sharpened my tongue: given me in effect a different voice—both verbally and scripturally—from its meeker predecessor of 12 months ago.

As often as I can (which is of course not often enough) I try to make time to venture down to Sherwood Gardens, which sits at the bottom of a hill just across Cold Spring Avenue. The garden, which is famous for its array and amount of tulips, is right in the middle of an affluent neighborhood, and the short walk from campus along the reservoir is unfailingly beautiful and soothing. The garden holds company with my basement and the beach across the street from my old house in Illinois as a place where I am utterly excited to just be. Whether I venture there with friends or by myself, a trip to the "Tulip Garden" always includes those telling moments of blissful, smile-laden silence.

Just last week, a friend was walking back to school from a night out when he was held at gunpoint, pistol whipped, and mugged...less than a mile away from my Utopian Tulip Garden. It's that kind of jarring paradox that shapes the first words that fly from my mouth whenever I am asked to tell an uncle, grandparent, or family friend about Baltimore. It's a city segmented into little wedges here and there: prosperous and poverty-ridden side by side, in such a manner that simply crossing a street could very well pull you out of a college professor's perfectly manicured backyard and onto a street corner where men's fingers surreptitiously shake "two" at passing cars.

In Chicago, you know what parts of the city you don't want to be in after dark, and what parts you really don't want to be in after dark. In Baltimore, though, such a dazzlingly juxtaposed configuration tends to produce a lot of excitement for even the shortest of adventures.

Along the same lines is Baltimore's un-ignorable reality of race. Even the most sanguine personalities are left with no choice but to acknowledge the nearly tangible line that runs down York Road, separating the white upper-class from

the black lower-class. My environment has brought me up to recognize those lines and how to avoid ever crossing them.

To traverse such social boundaries immediately places me in uncomfortable circumstances. I watch the world from my side of the boundary. You're reading a young, educated, white, upper-class male's thoughts right now, sorry to break the boring news to you. The reality is that I've led a tremendously sheltered life, happy with my side of the line. The ray of hope however, lies in the instances when I have crossed that social barrier here in Baltimore.

Perhaps the best illustration of my blossoming societal expansion can be seen through my weekly service learning experiences with Hispanic Apostolate during the spring of my freshman year. Working with Hispanic immigrants on their English gave me insight into a different life, and more than half a year later, one student still lingers in my mind. Melvin was by far the best student I worked with. He was a 20-year-old construction worker who had emigrated from Uruguay when he was only sixteen. His English was already fairly strong, and whenever I explained a mistake he might have made or a concept that we were working on, he would listen intently, internalizing, and practicing the sentence a few times in his head before moving on to the next section, never making the same mistake again.

Six days a week, Melvin worked construction in the city; a job that left him tired most days and exhausted the others. Yet, in spite of this demanding way of life, in spite of the fact that he didn't own a car, he still found the time and motivation to come to Hispanic Apostolate every Thursday night, bringing to the table more focus for two straight hours than I think I have ever put into practice anywhere.

Even though Melvin and I were basically the same age, I would never dare to consider myself his equal. At 20, Melvin had worked harder for where he was than I probably ever will. At this time last year, he hadn't seen anyone from his family for four years. He had made sacrifices that I could never

imagine making. On the car ride back to Loyola that night, I remember consciously forcing myself to recognize the opportunities I had grown up with, and coercing myself into a mindset where I no longer took them for granted.

I can think of no better way to maximize my opportunities than to build upon my inclinations. I have long believed that a good writer is first and foremost a good human being. Becoming an actual writer—a creator—involves the accumulation of pertinent experiences, as well as the refinement of an eye that is capable of turning those experiences into some form of meaningful, purposeful, provocative writing. Perhaps the most important step in the maturation of an author is the development of a voice that is particular (peculiar if you will) to him or her (specifically, a voice that isn't primarily recognized by an overzealous use of parentheses and asides). (Or irony). Good writers grow by embracing the grain of their environment.

It's one o'clock on a Sunday afternoon in late September, and I'm sitting on the steps of Ma Petite's shoes and chocolate with my dad and two other men as we all wait for the women in our lives. My dad says how nice it is that he and Mom could come to visit, and I ask him whether he thinks she'll come out with just chocolate or some shoes too. A pigeon bobs its way across the street, somehow timing it so that he never breaks stride, even while cars roll by, oblivious. Mom walks down the steep, chipped steps with two boxes: one full of chocolate brown shoes and the other full of bacon-infused chocolate. We sample her sharable buy and obligingly admire the other as we walk past the lavender and guacamole awnings. Crossing an intersection, I look at the street signs; behind the small green sign that reads "36th St." hangs a larger blue sign that says confidently, "The Avenue."

Stepping off the main drag, we wander through the door of Earth Valley, a newly opened fair trade store. Looking up at the cluttered walls, I am struck by a sculpture of a sun and moon, placed side by side to form a hypnotically imper-

fect circle. I am not often taken like this by any kind of art, and I ask the store owner for its story. I learn that it is made by a Haitian artist who uses only oil drums, fire, and a chisel to create his works. After asking permission, I take the piece off the wall and turn to my mother.

"Do you like this?" I ask her.

"I think it's a beautiful image...Yes, I like it very much" she responds.

"Why do you like it; why do I like it?" I press.

"It's happy." She says at first, but then, after another moment of looking and a few steps forward, corrects herself. "It's the texture." She says confidently. "You like it because of its texture."

I look down at the aluminum duo and know that my mother is right. I give the woman behind the counter forty-two dollars, and we walk back out into the Saturday afternoon sun.

