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THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE
SCAD WRITING PROGRAM

EDITORS

Lee Griffith and Catherine Ramsdell

GRADUATE INTERN

Nancy Peck

a publication of

SCAD: THE UNIVERSITY FOR CREATIVE CAREERS

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MISSED CONNECTIONS

Christen Gresham

September 19, 2013. Something is wrong at the house with the white van parked out front. I pass the house all the time on my morning walks and evening runs. Not much happens there, that I can tell. The ranch house was built in the seventies, just like every other house in my neighborhood. They keep their lawn mowed, the empty carport swept. The dented Chevy van doesn't belong, but it's always there.

The van doesn't do much for the house's curb appeal. It's always blocking the front yard with its peeling, white, rusted exterior. The driver's side window is stuck rolled down and someone has tried to close up the hole with tin foil and duct tape. Something about the van looks "up to no good," like it might belong to a pedophile. It's only a matter of time before it becomes the subject of another neighborhood association mailing:

Dear Neighbors,

In an attempt to keep our streets beautiful and hazard-free, we ask that you keep unsightly vehicles garaged or otherwise parked out of sight. Vehicles in disrepair left parked on the curb for more than 48 hours will be towed by the City of Savannah.

But sometimes someone moves the van. When it isn't there, I always wonder where it goes. Where would you take a van like that?

Regardless of the time of day, there's usually an arm resting on the frame of the van's duct-taped window. If I crane my neck, I can make out the driver's white mustached profile in the crooked side-view mirror. I have to

hold my breath when I pass the van because of the massive cloud of cigarette smoke seeping from the windows. It's old-man cigarette smoke — Marlboros.

And it *is* the kind of van you want to pass quickly, because the rusted door hinges might creak open and the kidnapper or serial killer hiding inside might snatch you up.

Once, late at night, I thought I saw a body in the back, obscured by the massive American flag and folded cardboard boxes stuffed in the back seat. I was too freaked out to do anything, so I just kept running. I'm pretty sure someone was just sleeping in the backseat. But I've watched too many episodes of *Criminal Minds*. The van could be hiding anything — a meth lab, surveillance equipment, stolen Blu-ray players, abused animals, missing children, or dead bodies. The dark possibilities are endless.

Every day the van's mysterious driver sits in the yellowed bucket seat, smoking away packs and packs of old-man cigarettes. Watching for something. Or waiting. He looks like a cross between Luigi from *Mario Brothers* and a *Muppet Show* character. Shocks of white, Muppetey hair stick out from underneath his green John Deere hat, and his taut suspenders threaten to detach from his holey Wranglers at any moment. His name is probably Wilson or Grady. But I've never asked.

I usually just turn up my iPod when I pass the van, like I do when I pass the other neighbors. If the music is loud enough, I don't have to pretend I can't hear. I don't like small talk and I feel socially awkward around people I don't know very well. It's embarrassing, but I'm the kind of person who hides behind a deodorant display if I see an acquaintance across the aisle at Wal-Mart. For people like me, earbuds are a lifesaver.

Earlier this summer, when I first started running, I got flagged down by two elderly ladies who were standing in the grassy median down the street from the van house. There's an ancient oak tree planted there. The tree has serpentine branches that sweep down and dip into the yard across the street.

The ladies' SUV was parked on the curve and they were examining the tree branches like it was some kind of historical monument. This wouldn't be out of the ordinary for other parts of Savannah, but my street is about as suburban as it gets. Tourists don't venture into my neighborhood unless they're turning around after taking the wrong exit on the parkway.

Maybe these ladies were too distracted by the tree's magnificent bark to notice my earbuds, because one of them interjected over Robert Smith: "Sweetheart do you think you could take a picture of us by this tree? The sunset's so beautiful and we came all this way to get a picture by this tree."

"We're from out of town," the second woman added, beaming up at me from under her straw hat.

I yanked out my earbuds and agreed to take a few shots, anything to get back to my run as swiftly as possible. One of the ladies shoved a cracked iPhone into my hands. “I don’t know how to use the camera, but I’m sure you know how to use it, honey.”

First, we had to figure out how to shoot both women from their most flattering angles. The lady wearing the straw hat peered over my shoulder as I flipped through the first dozen or so shots. “Oh dear. You’ll have to take another one, honey. I look fatter than a plucked hen.”

Before I had a chance to escape, the neighbor from across the street joined our impromptu photo shoot. I’d never met him before, but he introduced himself as an “artist.” He was in his late forties and his bleached blonde hair hung around the frayed collar of his vintage polo shirt. He quickly began directing the shoot. We would have to shoot from a different angle, he insisted. The sun hit better from the opposite side of the branch.

Seven poses and fifty shots later, the ladies thanked me — *You’re such a nice girl. And an excellent photographer too* — and drove back to Indiana or Wisconsin or wherever the hell they were from that didn’t have Spanish moss. That didn’t have a tree like *this*.

After that, it was easier to turn up the volume and keep running.

But tonight when I was running, I slowed down in front of the Chevy van house. Something was definitely wrong. The street was clogged with police cars, so it was hard to get by. Most of the cop cars were empty; they probably belonged to the cops sent inside to investigate the situation, whatever this “situation” was. Behind the cop cars, the house sat silent and expressionless.

We’ve had a lot of burglaries in the neighborhood recently, so I assumed that the van man and his family were just the latest victims. But part of me wondered if someone was being arrested for pedophilia.

It wasn’t until I took up running that I started to notice my neighbors. A lot of them are pedestrians like me — dog walkers, other runners. Some of them aren’t and deserve speeding tickets. Either way, I’ve started to notice that they come out at around the same time every night.

Last night I finally broke down and talked to one of them, because you can only make eye contact with someone at the same time and place every evening so many times before it becomes awkward.

I slowed to a jog near my house. A woman with two white terriers was standing next to my mailbox. She and the dogs live behind me, but we’d never spoken. Unless you count the out-of-breath, tight-lipped grunt-nod I usually reserve for neighbors I pass at night.

I crouched down to catch my breath near where the two twin terriers had stopped to sniff out a patch of grass.

I forced myself to speak. “What are your dogs’ names?”

“Well, the dogs are Prudy and Stacy,” she laughed. “And my name is Roxanne. I’ve seen you out here a lot. You’re really dedicated.”