Back on The Avenue, we continue to walk down the street towards the car. On the way we pass Milagro, the store with too many mirrors and Imogen Heap purring in the background. We pass Avenue Antiques, the store that seems to go down and down, room after room, so full of billowing cloth and nooks and crannies that I can't help but think how perfect of a place it would be to bring a girl to sneak kisses with while shopping. We pass a gay couple on a bench, both talking on their Bluetooths, ignoring each other and the man that is passed out on the sidewalk not ten feet away. I look down at the silver sun and moon in my hands. I look at their texture. I see how it shapes them—how it gives them an identity. I see it make them what they are. I tuck the creation under my arm, flop into the back seat, and wait for the short drive home.

A CHANGE IN MINDSET

written by
LAUREN LOEFFLER

"That's just it," he said, and continued to iron his orange Polo shirt. "They're all lazy."

The word "they" is so dangerous — completely necessary; we need a third person plural pronoun. But apparently we are not prudent enough with our language and we have lost control of a weapon.

"They just don't want to work. They don't want to study, and they don't want to work."

I don't think I am being overly sensitive when my blood pressure rises every time someone refers to an entire race, culture, or any array of classification with the word "they." The usage indicates ignorance and is simply not strong enough for the burden of a generalization.

So to whom did the Polo-shirt-ironing boy refer when he said "they"? In this specific instance, he meant black people.

I just don't understand. I don't understand how in an age of supposed acceptance and progression, such bigotry still exists. I don't understand what can cause someone to think in such a way and furthermore try to convince someone else of the validity of such views.

As I walk around my college campus and listen to the dialogue, I am often shocked. I never thought of myself as someone with delicate sensibilities or an untrained ear, but hearing the way some of my classmates speak makes me feel like some sort of puritan.

Nigger.

Faggot.

Where is this language used so casually?

Here. It is here at a private college in Baltimore boast-

ing a broad and diverse education steeped in values of justice where I hear these words that seem horribly out of place and outdated. Racial slurs and derogatory terms are hit back and forth in a game of spiteful tennis. Why are these labels tossed around without regard to their connotation or effects? These words perpetuate a mindset that is detrimental to us.

When I hear the word "nigger" it hurts me; for the word to even appear in my writing causes me discomfort. I'm a white girl, so why should it offend me? I suppose offend is not the right verb. Terrify? Maybe that's better. The word terrifies me because it conveys only hatred. Nothing more, nothing less, pure hatred, and this hatred is a ticking time bomb. I've already said that I don't understand, and it's true, I don't. Continuing to hate just does not make sense. We don't have time for hate - we have too many other issues to handle, none of which can be solved while hate is still so prevalent. Global Warming. Poverty. Genocide. Illiteracy. Drug Addiction. Teenage Pregnancy. Abuse. Crime. Unemployment. Disease. Welfare. Racism. Sexism. Dictatorships. War. Nuclear Weapons.

"Grandé Mocha?"

Insider Trading. Government Corruption. Bribes. No Child Left Behind.

"Grandé Mocha!"

"Oh, that's mine, thanks."

Starbucks.

Corporate America.

There are times that I feel sick when I drink Starbucks. I sit in a nice café, warm and sheltered from the world, type away on my MacBook and I feel nauseous. There is so much that is wrong with the world and so much that is out of balance, yet I have been spared the worst of it. Somehow I am safe, and perhaps this distance is precisely what makes me find hate to be so abhorrent.

So many of our problems stem from ourselves, from our own lack of compassion. Violence begets violence and hate

engenders hate; this is not a foreign or new concept, but one often overlooked. Why, when there is so much suffering and pain in the world, do we still find it acceptable to hate, to perpetuate the cycle?

Life is delicate enough without the danger of hurting each other. A changing climate, storms strong enough to bring a city to its knees, and diseases without cures are only a few of our foes. Why do we waste our time hating and fighting each other when we should be working together to stay alive? Why do we knock down each other's buildings when we should be constructing them together?

We waste our time debating whether or not homosexuals deserve to marry, whether a woman can handle the presidency, or whether crime rates are higher for minorities. Not only do we waste our time, spinning around in perpetual misinformation and misunderstanding, but we fight. We bicker like schoolchildren over petty differences, but the weapons we carry and the words we use are bigger, stronger and far more perilous.

The fights can be in the name of anything: God, morality, or the superiority of one race or gender, but in the end the fight is always really in the name of hate - hate for individuals or entire groups of people. The argument can be made that fighting and hatred are aspects of human nature, but for the sake of our continued existence, this must be proven false. Hatred is killing us in the most literal sense of the word and the time has come to change.

Now, more than ever, we are connected in a global society. Technological advances and global trade connect us in the business world, but we have yet to make enough progress in our humanitarian connections. We are all undeniably linked together and pain in one person is pain in us all. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny." If we understand how closely tied we are, maybe then our language and actions will adapt. Maybe the word "faggot" won't

be heard quite as much if we come to understand how masochistic it really is to hurt someone.

The task of curing our disease of hatred is monstrous, and tough to attempt without sounding trite. Could I stand at the top of a mountain and yell, begging everyone to love each other without question? I could, but my words would be like a drop of water on an inferno. I'm not calling for butterflies and rainbows because I'm not that naïve. What I'm asking for is a change in mindset.

I'm asking for an awakening into the modern world where we have the ability, means and responsibility to fix a number of our own problems. Hatred gets in the way of solutions, placing a heavy burden on our backs as we attempt to climb mountains. When I seek an end to hate I'm not coming strictly from an angle of good nature, I'm seeking an end to hate because it's necessary.

Ending hate can be so simple, too. Start with language. The less words existing to convey hate, the less hate exists. Don't use hateful words, even if you don't intend for their true meaning. Their very utterance does an injustice to the air. Take some time to think about the ways in which we are all similar. At the most basic human level, we are all identical. Our bodies all perform the same tasks and all have the same need for food, water, shelter and love. Once you realize that we are all in this together, ending hate is not some far-fetched dream, nor just a possibility. It is an unavoidable conclusion.

A TIME OF CONFIDENCES

written by
DOUGLAS POLISIN

The morning I left for college was masked in a heavy fog; scattered memories of the night before vainly attempted to piece themselves together as the stench of cheap beer sweating from my pores gave an all too well reminder of last night's festivities. The final farewell to friends, or the few that remained home still, had been a last attempt to cling on to the home-life and the comfort of friends who shared the same travails of the hell that is the awkwardness of high school. Vague images of melodramatic toasts and stories of old intertwined as my eyes peered over the packed bags at the foot of my bed. I wondered if the farewell had been a farewell at all; had I said my goodbyes or just left in a state of panic from my overprotective mother's demands to be home by curfew? Memories blurred into one; the sound of an orchestra as I ran passed dark, unlit houses was the last thing my mind could recall. As I laid my aching head back down to the pillow I thought how funny it was that the one night you hope to remember is the one you can't at all.

As I looked to the pillow next to me, I realized I was not alone in bed.

It seemed that I had accompanied a stranger into my bedroom and she had found a home on the pillow next to me. Dangling her earphones over the side of the bed, a foreign CD player lay in front of my eyes.

Teasing me, I quickly picked up the Discman and examined the scuffmarks on its top. Where had it come from and how had it come into my possession? I suddenly knew that its contents held the answer to the night before. My hands pulled the machine close to my face, still glued to the

pillow, and my thumb popped the top open, unveiling a shining silver burnt disc that was marked, scribbled in bold black permanent marker, "See you soon." The unkempt handwriting was instantly recognized as a flood of memories overtook me, granting me a sigh of relief.

I had left the party two hours after my curfew; after many unpleasant, half-intoxicated phone calls with my mother, begging her to let me spend the last night with my friends. She had allowed an extra hour; I had drunkenly rounded that to about two hours. It was my last night and I knew that not even my mom's cold streak of punishments over the summer could stop me from the voyage I was about to embark on the next day.

I gave a sorrowful and hopeful goodbye cheers to my friends; one that I only half believed. For all I knew, this was the end of our little group. The final nail in the coffin of a group of people that I had spent the past four years living, growing, and fucking up with. The next day I would be on my own; with the new task of making a new group of friends to replace those I spent so long to make. I was leaving those closest to me with the knowledge that they'd only be a penciled-in meet-and-greet for breaks and long weekends. I was aware that I was losing something special; I was losing them, and I was losing the simple pleasures of sheltered friends who could be found at the drop of a phone call. I was terrified more than I could express to my friends, who adopted the attitude that college would breed the greatest freedom ever imagined. I was not convinced. So while their certainties gave me something to hope for, I knew that they, too, were feeling the same isolation and abandonment underneath the illusion of beautiful girls, wild parties, and water fountains somehow replaced with vodka.

As I left my friend's backyard picnic table, crusted with cigarette ashes, baptized with alcohol spills, encircled by a ring of bottles, cans, and dead cancer-sticks, I knew I was leaving an innocence crystallized in the form of high school

friendship. This was the end of road and, yet, we were all trying to convince ourselves that it would never end; that the innocence of not-knowing-any-better activities at the picnic table would last forever. A kinship had been born upon my friend's raggedy picnic table and I saw its legacy inevitably die in our goodbyes.

Making my way out the front door and moving towards a new life, my friend stopped me, bidding me a final goodbye and man-hug that slowly turned into the full-blown hug our friends no longer cared about giving in the final days of summer. After drunken, sentimental, forgotten words, he handed me an old CD player and walked me out the door. "It's only a matter of time. I'll see you soon", he said as I made my way down the steps, tripping over the concrete and finding my balance.

I looked back at the bottom of his driveway; he was still standing atop his steps with his blinding stoop flood-lights turning his lanky, arched body with hands in pockets into nothing more than a black outline; a shadow of the friend I once knew.

Pressing play, I let out a deep breath and gave a great wave. He stood in his shadow and barely moved. The sound of a small guitar accompanied by a pair of lonely string instruments filled my ears. I began to run as the song weaved (its message/force?) through my mind. I knew not of the title or album but I was certain of its creator: Simon and Garfunkle. My friend had spent the past four years explaining the genius of Simon and Garfunkle (mostly, if not entirely due to the part of Simon) to me; a full-blown, longhaired, grunge rock, hating-your-folks, Cobain-induced rock and roll fan who was trapped in the angst-ridden trimmings of the early nineties. "Mrs. Robinson" was the song my dad sang along to in the car, it wasn't rock and roll and it had nothing to do with the pain that I was feeling in high school. But my friend over-compensated for this; he smoked pot, he had a vast knowledge of music, played guitar at a much higher level than the

few chords I knew, and claimed that the artists I listened to descended from a lineage of rebellion laid down by likes of Dylan, Hendrix, Zeppelin, and, of course, Paul Simon.

Who was I to argue? My friend had grown up on Green Day and the new descendants of punk and, *yet*, still looked to these folk and rock players as the most important musicians in all of history. I knew as soon as he showed me his first dimebag of weed that I was un-experienced, un-informed, and unfortunate in believing that grunge had invented good music, proper emotion, and the rebellious attitude of rock and roll. He made me understand that the feelings of angst, hardship, and pain were embodied long before "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "Jeremy".