And that was it. At that moment I’m convinced it is the smart thing to do: it would be nice to know a neighbor. Just in case a rapist or an axe murderer ever chases me. It would be nice to know that I could run to Roxanne’s house. Despite taking up running this summer, I’m still really out of shape. Sometimes I feel like I’m going into cardiac arrest after running for more than five minutes. If I ever keel over on the asphalt, it would also be nice to know Roxanne might notice and call 911.

When I circled by the van house again, I saw that the front door was open. A cop and a man in rubber gloves wheeled a stretcher out of the doorway. It was weird because there wasn’t an ambulance, just a black van backed into the driveway. It looked a lot like the pedophile van, only newer. Then I noticed the burgundy body bag resting on the stretcher. I looked at the body bag, then back at the cop. The cop looked at me, but he didn’t say anything. And I wanted to ask him what happened. But I knew I couldn’t. There were so many reasons why I couldn’t. Maybe I’ll post a missed connection ad:

CL > savannah > all personals > missed connections
We locked eyes. W4m (My Neighborhood)

You were the cop wheeling a body bag out of my neighbor’s house. I was the girl running by in ill-fitting running shorts. Email me the color of the body bag so I know it’s you.

I wanted to ask the cop if van man was zipped inside the body bag. I’d never seen a dead body before tonight. Not even in a bag. I’ve only been to one funeral and I couldn’t get a good look at the body because the casket was covered with roses. So when I saw this body bag, the mortality of it all hit me like a shot in the foot. I staggered, but the cop looked at me the same way I looked at him. He knew I’d never attempted to connect with this neighbor. His look said it all: *You don’t have the right to care. Move along.* Still, I felt like the situation demanded that I stop — someone was dead for crying out loud. But it also felt wrong to stop. Like I’d be interrupting some kind of top-secret investigation. Like it was none of my business. So I just kept running.

The cop and the rubber-glove man shut the body behind the black van’s double doors as the teenage boy from the next block rocketed past me on his bicycle. He pedaled on, arms outstretched triumphantly. Only seconds behind me, he missed everything I had seen. He turned a corner and became a vapor, a waft of boy-deodorant snatched in the breeze.

My iPod continued to play music through the whole thing. And that felt wrong too, like it should have held its breath at the sight of a dead body. I didn't even notice the music until I started to run home.

The Shout Out Louds crooned against my eardrums:

*Whatever they say
we're the ones building walls.
Whatever they say
we're the ones who never say no.
To get to know yourself
you gotta run away.
Never trust anyone.
So run away, run, run, run, run, run, run.*

I know it's ridiculous to read meaning into a randomly played song on an iPod, but it's hard not to when you've just seen your neighbor rolled away in a body bag. Somehow, I feel like I've made a mistake about the van man. I've never tried to understand him. I don't even know if his name was Wilson or Grady. Maybe he was just sitting in that old van so he could escape whatever was in that house. Maybe it smelled like antiseptic and mothballs in there. Maybe he was dying. Maybe his wife was dying. Maybe his wife wouldn't let him smoke in the house. For thirty minutes in the evenings, this was his rusty, dented, pedophilic sanctuary. Because I'd been too busy trying to tune everything out, I hadn't noticed.

If I think about it, maybe he sat in the van for the same reason I run. Closed inside my house, my thoughts are dark, oppressive, and tinged with the fragrance of reheated casserole. I run in the evenings to escape. If I run fast enough, my thoughts can't catch up. If I run, no one I know is able to catch up. For thirty minutes in the evenings, that feels okay.

The worst part is, I've made this connection too late. Sometimes I feel like most of my interactions with people are too little, too late. I speak up only when it doesn't matter anymore. I don't know for sure if van man is dead, but the van was empty when I circled past it again before going inside to shower.

CL > savannah > all personals > missed connections
Are you still alive? W4m (My Neighborhood)
You: The guy who hangs out in the Chevy van.
Me: The girl who jogs past you on the wrong side of the road.
I hope you are okay.

In the neighborhood where I run, a curve obscures pedestrians completely from oncoming vehicles. I'm always a little nervous when I reach that point in the road. Sometimes I imagine that a blinding beam of light strikes me, and everything goes black. I picture my body torn and splattered on the grassy median where people take their dogs to pee.

I imagine that, weeks later, Roxanne and her dogs meet up with the artist from down the street on that very same median. Roxanne's dogs sniff around, searching for an appropriate spot to pee, and the artist lights a cigarette. Maybe Roxanne and the artist don't usually speak, but for some reason Roxanne strikes up a conversation.

"Thank God, they finally got rid of that creepy van!" Roxanne says, pointing down the street where a darkened rectangle of asphalt serves as the only evidence that a van was ever parked there.

The artist laughs, taking a drag of his cigarette. "I know, right?"

"Hey," Roxanne asks between smacks of chewing gum, as Prudy squats to pee. "Do you know whatever happened to that girl who used to run by here a lot at night?"

"The girl who lives behind you?" The artist waves his cigarette dismissively. "I heard she got hit by a car."



WHAT PRICE GLORY

Steve Drum

Furniture: DRESSER MIRROR — Price: \$300.00 (SOLD)

This is a dresser mirror Rock Hudson had in his bedroom. This is the mirror that he had his jewelry box sitting in front of. When putting the final touches on his clothing like cuff links, tie, studs, pins, or jewelry, this is the mirror he dressed in front of. It's made of solid wood and swings forward and backward and locks into place with a custom dowel. A wonderful piece for any serious collector. COMES WITH A CERTIFICATE OF AUTHENTICITY AND A LIFETIME GUARANTEE OF AUTHENTICITY.¹

*

My husband and I are flipping aimlessly through television channels in a hotel bedroom and we both recognize a movie from our respective childhoods. He used to rent it on VHS, because he's forty. I used to watch it on Cinemax, because I'm twenty-six.

It was one of at least one hundred movies built around the same premise: unpopular nobody pays the most popular girl/boy at Somewhere High School to pretend to be his/her girlfriend/boyfriend.

There is always a moment of revelation at someone's house party or a school dance or the mall. Whatever distinguishes the somebodies from the nobodies is blurred. The popular somebody realizes his or her status is a palace built on sand. The inside of his or her shiny world is ugly and empty. He or she starts to envy the unpopular nobody of his or her individuality, his or her freedom from the pressure to perform.

1. Flaherty, Martin F.J., III. *Rock Hudson Estate Collection*. Web. 16 March 2014. <<http://www.rock-hudson-estate-collection.com>>.

It doesn't hurt that the nobody is usually movie-star attractive under a pair of glasses.