Countless hours were *spent* explaining the beauty and pain within "The Boxer". Weekend after weekend was spent within my friend's van, drinking and smoking, as the song blast, air-acoustic guitar in tow as the horns screamed and Paul sang "Li la li" again and again. Over the car speakers my friend explained how the song told the story of a man who was forced into situations he did not want, leaving his family, working a job that brought him nothing, and wishing to come back home "where the New York City winters aren't bleedin'" him.

After listening to a few mix-tapes, I found that in all these songs was a sense of loss in which a character hoped to leave the mundane life that the generation before them had placed upon them. Outside of a party one night, my friend turned on Simon's "Duncan" and as I listened to the lines, "My father was a fisherman/ my mama was the fisherman's friend/ and I was born in the boredom and the chowder/ So when I reached my prime/ I left my home in the maritimes", I realized that teen-angst had come compliments of that feeling of displacement and finding one's self in Simons songs.

Thus, Simon and Garfunkel's "Old Friends/Bookends" seemed to be the perfect end as I ran past the dark, unlit houses; the streets I knew common to petty robberies, the

deserted high school track where drug deals and make-out sessions frequented, the houses I believed to be haunted on my street when I was younger.

As I listened to the song, I not only understood the song as a testament of friendship in that the two characters are sitting with one another after years of companionship (whether with or without one another) but as a song about the two moving on from a point of naivety into adulthood, moving from "a time of innocence" and "a time of confidences" into a feeling of complacency that one finds in old age; genuflecting on the past's youthful experiences ("Time it was and what a time it was"), feeling a combination of sorrow and completion as the two characters not only "bookend" themselves by the youthful experiences between the two but "bookend" themselves in understanding that they're fully grown and satisfied with their own individual experiences.

Lying in bed, closing my eyes and listening, I remember running fast as a french horn led a cacophony of thunderous strings atop a gentle ascending acoustic guitar, guiding me home before another one of my mother's calls. I misinterpret one of the lines as the dark streets sweep me away from my friend's house and comfortable adolescence. What is "How terrible strange to be seventy" becomes "How terribly strange to be seventeen", and I realize that "it's only a matter of time" before my friend and I sit on his picnic table, having a beer, trading stories about our lives; bookending one another. Positioning our memories of times together and apart, knowing "they're all that's left."

THE ASSOCIATIVE PROPERTY

written by
MARY MURPHY

"You're so white!"

My cousin Laura pokes the fleshy part of my upper arm. I giggle and adjust my floaties — two neon orange tokens of my mother's eternal neuroticism. At age five, I knew I was a fairly competent swimmer, even in the deep end. But I can hear her voice now as she squeaked the hot plastic up past my elbows, "You know those Romeo kids, Mar-mar. They get rough in the water."

The terracotta of the patio was too hot to stand on, but I wasn't allowed back into the pool until the white streaks of my freshly applied sunscreen had faded.

"A few more minutes, Mar," calls my mother through the screen door, my baby brother on her hip. I sit perched on the railing, the wide white steps into the shallow end, my feet dangling. I watched my cousins do backflips off the diving board, go headfirst down the slide. They did play rough. I watched, mesmerized, as their dark skin seemed to absorb the light. Mine reflected it. Dark skin and dark hair; all six, consummate Italians. Anxiously, I fidgeted in attempt to will the whiteness of my arms away. The Romeo kids didn't need sunscreen. Just my mother and me. Two porcelain dolls sear

I was in my parents' bed when he told me. It was "Mary Monday" on Nick at Nite. A "Mary Tyler Moore Show" Marathon that started at 8 p.m every Monday in July. As a child, it was my favorite show, and my mom loved it, too. How adult I felt, laughing every time Lou Grant vigor-

ously scolded Mary, every time she pulled that same dejected face.

The two window fans buzzed over the laugh track as I cocooned myself into the cool white sheets. In the episode, Ted Baxter and his wife Georgette adopt a son named David, because they think they can't have children. In a supremely '70s conclusion, Georgette reveals she's pregnant before the credits roll.

"What does adoption mean?" I curled toward my father, who knelt at the side of the bed.

"It's when a mom and a dad decide to love a baby that grew in another mommy's tummy. Mom was adopted, did you know that?"

I giggled. He smoothed my hair and laughed, perhaps to reassure me or to lift away some of the statement's gravity. Then he said it again; that Nanny and Poppy adopted Mom like Georgette and Ted adopted David. I cannot recall the way in which this fact became real to me, how I could have possibly wrapped my five-year-old mind around something that didn't even make sense on TV. But perhaps the comprehension came in waves, the assimilation unpacking itself gradually upon me over time — a process that still, perhaps, remains incomplete.

I turned back toward the television, watching the little boy in the red baseball cap and blue polo shirt, feeling a strange and unfixated connection. Something had changed. And in a way I was not quite conscious of then, (could I have been?) I felt as if I, at five, belonged to someone who did not belong to anyone.

Just days after, I sat in the passengers seat as my mother drove us to Gilligan's Island, a diner 15 minutes out of town, for ice cream. There was no talk of what my dad had told me, no Dr. Spock-like analysis of my current emotional state -- I don't think there ever was. Just going out for ice cream. Just us girls.

"Are you gonna get Cookies n' Cream?" My mother asked. The flavor was my latest discovery, after trying it for

the first time at a birthday party weeks earlier. I remember forcing an ordinary response, trying not to let on to the fact that I was suddenly enamored by her; the woman who smelled of Wrigley's Winterfresh and Cover Girl pressed powder; the woman whose taupe winter coat - the nylon one with shoulder pads - always swooshed into the house when she came home from work and slid off her leather driving gloves in the foyer, her pink nose and lips both verifying the cold and bringing it with her.

She was my mother, but altered. My mother, transformed. I studied her profile as we drove farther and farther from town; her face set against the citrine green of the desolate farms and fields we passed. Our big hazel eyes and ivory skin, almost identical. Even at five, my face was hers. I continued to stare, with a pure and uncompounded sadness that only a five year old can apperceive, feeling so sorry for my mother -- a separate entity, a far off planet floating through the universe looking for something to belong to. Or was that me? I wasn't sure -- I'm still not. Because what's mine is hers, and vice versa.

I ordered Cookies n' Cream for myself, and she got black raspberry, like always. We drove around town until it got dark, looking for deer with sticky hands and lips. When the sun had finally set, we took the long way home, around Hamilton Hill and Taylor Lake. It seemed like we'd been gone for hours.

My mother's Aunt Caroline died when I was 13. Though she'd been a presence throughout my childhood with baked ziti and fried fish at her house every Christmas, she had been my mother's second mother, the antidote to my grandma's brash and tactless disposition.

"You're acting crazy, Mary Rose," my grandma would scoff, as she hovered over the kitchen table, stuffing the artichokes for supper. My mother would retreat to her Aunt's house, only a block away in the small neighborhood, to eat warm pizzelles and watch "Love American Style" as Caroline

cursed out her sister in broken Italian.

As my Aunt's battle with ovarian cancer expired, I had endless dreams about her. In dreams, she looked warm and radiant, almost lit from within — the way she'd looked before the cancer, the way my mother remembered her, before she'd become thin and withdrawn, her raspy cigarette-voice strained with every syllable. By the end of June, the phone calls started. It was a summer of cancer-speak: regression, biopsy, malignant.

"Can you come get me?" I had called my mother from a pool party only a half-hour after arriving. I got inside the van, my throat sore and my eyes glassy. We cried together the entire way home. I mourned for myself. I mourned for my mother — because everything Aunt Caroline was to my mother, she was to me, too. The associative property.

Her funeral was on the Fourth of July. My cousins went up one by one, then her daughters—six signs of the cross before the casket. When it was my mother's turn, she gripped my arm and we walked cautiously toward the open casket, red-faced and sobbing. I'm holding her up, I thought, as we knelt and prayed together.

It was the fourth grade, I think, during show and tell. The girl had laid out the daintiest pair of gloves I'd ever seen on the desk in front of her. They were a faded ivory with delicate buttons running up from the wrist.

"These were my grandmother's from the 1930s," she said, smoothing her hands over the fragile silk, beaming with pride.

"They fit me just right, because she has tiny hands like I do." She easily slid the right glove up to her elbow and wiggled her fingers inside. "See?"

I looked down at my own hands. My long, spindly fingers and pale ivory skin, as I thought of my grandmother's—large with short, sturdy fingers, her bones thick underneath copper skin. I felt the jealousy build as I watched the girl slide on the left glove, the sleek material catching the light as

she held out her forearms for us to marvel. I didn't want my grandmother's hands, I thought, ashamed for feeling such fierce envy. I wanted my grandmother to have my hands.

My mother and I fought often during my high-school years. Knock-down, drag-out fights through slammed doors and rabid tears that would leave us both hoarse the next morning.

"You're just ungrateful!" she sneered once, silence finally broken after a four-day standstill — the product of a vicious exchange days earlier that even my father couldn't mediate. I threw a dining room chair into the wall (the mark is still visible) and left the house as the cherry-stained spindles skidded across the marble. With no idea where to go, I began to walk. I walked for hours, squinting at the hot July sun, counting mailboxes as I passed them: The Martins, The Marotzes, The Saccos, shaking the bits of gravel from my flip-flops. I walked to the end of our long country road and took a left, toward the rocky construction site on Hamilton Street, where bulldozers sat but never moved. I tried to kill time, sitting on the hot earth for what seemed like hours, methodically scooping up crushed rock and letting it fall through my fingers until my hands were coated in pallid beige dust.

Then I stood up and walked home, because I knew she'd be worried.

A few weeks ago my grandma called and asked me to come over. She and my grandpa had been fighting over a picture they'd found in an old photo album from the attic.

"Mary Catherine, come in here," she motioned me into the bedroom where she sat, photographs sprawled everywhere, black and white squares dotting the ivory bedspread.

She picked a black and white wallet size with dog-eared corners.

"Your grandpa says it's your mother, but I told him it was my Mary Catherine."

I could hear my grandpa scoff playfully from the hallway. I took the picture in my hands and examined.

It was me. My father had taken it in the living room of our old house. I remembered that pink floral dress, my dad trying in vain to stop me from giggling long enough to pose. "See, Joe?" She glanced knowingly toward my grandpa who leaned in the doorway.

He laughed and feigned offense, "Well, I knew it was either you or your mother."

Me. Or my mother.

There was no else it could have been.

HOW TO DISAPPEAR

written by
RACHEL TIERNEY

Magic tricks have always fascinated me. When I was young, I'd stop to watch street performers in Cambridge's Davis Square as they shuffled cards and found coins behind unsuspecting ears, making things appear and disappear at whim. I would practice these tricks for hours, but my six-year-old hands were not nimble enough to pull them off successfully. Even when, on rare occasion, I was able to recall a ten of hearts or three of clubs, I was very conscious of the fact that I was not actually making the card reappear. Because in order to make something reappear, it must first disappear, and that was an art I couldn't seem to master, no matter how hard I tried. My older siblings tried teaching me, which always made me feel guilty that the cards and coins were only practice until I could figure out how to make myself disappear - away from all seven of my brothers and sisters, my parents, the two dogs and one cat that consumed every inch of space in our home - into a space of my own.