I recognize the actor playing the film's nobody. Very famous. That Brat Pack guy from *Grey's Anatomy*. Andrew McCarthy? No, the other one.

But the girl. Who is the girl? I must find out what happened to the girl.

The actress playing the somebody he's paying or tutoring or whatever in exchange for her fake heart is a relic from the days when high school romances were performed by actors in high school. She has a crimped-blonde, white-leather, fuchsia-gloss beauty I associate with California of the 1980s. And she is playing this suburban Lolita with such womanly authority and intuition, that I know — I know deep in my heart — that the universe has rewarded her.

"It looks like everyone thought she was dead for a while," my husband says, scrolling through pages of search results on his phone. "But I think — it sounds like she just left."

"Huh. Does anyone say why?"

"No," he says, shaking his head. "She just left."

*

Personal Items: INCH BY INCH — Price: \$700.00

*Here is something of value . . . These are Rock's pornos that he had (MORE COMING). This one is a Matt Sterling film titled Inch By Inch. It stars Jeff Quinn, Doug Jensen, and Tom Brock. Twelve new superstars in a non-stop sexual thriller.*²

*

I first meet Rock Hudson in 1961, when he is still so uncommonly lovely. The year is actually 2009, and Rock Hudson is twenty-four-years dead. But he is alive: thirty-six years old, a light caught beneath his eyes, his hair painted in the wet blue-black of Technicolor.

It is *Lover Come Back*. Doris Day stomps around in white heels and comic anxiety, the opposite of sex. She clenches her body in a psychic defense, but Hudson always steps into the frame.

I am recovering from a psychic defense of my own: a willful pride in my bedroom; an iPod or Netflix queue proving I am "not your typical" gay man. I am still dismissing some hallmarks of gay culture as "too obvious" a choice: Judy; drag; the natural posture of my shoulders; the natural position of my Adam's apple. As the child of a blue state and a family that always gets it right eventually, I am still taking this as my privilege.

The streaming feed of the television and the Internet that accompanied my adolescence brings some blurry headlines of Rock Hudson's life: a soapy actor, a disease that revealed a deception.

2. Ibid.

A Norma Jean tragic queen who died before I was born.

I am alone in an apartment in Brooklyn. It is too late and I smoke too much pot and Rock Hudson is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. He is shining and smug. His face smarts with a shave. He holds his mouth in a pert grin. And he seems to wink into the camera at whatever joke I presume his life to be.

I stay up until the sun rises, cutting together a video of all the split-screen telephone scenes. I tune out Doris's audio and reflect the image of Rock speaking onto both sides of the frame.

But after all my work, he looks distorted in the reverse image. He looks intensely familiar yet unrecognizable — like seeing my dad with his glasses off or seeing my own face on camera.

*

Jewelry: JADE NECKLACE — Price: \$2,000.00 (SOLD)

This jade necklace is from the jewelry box of Rock Hudson. It is individually knotted and has a silver clasp. It was made in China. It was a gift from Rock to his mother, then Rock got it back after she passed in 1977. This piece is truly wonderful. Measures 16 inches x 12 millimeters and weighs 62.6 grams.³

*

The book's cover is a large picture of a shirtless Rock Hudson, but Rock keeps disappearing from the page.

Shortly after *Lover Come Back*, I buy what I think is the Rock Hudson story. It is shelved between two other Rock Hudson stories, but this book is the newest and Rock is wearing the least on its cover.

To my disappointment, the book's author, Robert Hofler, is much more interested in a detailed portrait of Henry Willson, Rock's agent. Willson is cast as the lecherous alcoholic, transforming unremarkable tricks into untalented movie stars at the reluctant drop of their trousers.

He reminds me of older men I encountered as a teenager, during a sowing of oats I have since dubbed "The Summer of Steve," though it lasted about eighteen months in total.

These men were isolated by their appearance or inexperience or some unspoken heartbreak. Men with toad jowls and sewer-grate smiles, tongues glinting wet in the crooked shadows between their teeth. They would say or pay anything for the presence of even the most unenthusiastic youth. I pitied their sad, transparent apartments and felt great power in reluctantly dropping my trousers.

I am drawn to the mood of all the book's sad Hollywood mansions, but frustrated with Willson's leading role. Rock is on the cover, but he is cast as just another horse in Henry Willson's stable. He is simply the handsomest or

3. Ibid.

the luckiest boy to cross Willson's path. He is a bumbling puppet with capped teeth and a fake name. He is Roy Scherer, whore to Willson's demands for nearly two decades. When he finally breaks ties with the man who "invented" him, he is a forty-one-year-old child, incapable of defending himself against the slings and arrows of America's most outrageous fortune: fame.

Toward the book's denouement, Rock's story moves downstage toward the audience.

He is bloated and haggard. He unleashes Freudian nightmares of deep-rooted neuroses on a changing cast of lovers. He smokes and drinks in hotel bars like a prophet to some impending apocalypse.

He reminds me of older men I encountered as a teenager. By the point of the book's inevitable ending — the decay of Rock Hudson's body — he has been gone for several chapters.

He was somebody. No one knows why. He just left.

I return to *Lover Come Back* for answers. I scan him for traces of a performance. I panic. His mask might drop, dragging the peak of his career into the depths of despair. I look for boom microphones in the corners of the frame.

I worry Rock Hudson was only pretending to enjoy himself — like Marilyn Monroe or a boy dropping his trousers for a stranger.

*

*Documents and Awards: LETTER FROM EVELYN SCHERER
LURVEY — Price: \$250.00*

This was a letter sent to Rock's production company, Gibraltar Productions. Very personal information. This item was in a file cabinet that was labeled 'Personal.'

Dear Miss Ruppert,

My brother, Jerome Scherer of Olney, Illinois, gave me a letter you wrote to him concerning 'Rock Hudson's' relationship to the Taylors in Irving, Illinois. He gave me this letter so that I might have your address to get in touch with my nephew. You see, when he was in Chicago about two years ago, he called me by phone and at that time I asked him for some autographed pictures of himself for my three daughters, now 11, 16 and 21. He promised they would be forthcoming but they didn't. Can you imagine the disappointment? To me, a promise is that regardless of whom concerned but they have a youthful attitude which almost assumes annoyance; yet, for a final in speech the 16-yr old earned a coveted 'A' on why 'I wouldn't want to be a Movie Star' and she omitted the fact that her cousin was too 'busy' to send her a promised picture. I can't promise, tho, how long such family loyalty will endure or how long I, myself, can encourage it.