My family's presence followed me everywhere — job interviews, college applications, first dates. The subject was inescapable. And, inevitably, on the first day of school, teachers asked the same get-to-know-you questions, one of which always centered around family.

"And how many brothers and sisters do you have, Rachel?" they'd ask.

"Well, there are eight of us...."

"Eight of you?"

"Yes, eight of us," I confirmed, "and I'm the sixth. Although technically I am also the oldest." My teacher made no attempt to solve the riddle, and instead gaped open-mouthed

at me until I continued. "The five oldest are step siblings, the youngest is a half sibling, and the second youngest is my only true blood sibling, but we all live in the same house. Well, most of us anyway. But we don't really have the same set of rules, so I suppose we live in two separate households...in a manner of speaking."

I forced a smile, which came out more like a cringe. I had been through this conversation a million times before, telling the story of my parents divorce and my mother's remarriage, naming my siblings in order, always twice so audiences were sure I wasn't fabricating a Brady Bunch rewrite. We were a little more complicated. Instead of the conventional two blended families, our house held a grand total of four families living under one roof. And, unlike the Partridges, none of us sang or played an instrument either individually or as a collective chorus. Not exactly television textbook. I hated reciting our names, the way my voice became robotic and how I automatically referred to myself in third person as if I were reading the salutation from our Christmas cards.

With our conflicting schedules, the eight of us were never home at the same time, so Christmas card pictures were taken despite someone's absence. To this day, we have never sent a Christmas card with all eight children accounted for in the picture. Our parents corralled the remaining few into the living room, attempting to construct some form of artistic arrangement in front of the tree or fireplace. My mother acted as director.

"Chris, put Zach on your lap. Maggie's tail keeps hitting him in the face. No, no not like that, he'll fall. Katie, you take him and switch places with Rachel so you'll be more in the center. Ok, good. Wait, now I can't see Caroline's face. Mark, if you could help me out with this instead of making faces at the kids, I would appreciate it. Will someone please get the dog to sit down? You know what? Forget it. Everyone just sit somewhere and smile."

My mother's vision of the perfect Christmas card never

appeared on any roll of film. She used to tape other families' portraits to the front door frame, sighing every time she stopped to admire their symmetrical poses, matching outfits, and perfect smiles. In the midst of a red and green montage hung our own picture. Charlie often appeared wearing the same grungy Bart Simpson t-shirt and Zach never looked at the camera for the first four years of his life. My mother must have realized her self-inflicted torture, because a few years ago she stopped hanging other families' Christmas cards and started dumping them into a basket on the dining room table. Our card is the only one she still hangs.

There were never enough pieces in board games, (I had to be the penny last time!), hand-me-downs were staple, (But I thought you always loved Charlie's Bart Simpson shirt), and food took forever to pass around the dinner table, (Will someone PLEASE pass the mashed potatoes?). At school, each of us had to live up to the reputation and standards of the preceding sibling. My older brothers were football players and popular, so upperclassmen assumed I would be cool as well. So when I didn't take an interest in drinking, they weren't sure what to make of me. Chris and Charlie were also troublemakers and I was punished for their pranks.

"You're one of the Furcolos?"

"No, I'm a Tierney. The Furcolos are my step siblings."

"So you live with Chris and Charlie Furcolo then?"

"Yeah."

"Well I hope you've steered a different course, young lady, because that business will not be tolerated a third time around. Understand?"

I couldn't do anything without one of my brothers or sisters getting involved. Before any of us had cell phones we all shared one house line, which Charlie usually monopolized. When I started dating and boys called to talk to me, I'd be lucky to go ten minutes without someone, usually my brother, interrupting.

"Rach? Yeah, sorry you have to get off the phone now."

"No way, I had it first."

"Ok, ok you're right. Who've you been talking to for so long anyway? Is it a boy? Oh my God it is a boy. Does he go to school with us? Oh man, are you guys, like, dating? You want to make out with him don't you? I can totally tell. She's into you, dude. Go for it."

I envied my friends with their own bedrooms to retreat into and obsessed over finding spaces to call my own. I buried myself under blankets, hid in closets and under countertops, even balanced myself on tree branches. Once, I marked, with every pencil and pen I could find, pathways in the bedroom I shared with my sister just so I could declare a strip of carpet as my own. Time after time, one or more of my siblings took over my two inches of space, claiming they'd found it first. Since I couldn't physically separate myself, I had to learn to tune everything out. And so, I learned how to disappear.

My brothers and sisters couldn't understand why I'd rather read *To Kill A Mockingbird* than play hide-and-go-seek. I lied, claiming I still hadn't fully recovered from the half hour I spent locked in the dryer once when my brother Chris got tired of looking for me. In truth, I hadn't really minded my time in the dryer. It was warm and quiet and impossible to share; if it weren't running constantly with never ending loads of laundry, I probably would have crawled in again frequently.

My older siblings' textbooks, my mother's paperbacks, newspapers from the firewood pile - every storyline swallowed me. No matter what time of day or location, the characters in books came alive just for me and entire worlds existed for my own enjoyment. I never had to wait my turn and, unlike with my siblings for our parents' attention, there was no competition in literature. In recognition of my parents, distributing attention amongst eight children ranging now from ages thirty-nine to fourteen is a daunting task to say the least. All of the kids realized this, and we would always wait patiently while they rattled off an inventory of names before finding the correct one to address one of us by.

We never expected our extended families to keep all of us straight. During the holidays, my mother dragged us to traditional family gatherings. We all stood together in a row as great aunts and second cousins we never knew existed watched us intensely, as if awaiting an inevitable Von Trapp family performance. And because names and faces were not enough to distinguish each of us, our names were lengthened to several word phrases. My older brother Charlie, for example, became Charlie-the-one-who-used-to-eat-sticks-of-butter-whole, and my younger sister Caroline, the-one-who-has-terrible-asthma. All of our most embarrassing and eccentric features permeated our identities.

My own kenning was, and still is: Rachel-the-one-who-loves-to-read-and-write. And while it sounded tamer than those of my brothers and sisters, I blushed profusely every time the title was uttered. I hated that strangers who couldn't even remember my name knew my deepest passion and shared the knowledge of my perfect escape. The information always brought streams of questions I had no desire to answer — What's your favorite book? Do you want to be a writer when you grow up? Can I read something you wrote? I learned to always bring a book with me as the easiest way to avoid an ambush and further perfect my disappearing act. Invisible, I could pretend I didn't hear Uncle Bill, slurring through his third gin and tonic, shadily comparing my sister and me to girls in magazines, or see my distant cousins sizing up my siblings and me like we were trespassing on delineated turf. We were merely a phenomenon on display, caged animals for viewing in a zoo, and I hated the spectators.

Our togetherness would evaporate once we crossed the threshold of our home. Separated by last names, my younger sister, Caroline, and I lingered on the outskirts. We were outnumbered by Furcolo's three to one and it showed. We looked different with our blonde hair and blue eyes and our accents picked up from years of living in Boston. Because the household consisted of two separate families, the answering

machine message always presented problems; even though my mother and step-father, the owners of the house, were the Furcolo's, Caroline and I still had to be accounted for, yet we couldn't make reference to the "Tierney residence" because that belonged to my father in Woburn. While my youngest brother, Zach, was still cute and marketable, his gibberish played on the machine, but by the time he was five and could announce words as well as the rest of us, the time came for a new strategy. My mother wrote out several scripts and even attempted to have all of us speak in a harmonized chorus, but eventually settled on the same improvisational "technique" employed by our Christmas cards every year.

"Hi. You've reached Mark, Sue, Tara, Anouk, Chris, Charlie, Katie, Rachel, Caroline, and Zach. Believe it or not, not one of us is here to take your call, but leave us a message and somebody will get back to you." Our answering machine still plays this same message and is only altered if someone gets married. I used to hate hearing my name blended into the string of names in no particular place of importance, but it's funny what distance can do. Sometimes it takes a physical absence, a literal space, to fill an emotional gap. Now when I call home and hear the message played, our names fill me with a contradicting nostalgia for the unconventional childhood I spent most of my life hiding from. And, for once, I lose the urge to disappear.

ORIGINS

(see images on pages 52 & 53)

written by
MICHAEL BOYLE

Boarding the plane in Narita was bittersweet. Six months and I was finally leaving Asia. Handing my ticket to the attendant, I crossed the threshold to the boarding gate; the tunnel to my life outside Thailand, a return to normalcy. I sighed heavily as I sat down in my seat. It was only noon, but I was tired. Six months is a long time. As I mashed my palms into my worn out eyes, a small Japanese man wearing a three-piece suit and cradling a grey fedora under his right arm took the seat to my right. "Ah, New York. Returning home?" he inquired, setting his briefcase tenderly under his seat.

Home? I was returning home? For the past six months, home was a one-room studio overlooking the Bangkok skyline. Now I buckled my seatbelt and prepared for the thirteen-hour flight back stateside. Takeoffs are always shaky for me. The rumbling of the jet as it lifts off the tarmac leaves me, at best, with a pit in my stomach and at worst, with visions of flaming steel hurtling through the sky as panic overtakes the entire cabin. I closed my eyes as the plane was taxiing across the labyrinth of runways and takeoff. With my head back, I practiced some deep breathing to calm my nerves. Through the rhythmic inhaling and exhaling, fragments of the past half a year were drifting through my head like clouds and I was drifting with them. All of the familiar faces, places, and experiences became life-like pastels performing for my mind's eye.

"You're going to love Petchaboon," Kai said with a smile. It was just past eight. That put us about an hour outside the small farming province in central Thailand. Twelve hours of travel was a lot for anyone. Factor in bussing across

almost two-thirds of the country, a journey that began with the sunrise, and we were wiped. It had been a long day.

"Don't worry, we'll be able to sleep in tomorrow." Her eyes glittered with satisfaction. She was returning home and I was lucky enough to tag along for the ride.

She presented the idea to me on the beach, going north. We were lounging in the midday sun. She was reading and I was attempting to get a few shades darker before we headed back to the Bangkok grind. It was a light conversation, nothing too serious, only beach banter. Why not come on up to Petchaboon for a few days to meet the rest of her family and see a part of Thailand not many foreigners frequent? That sounded different. What was there to lose? So two days later we started that exodus north.

I met Kai at the local pub, Hamra Street. She was the bar manager and I was a university student looking for the quickest way to get loaded. It was the start of a beautiful relationship. I remember how, from the beginning, I always thought she looked so striking, so elegant. Of course, it took me a solid two months to talk to her beyond ordering another round—my Thai was a joke and my ignorance dictated that she obviously would not know English. Had someone asked me in June if I would be meeting her family five months later, I would have laughed and scoffed.

"We've now surpassed ten thousand feet..." the flight attendant's voice came over the loudspeaker. I shook off the light sleep that had settled over me. My friend on the left was asleep, his head cocked awkwardly to the left. The man on my right had his nose buried deep in a book. I stretched and reached into my bag looking for something to read when I realized that I never answered that man's question: "Returning home?"