Please don't interpret the above paragraph as written in bitterness on my part; disillusionment — perhaps — to the extent that I too question, 'What price Glory?' But, I do dislike having children having to ask that question at their ages.

From Hedda Hopper's column I wonder if 'Rock' is there at present but perhaps you are in touch with him. Incidentally, I was glad to read that he has some varied roles coming up.

Thank you for serving as the 'in-between.'

I remain his Aunt Evelyn,
Evelyn Scherer Lurvey⁴

*

John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* follows an unhappy man who pays a shadowy corporation for extensive plastic surgery and abandons a bleak existence as a middle-aged, suburban Babbitt (played by John Randolph) for a new life as a handsome artist in California (played by Rock Hudson).

"It's a masterpiece," the corporation's shifty executive comments to the surgeon upon the unveiling of Rock Hudson. "Good work."

But his new identity, his swinging beachside mansion, and his bohemian milieu cannot rescue the man's soul from its original ache of discontent. His new, Rock Hudson face is not enough. He stares into the mirror, pulling at Rock Hudson's skin, unsure if he is playing someone else or if someone else is playing him. He is a nobody playing a somebody or a somebody with nothing inside. Finally, the man's authentic self crashes through the lie he is unable to perform. And it isn't pretty.

Watching it today, the film bears a startling resemblance to the Rock Hudson story — or a Rock Hudson story. With all our heavy Hudson associations, it's impossible to watch him perform as a man with no stable identity, a pretty puppet with a fake name, without questioning whether the biographical parallels are intentional.

Alas, they aren't. The film was adapted from a 1965 novel, written independently of the production. Frankenheimer admits that he first offered Hudson's role to Kirk Douglas (scheduling conflict) and Laurence Olivier (Paramount said no). In fact, all accounts of the production indicate that no one thought the movie would sell as a Rock Hudson picture.

Alas, they were right. While the movie garnered some mixed critical interest, it was a financial disaster.

"I have a theory," Frankenheimer has repeated in several interviews. "Those people who would go see Rock Hudson movies didn't want to see that one, and people who wanted to see that kind of movie didn't want to see a Rock Hudson movie."⁵

4. Ibid

5. Oppenheimer, Jerry, and Jack Vitek. *Idol, Rock Hudson: The True Story of an American Film Hero* (New York: Villard Books, 1986), 81.

Whether casting Hudson was a deliberate play on Hudson's sexuality or a smart financial calculation (alas, all evidence points to neither), it is interesting to note how well-equipped Hudson should have been to perform the role. If an actor's personal experience informs or improves their performance, *Seconds* was the role of Rock Hudson's lifetime (whether anyone knew it or not).

At the very least, there is the hope that Hudson knew it himself and could experience some catharsis in the role. He fought fiercely for the part. After decades trapped in a froth of romantic comedy and "women's weepies," he was sure the role would force Hollywood to take him seriously as a creative talent. It was to be his "breakthrough" performance.

But, alas, it wasn't. Rock Hudson's performance in *Seconds* is a pretty standard Rock Hudson performance. Sure, the existential tale casts a new *Twilight Zone* shade of Rock Hudson onto his *Mark Trail* comic strip beauty. But his acting still moves at the rhythm of a melodrama: one amplified emotion at a time.

By the mid-sixties, Hudson's friend and post-war peer, Elizabeth Taylor, had graduated to intricate scores of contradiction and messy hyperrealism (see *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*).

But in the same year, Rock Hudson censors any authentic danger in his performance with a tight lid of Eisenhower-era control. His voice and face are too aware of themselves. Even as his character unravels, fighting to destroy this shiny image in which he's trapped, Rock Hudson looks like he is only pretending to come undone.

It is 1966, two decades before Hudson's disease unravels his own identity. Neither the film nor the film's (hypothetical) audience can be expected to perceive how deeply the story might be cutting Hudson's soul.

Toward the film's end, Hudson escapes back to his former life, where he is unrecognizable and presumed dead. Pretending to be a friend of her late husband, his former wife confides in him that her husband was "like a stranger." He didn't let anything touch him. He had been dead a long, long time."

Any subtext is held captive in some distant future.

But I watch Rock Hudson, desperate for his mask to drop. I scan for the seams between his life (of which I know too much) and his performance (of which I am growing bored). I wait for the moment Roy Scherer will come crashing through the lie Rock Hudson is unable to perform.

I wait for the moment Rock Hudson will stop looking like Rock Hudson.

I wait for Rock Hudson to leave.

Alas, he doesn't.

*

A 1970 Motion Picture Herald survey had Rock Hudson tied for third place with Cary Grant and Elizabeth Taylor in a list of the sixties' top

moneymakers. But as one critic commented, “Of all the actors who were box office champs, he must be considered the least individual, the least positive.”⁶ Perhaps this itself is the secret, perhaps his non-threatening nature is the very essence of his appeal, but Hudson himself absolutely refuses to speculate.

“A mirror is the biggest liar there is. You never see yourself as others see you,” Hudson says. All he personally needs to know is that “I have always wanted to act, always, and I’m pleased to report I’m an actor.”⁷

6. Turan, Kenneth. “‘The Baron of Beefcake’ at 50: Rock Hudson’s Past the ‘Dark Ages’ and It’s Time for Fun,” *The Washington Post* 20 July 1977: B1.

7. *Ibid.*



HOW TO LOVE PIZZA AND HATE CHEESE

Jonathan O'Connor

It will start when you are five. A weird taste will enter your mouth, and you'll be sent to the hospital for inspection. A guy with a stethoscope will tell you to lay off the dairy, and your father will say something about how there will be more for him.

"More for me," he'll say.

One day, your father will ask you to make him a grilled cheese with American and Swiss. He won't say please.

"Make me dinner," he'll say.

You can't be sure, but you will think that you burned his sandwich on purpose. Don't worry, though, although you often will, because this time he won't notice. This time the taste of Budweiser will be sharp on his tongue.

"How are the girls, Jonathan?" he'll ask while he watches a show about fishing.

You will be able to smell the beer on his breath. It gives you that taste, the sickly one. You sit down and watch fishermen catch marlins and think of how disgusting they would taste.

"You love fishing, but you hate fish?" you'll ask.

"Yes," he'll say, "I don't like the taste of fish. Never have. I can catch 'em though."

You hate fishing.

In the other room you will hear your mother sobbing, most likely something bill-related.

"Shut the fuck up," your father will say. "I'm watching my show."

He will bite into the burnt grilled cheese and burn the roof of his mouth.

“Girls are fine,” you’ll say.

*

It will end when you are five and two months. That will be around the time you visit the stethoscope guy again, and he will say you are free to have dairy. When you get home your father will make you macaroni and cheese out of the box. He will say that boxed mac and cheese is the only way to eat mac and cheese, and you’ll just stare blankly at him, imagining that it would be possible to make it without the box. You won’t argue. He will set the bowl in front of you and pour himself a mug of whole milk. He will use the same mug that he uses for his beer, because it is the biggest mug, and you’ll think it has been washed, but you won’t be sure.

“Are you excited to be having cheese again?” he’ll ask.

You will look at the bowl in front of you and examine the macaroni. You’ll think about how this is the closest you’ve seen them, with cheese all around. How, in things like soup, macaroni tend to separate and only seldom come together. You will take a bite. It will taste like fish.

“Mmmm,” your father will say, “How about them girls?”

You will continue chewing.

“Just remember to wear a raincoat,” he’ll say, “and always have one with you.”

You will know what this means, since he talked with you about sex when you were four.

You will swallow.

“I’m a virgin, Dad.”

He will wink.

*

At night (it won’t have to be a specific one because you’ll have this conversation many times between the ages of five and eighteen) your father will come to your room or the TV room or the kitchen or wherever you’re sitting, standing, or lying and ask you if you like him. These times, his breath will smell like vodka, whiskey, or beer and he will have a plate of cubed cheese on toothpicks (this will seem dangerous to you), cheese roll-ups, or on longer nights, an entire Crock-Pot of fondue and a loaf of French bread. It will always seem like he is taking his time because the conversation feels long, but it will always go something like this:

“Do you like me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You’re my dad.”

“I want you to hate me.”

“What?”

“I want you to hate me so you won’t be like me.”

In the background you will hear your mother crying and know that this time it isn’t bill-related.

“Shut the fuck up,” he will say. “I’m speaking with my son.” Then, softly, “Never speak to your wife like that.”

*

After you come out, you will learn several things:

1. The grandfather you never met hated fishing.
2. The grandfather you never met was gay.
3. The grandfather you never met was sexually abusive to your father.
4. This is why, you assume, your father drinks so much.
5. He drinks more in times of stress, like when his only son comes out.
6. He gets violent when he drinks in times of stress.
7. In times of stress, there is cheese in your house.
8. You still hate cheese.
9. That saying about going up after hitting rock bottom holds some weight.
10. You are strong enough to carry it.

*

Your father will lose the taste for drinking. At night he will sit with you, and you will make small talk about life and he will always say how proud he is of you. He will look different now, although you’ll swear he has had those boots since you were five. You will realize that the difference is in his eyes. They don’t look glazed. You will tell him you are proud of him, too.

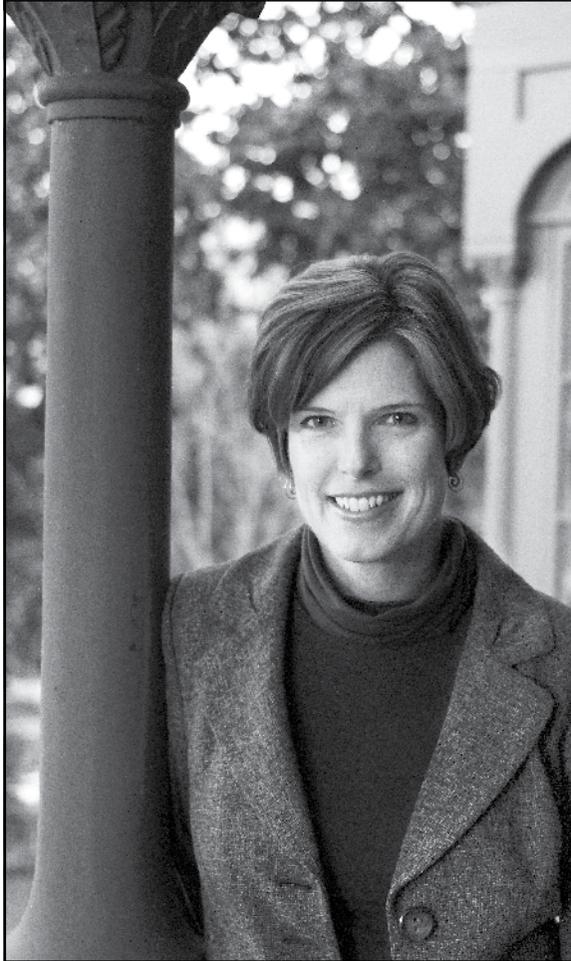
“I’m proud of you, Dad.”

He will smile and look at his boots. There will be paint on them. You will talk about how different you are, and he will say that his parenting strategy worked. You will know what this means. Your mother will walk in and sit on his lap. She won’t be crying.

“Let’s order a pizza,” you will suggest.

“I never understood that,” he’ll say. “It is impossible for someone to love pizza and hate cheese.”

You will smile. You won’t think so.



LAVENDER NO. 19

Sybil McLain-Topel

La lavande.

La lavande me manque.

Lavender is missing to me. This is the French construction of the phrase, "I miss lavender."

When I say I miss my lover, I say in English, I miss you. In French I say, you are missing to me: *tu me manques*. Listen for nuance. The noun for me, myself and I, now rests in shade. My lover takes on full sun. *Tu me manques*.

Subtle. Thought. Shift.

*

Early one Saturday I wrestle with the gray stems and twisted, stubby stalks of lavender growing in their third year beneath the window of my first husband's bedroom. They are stubborn. I don't know what to do with them. They don't look like photos of lavender fields, row after endless row, spread across hectares of French land, a knee-high carpet of plush blue-purple buds holding down dry Gallic earth. Photos that hide the gnarled branches and roots beneath twilight petals, petals that release pungent oil, oil that makes the south of France one long inhalation for my soul.

Nothing like the dry driftwood knots under my knuckles that won't yield to my vision of how these plants should behave. Like my first husband, who is distant, who is at work, who hates yard work.

If I cut them back, will the woody stalks sprout new shoots or just rot?