Home. The word kept repeating in my head as the plane set course towards New York. As I flipped mindlessly through the issue of Men's Health, visions of holidays and home cooking, family and friends, my own bed and Chip-

tle started cycling through my head like a slideshow stuck on repeat. That was what awaited me upon my arrival; all those things that I went six months without. I thought of how my laundry smelled different because I could never find an adequate replacement in Bangkok. Apple picking and the changing foliage of fall in New York—two things I missed at their peak but hoped to catch the tail end upon my return.

Kai always told me she moved to Bangkok because Petchaboon was empty. "Farms, farms, and farms," she described it aptly one night over dinner. She told me it was going to be small. I had no idea this is what she meant. Getting off the bus at the station in Petchaboon was a complete turnaround from the Bangkok bus terminal. Granted it was around nine at night by this point, but this place was absolutely deserted. Nine at night in Bangkok and hordes of people would be bustling about making bus connections while the main terminal looks like a Cairo bazaar. Peddlers selling everything from handbags to sweet potatoes dot the arrival hall like ants on a hill. In Petchaboon, a lone street food vendor greeted the few stragglers still arriving this late at night. The city was asleep.

We began walking down the moonlit street towards the 7-11. I went in for water as she haggled with the cab driver over prices. This was Kai's home. The contrast from Bangkok was absolutely striking. Only 400 kilometers north of the capitol, Petchaboon looked like a ghost town. Stepping out on the main road was like taking a step back in time: the main road was hard packed dirt, the wooden storefronts stood silent and dark. I half-expected Dirty Harry to come strolling around the corner. The dirt kicked up around the rear windows as we drove off towards her home.

"Would you like shrimp or chicken?" the attendant caught me off guard. I must have started drifting again. The Men's Health lay sprawled across my lap like a napkin. I requested whatever tasted better and the young woman handed me the hot plate and utensils. I checked the TV screen

mounted on the seatback in front of me. We were somewhere over the Pacific Ocean hovering between Russia and the Northwest Territories. Soon, I would be back over my own continent heading towards home.

Boy would I miss Thailand, though. I mean, six months is substantial. Of course, Kai would be halfway around the world, but it went far beyond our relationship. I remembered waking up in that 15th floor apartment, overlooking the sweeping park with its lake and fountain. I thought about walking outside my building to find the local fruit peddler not twenty yards away ready to serve up fresh pineapple, dragon fruit, and coconuts. And of course, how could I forget the peace and tranquility of the country? As a New Yorker, never before had I seen people be able to relax the way they did in Asia. It was not laziness; rather, a deep respect for the process, the doing, of a task. It was wonderful. Many times, an entire hour to eat breakfast or lunch was not far fetched. Time is far too scarce to be able to afford such luxury in the U.S.

Kai's mother and sister had dinner laid out for us when we arrived to the house. Fried duck with water lily, sticky rice, shrimp with lemon and onion, and sour chicken soup. All staples to the Thai diet, it did not occur to me until much later how odd it was for me to be accustomed and unfazed by such a meal. It was delicious. Kai spoke the best English out of her entire family. Her mother knew none. However, I was still able to use the little Thai I knew to thank her for the wonderful meal and display gratitude for this opportunity to meet everyone.

I distinctly remember the feeling of absolute contentment overtake me as I got into bed that night. I was exhausted. It had been a long day. Yet, somehow, I felt more comfortable at that moment, in that strange place, than I had felt in months. The bed felt nothing like mine at home and that meal was far removed from any late night snack I prepared back in the States. It was cool outside and the night

breeze was moving gently throughout the house. I had to get my sleep, because tomorrow we would be up early to go to the day market.

The rest of my time spent in Petchaboon was much of the same. I was a guest in a Thai household. What was there to do but act like family? At the market, Kai's mother showed me how to choose good pineapples, fish, and rice; showing me the various signs of aging or fecundity. At night, Kai and I would enjoy the countryside. She took me everywhere. We hiked under waterfalls and around cliffs, through jungles and down riverbanks. Besides the night of arrival, there was not one time we went to bed past 10 P.M. I did not care. There was so much of Thailand to experience in Petchaboon. By our second night there, my Thai had improved greatly and I was feeling right at home.

The morning Kai and I left to return to Bangkok was cheerless. I would miss her family and her hometown. What little I could communicate between us was sincere and that really meant something. Even if it was only in saying that dinner was delicious or that their family farm was beautiful—all of that was earnest. As Kai and I headed for the doorway, her sister spoke to me in Thai. I did not know what it meant at the time, but Kai translated at the bus station shortly afterwards. Our home is your home, and if you return, it will still be here.

We were somewhere between Michigan and Buffalo, about an hour outside JFK. 48 hours prior I was enjoying dinner in Hong Kong. Now I was back in America. They always talk about the reverse culture shock some suffer when returning from a long time abroad. But I was not concerned with that. For some reason, I was happy to be going back to New York, even if it is freezing compared to Southeast Asia. If my six months away taught me anything, it is that we are not tethered to one place. It may not be where you grew up, it may not be where your friends are, and it may not be someplace that is all that accessible or beautiful or even

necessarily justifiable in another's eyes. Rather, home is where you can lay your head down at night and fall asleep smiling.

I began cleaning up the area around my seat, putting away my reading material, packing up my laptop, and brushing off crumbs and stray bits, when I saw the Japanese man next to me sleeping soundly. His fedora was pulled low over his eyes and his head was tilted ever so slightly down and to the left. His suit coat was discarded yet his vest remained button tight. On his tray table, a travel wallet lay open displaying pictures of various family members. On the left-hand side of the vest, his passport stuck out over the top of the pocket. The man's Passport was Japanese, yet somehow, I knew he was going home. Wherever that may be.