Hey 19

My nose filled with stale cigarette smoke and the foul arrogance of the man next to me who was about to miss his reservation at a five-star restaurant in Paris. He had peppered me with attitude for much of the flight, but at least had the grace to buy me a cognac when the plane turbulence caused my fingers to crunch the armrests with fear. It was dark and I could feel the cold Atlantic beneath us. I knew we would crash. I'm sure my naïveté amused him from time to time during the six-hour flight from New York.

The plane began to descend. Out the window stretched green fields sewn to earth by threads of bushes and trees, a quilt of welcome. Morning sun spilled jonquil rays of spring. My first smell of lavender fields was only days away.

Turbulence would never have the same effect on me again.

*

In the summer of my nineteenth year, somewhere in the south of France, I captured stalk after stalk of lavender buds and let them dry. The stems turned light gray, the buds lost their hard purple edge. But the oil remained, and crushing the buds between thumb and forefinger and mashing them into my palm, the scent unfurled. I tugged the precious buds from their stems and made sachets. They went in my suitcase, tucked into my American clothes, next to the few French things that journeyed with me to my sophomore year in college.

Inventory:

One T-shirt with a witty French slogan.

Two bottles of wine, one a gift from the manager at the swimming pool where I took the girls to swim almost every day. He was nice to us all summer long, a mustache with the promise of handlebars to come whisked his upper lip like a brush. He was tan. Like a refugee from Jacques Cousteau's boat.

The other bottle of wine a gift from a gentleman farmer who bottled it himself, somewhere on the outskirts of Paris at his gentleman's farm. He made meals for me because I was the guest of his son. His son was the friend of one of my French professors. The son and I became lovers on white sheets, near Paris. Not right away, not the first day in Paris. Not on the spring day when I landed in Paris, and dinner was veal, pan-fried with a delicate cream sauce, and I don't remember dessert because the jet lag dragged me under and they put me to bed gently and left me to wake up in a blue-sky April morning and fed me sweet red strawberries for breakfast.

Strawberries taken by surprise from their garden moments before.

We made the white sheets red in July. Maybe again in August. It's hard

to say now. He visited me in southern France where I cared for the two young girls. He visited me when their parents were not home. We hiked in the woods and I fell in the orties bush and learned the French word for stinging nettle, orties brulantes, burning nettles.

Stateside

In New York, the customs agent asked my age.

I beamed my prettiest smile.

“I’m nineteen and I’m going to drink that wine in Tennessee, where the drinking age is eighteen,” I said. *Please don’t take my souvenirs. They’re mine. I’ve heard stories of things stolen in customs. At least I didn’t try to sneak in stinky cheese and garlicky saucisson.*

He laughed and tucked the wine bottles back where they belonged, snug in American clothes, next to sophisticated little lavender sacks. I sashayed off to catch my plane to Knoxville.

First Garden

Lavender would not grow at my first house, a white brick home in Nashville, where I went into labor with my one and only child about seven months after moving in.

Our pitiful plants fought with shade and poor soil. My son grew.

My first husband, a young attorney, competed for billable hours, worked Saturdays at the office, and sweated his way through yard work on Sundays. A few herbs poked their way to the light here and there, the oregano thrived and lemon balm invaded like an unwanted weed, like the university that kept creeping across the street into our yard, the one that finally took over the house.

Le Crépuscule

At my second house, the big one, the one in the correct suburb with correct neighbors, where my child attended the right school with the right people, the lavender thrived. My French interior designer was jealous of my lavender, which satiated me in a strange way, like a middle-schooler winning an award.

The first husband bought a midnight blue Nissan Xterra without letting me know. I bought more time with the designer. *C’est la vie, n’est-ce-pas?* To each his own.

When the lavender outdoors would not bend to my will, I brought it in.

There’s a color in the evening in the sky, after the sun sinks. It’s not blue and it’s not purple and it’s not lavender. It’s that intense shade some call periwinkle, but it’s darker. It glows. In France that part of the sky after sunset

is called *le crépuscule*. The color we put on the kitchen walls should have been called *Le Crépuscule*. But it was called Paris Evening, like a Liz Taylor wannabe perfume, a knock-off.

We kept painting the walls in colors that reminded me of southern France: terra cotta for the play room, light lilac for the guest room, jonquil sunshine yellow for the sitting room off the kitchen, the one that opened to the screened-in porch painted the parched gray of lavender stems.

Alabaster Moonflowers

At my third house, the one for divorced parents trying to pretend they still live in the correct suburb, the one where parents still strive to send their kids to the right school, not only did my lavender thrive, my rosemary grew to the size of a small car.

Sage showed up in our cornbread dressing for Thanksgiving. Chives came back year after year, their purple buds an early spring tease of the lavender scents to come.

White clematis installed itself in the humid mulch at the base of the backyard deck. The vines climbed the deck posts, and flowers unfurled like white flags of hope under the sun. At twilight, moonflowers opened their lustrous white petals.

The hammock in the shade of the deck gave a valley view of the backyards of homes beyond. I painted my bedroom a light lilac, like the guest bedroom from the big house, the walls now the same shade as the sunlit room where my military man and I broke the rules.

Alabaster skin, chipped front tooth, and freckles — *tâches de rousseur*.

Freeze tag brought us together in another state when he was four and I was eight. When he was thirty-eight and I was forty-two, he lived not too close and not too far.

We became children again, the salty sweat of play fresh on our lips. When he left, I was barren. He never explained. Why. He left.

Clinging

Trying still to stay in the neighborhood so my son could be near his father and keep attending the right school, I moved across the street to a house that was smaller still. The new owner bought my third house because of the rosemary, chives, clematis, sycamore trees, and lavender, all of which I had planted, watered, and nurtured for several years.

In my fourth and last house, I didn't paint. I left the walls a dark chocolate brown in the front hall. I stole a few lavender plants from my old garden, but they failed in the dusty red clay on the hill.

My old young lover had a new baby. He told me the day I saw him by chance at the airport. I understood then what he couldn't tell me in the room with the lilac walls.

Youth. *La jeunesse.*

Summer Harvest

On the day I left town, I drove by all the houses. The magnolia my son's father and I had planted at the little white house in Nashville lived still, sweeping beautiful boughs out toward the street, embracing the neighbor's yard. That tree is eighteen, going on nineteen. The university rents our first home to students now. The herb garden is long gone.

At the big house, the lavender was ripped out years ago. New owners had planted something green and leafy, mundane, correct in a neighborly fashion. Tame.

At the smallest house, on either side of the front door, Knock Out roses thrived and Russian sage pretended to be lavender in color and bud, with a tedious scent that's nothing like the real thing, but much easier to grow.

La lavande

Intense heat, powerful smell, purify my soul and bring my youth back. It was stolen from me one day in the South of my birth.



DANIEL ADEL: PIERCING THE VEIL

Sylvia Fournillier

Walking down one of the aged cobblestone roads that winds through Lacoste, France, you might come across a particular studio, tucked away stone by stone, visible through a wide window that cuts away from the ubiquitous village masonry. On a wooden desk, which has been pushed against a wall, you can spot a disarrangement of various studied patterns. Sketches take up most of the space. Paintbrushes, pens, pencils, and miniature sculptures of crumpled paper lie on top of the desk. Close to the edge sits a vintage telephone that rings mostly with calls from solar panel marketers. (Clients call his cell phone.) Maybe one day, after a call from a particularly persistent sales associate, the phone will fall off the edge.

Across from the desk is a small couch just comfortable enough to take a short nap on or to seat a visitor. At the moment, this couch is empty except for a tossed-away jacket that is no longer needed in the well-heated studio. Along the walls are finished paintings. Except for one, they all have the same flowing, shrouded images. Directly opposite the window, resting on an easel, is a work in progress. Daniel Adel is staring at it with unwavering intensity.

The artist is sitting on a chair he rolled away from the desk. He observes his work, unaware that he himself is being observed. Leaning forward, he rests his elbow on his knee and his head in the palm of his hand. His back is to the window when, as if struck by inspiration, he rises toward the painting, getting ready to once again put brush to canvas. When it seems that further progress is about to be made he stills — as if doubt has begun to creep into his mind. His raised hand hovers, stubbornly holding

onto a spark of inspiration. But, eventually, his hand lowers. As if still grappling with his own actions, he eases back into his seat, returning to a pondering position. The pair of eyes watching this scene turns away, worried that they just intruded on an intimate moment of creation. This unfinished painting is the latest addition to a collection Adel will hang in a New York gallery next summer. On this night, no more paint will touch the canvas.

*

Daniel Adel is a man of portrayal. He is an illustrator, portraitist, and he also dabbles in photography. He has managed to make a successful career out of a passion that he cultivated from a very young age. He took up drawing early and gradually moved to other forms of expression. He says, “The first actual paintings, oil paintings, that I did were painted when we lived in London. It was 1969 or 1970, and I started messing around with oils at that point.” By high school, he had moved on to another art form. “All four years of high school I was illustrating. I was meeting deadlines and doing assignment work, and really already getting experience as an illustrator.” Even though he claims the work he did during that time was terrible, it paved the way for Adel to create caricatures for *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Washington Post*, and other well-established publications.

While working in illustration, Adel would also paint portraits — often commissioned by clients such as the president of Notre Dame. During this time Adel painted more and more, and in 1989, began to exhibit in New York. Now that Adel resides in Lacoste, he focuses on paintings of sculpted cloth, veils caught in dramatic moments of ruffled motion. These paintings play on light and dark imagery that Adel himself does not yet fully understand.

*

Adel is a born-and-bred New Yorker. He settled in Lacoste with his wife, Veronique, whom he met during a visit to the seemingly frozen-in-time village. “It was one of those things that I would regret for the rest of my days if I did not go back and make an effort,” he says about meeting his wife. He also found inspiration in the landscape: “When I first came to Lacoste, all I wanted to do was take pictures, and I loved it. In fact, I recently wandered up the hill and I realized that for years that was my routine. Almost every day I would be up there with a camera just taking hundreds and hundreds of pictures. So it probably has influenced the paintings in some way. I think going through hundreds of images on Photoshop and making them into something that I love looking at has allowed me to go more directly, in painting, to the endpoint that I want.”

Adel has done well with marriage and Lacoste. Though neither has stopped his hair from turning gray, both have put a youthful light into him. Away from his studio, Adel can be found in lively chats with locals, students,

and tourists. He laughs a lot. He seems instantly at-ease with whomever he comes across — whether he has known them for a number of years or a number of seconds.

Adel frequents the Café de Sade, which is just a short walk from his studio. It is convenient and it is the only café in Lacoste open all year long. He is often seen inside the café having a drink and hanging out, or out front, smoking. It is a long-standing habit, and during the cold seasons he will pull on his black jacket and gloves, and slap on his gray hat with earflaps, just to enjoy the smooth tobacco.

Adel has a receding hairline — or maybe a receded hairline — that gives him more forehead than hair. From a good angle, this gives him the same exaggerated features as the caricatures he draws. Like many artists who have spent countless hours staring relentlessly at their work, Adel has bad eyesight. Because of this, he wears circular, rimmed glasses, which seem to be very much a part of him, and which he frequently takes off, as if unknowingly, and wipes with whatever shirt he is wearing at the time.

Adel is often seen out and about. He takes walks to clear his mind and along the way stops to talk to many people. He is willing to strike up a conversation with perfect strangers, eager to know what brought them to Lacoste. Mostly though, Adel is in his studio working on the latest of the paintings that seem to reflect many of his unanswered thoughts. “I am kind of obsessed with the past,” he says. “I have a feeling that is at least part of what is going on in my work. A lot of my past is about as shrouded as all of these objects are.”

Adel moved to Europe for nine months when he was nine. “That was a huge eye-opener for me. That’s sort of where I discovered history.” For Adel, that allure of the past has only increased with the passage of time. He graduated from Dartmouth College with a B.A. in art history. “For artists, very often it’s work from the ’70s and ’80s that will be their main influence. It’s rare that their main influences go back more than twenty years, and I am kind of increasingly interested in what happened two hundred years ago and two thousand years ago. I have been trying, in this series, to get something of the Dutch seventeenth-century painters into it even though you could never find a Dutch seventeenth-century painting of drapery that does this.”

The images in his paintings are always shrouded. The white drapes that conceal the objects look to be in mid-motion, gearing up either to expose or to obscure his past or our history. It is unclear which.

A book Adel recently completed might expand on the subject of his art. He says, excitedly, that this book is the most interesting thing that he has ever done. But he refuses to publish it, an odd revelation from a man who otherwise believes his work should not remain hidden. The subject is taboo.

But, he says, there was a time when he was willing to publish it. Then his son, Luc, was born. “Once you become a dad you feel, well, jeesh, he’s gonna pay more of a price if I publish it than I will. Then you get into the whole calculation about how important is it to tell this story. I feel the truth is important, but there are some truths that are just not cool.”

When speaking of Luc, Adel takes on a role all parents will understand. He is enraptured with the simplest things his son does and boasts uncontrollably about them, even his son’s laugh. “He’s got a rich menu of laughs. It’s awesome. He’s got at least four or five different laughs. He’s got a goat giggle, the guffaw, he’s got a cackle, and then he has his real laugh, which is great. I was hoping above all that the kid would make me laugh and he does. He probably senses that that’s his purpose in life.”

Between 2006 and 2008, Adel published, edited, and illustrated a yearly newsletter in English and French: *L’os De Figue* or *Figbone*. Despite its short run, *Figbone* garnered favor around the village and was featured on the cover of *La Provence* and on the radio station France Bleu. Its layout and format mirrored Adel’s fascination with the past; it resembled eighteenth-century publications. Since the newsletter was free, the cost of production became too much, and in 2008 the last issue of *Figbone* was produced. Adel’s friend and local gallery curator, Cedric Maros, says, “I think he wanted to continue, but there was not much involvement from the other artists in the village to help him carry on.”

“Instead of taking orders, I got to give them,” Adel says. “It was fun.” If he finds a way to finance it, *Figbone* will be back up and running again. Until then, Adel keeps his focus on the painting, leaving his studio promptly for meal times like the true Provençal he has become.

He walks down the hill and crosses the short distance from his studio to his home. Once inside, Luc happily greets him. His wife, Veronique, is in the kitchen making the finishing touches to their lunch. It seems no matter what Adel is trying to discover in his paintings, the veil is dropped and forgotten as soon as he is home. His family holds all the answers he needs when he watches Luc dive over and over again onto the couch.



IF BEES ARE FEW: AN ESSAY IN Q & A

Sarah Hinson

*To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.*

— *Emily Dickinson*

Q: What is the significance of the honeybee (Apis mellifera)?

A: Emily Dickinson, Rudyard Kipling, and Sylvia Plath each wrote poems about bees. Dickinson compares their sound to “trains of cars on tracks of plush,” while Plath hears their language as “furious Latin.” Aristotle, Virgil, and Shakespeare, among other writers and philosophers, use the honeybee community as a metaphor for society. Perhaps it is easy to draw inspiration from these insects because they remind us of our simpler selves, reduced to the brevity of a waxen caste system. The bees’ innate orderliness is innately poetic.

Q: How did you first become interested in bees? Why do an interview about them?

A: I was once enamored of a girl who loved bees. She had a tattoo on her back of black-and-white bees with Byzantine halos circling their heads.

I read her favorite book, *The People of Paper*, in which one of the main character's lovers, Cameroon, hoards mason jars full of bees and repeatedly injects herself with their venom. I found the story sad and confusing.

I am by no means an expert.

Q: Is it possible to write about a thing without writing about the self?

A: I'm not sure.

Q: What are some bee basics?

A: Each bee plays a role. Nurse bees care for bee larvae while the queen's workers help feed and bathe her. Guard bees protect the entrance while foragers disperse to gather pollen and nectar. The unluckiest of the group transport their dead from the hive in a miniature funeral procession; their wings — moving about 12,000 times per minute — produce a mournful buzz.

I have only been to one funeral that I can remember. There was no procession. Instead, we had a party at a marina in Wilmington, North Carolina — per my deceased uncle's request. After the event, my dad called the godlessness of the service an abomination. I cried during the slideshow of old photographs — wet, hot tears, face tight, back straight with the intentional, selfish poise that comes from knowing you are being watched and pitied. The worst part is, I didn't even feel like crying. We unwrapped fortune cookies and cracked them open to find my uncle's mantra: "Things change, and I will be happy." It was his way of communicating with us from beyond the grave. I repeat the words to myself often.

Bee linguistics proves complex. Like humans, bees find that nonverbal communication can be just as, if not more, effective than verbal chatter. Sometimes the release of pheromones does the trick, or bees will exchange items with one another to convey specific messages. Often, however, they resort to interpretive dance. Austrian ethologist Karl von Frisch won a Nobel Prize for his interpretation of the "waggle dance." That is the actual term used by beekeepers and ethologists for the insects' figure-eight movements, used to communicate everything from the location of water sources to spots laden with pollen and nectar-rich flora.

When I was five or six years old and an amateur dancer myself, I knew little about bee culture. (I think I only knew that glitter sparkled.) I did, however, maintain a vehement belief in fairies and assumed that the two must be

closely related. I had heard that bees were bad news; in school we sang a song about “squashing up my baby bumblebee,” so I gathered that a consensus had been reached to eradicate them — even if you made a mess doing so. Despite this, something in me wanted to root for the underdog, especially if it led to befriending fairies.

So, not knowing about hives, I did what any logical person would have done: I built the bees tiny houses where they could have tea parties together. Meticulous for a child, I arranged twigs and grass into geometric shapes and covered them with moss, careful to leave a slight opening for winged visitors. If we had cookies or cake in the kitchen, I would save crumbs and store them in each edifice. When I returned the next day, the crumbs were gone, a feast for ants. In my mind this was evidence enough, like half-eaten cookies on Christmas morning.

Q: What is the role of the queen bee?

A: Every hive has a queen. She is the nucleus of the colony, with worker bees tending to her every need. The queen — the only female bee with fully developed ovaries — must mate within twenty minutes of her emergence from the cell where she was raised. If she succeeds, she never has to mate again. A spermatheca located in her abdomen stores the sperm from male bees, which she uses to self-fertilize. A healthy queen will lay up to 1,500 eggs a day.

The queen consumes a decadent diet of royal jelly. Worker bees secrete royal jelly from special glands and feed it to the queen and developing larvae. If a queen becomes weak or dies, the bees select several larvae and imbue them with jelly to prepare them for their future sovereignty. This, somehow, prompts the development of queenly ovaries.

My mother is our queen bee, though her childbearing years are long past. Small and round with honey-colored hair, she holds down the fort with quiet intensity. She views herself as a worker bee, a peasant in a past life, and fails to see how crucial she remains to the order — and disorder — of the hive. My brothers and I define her, thanks to her agoraphobic tendencies and unfulfilling marriage. David, the middle child, continues to enable her in a codependent exchange where mother and son are allies. The oldest, Tommy, left a long time ago. I waver between codependence and detachment, liminal. No one finds nourishment.

I do not know how to write about my mother; conversely, I do not know how to stop writing about my mother.

Five or six years ago, she began to drink. First it was gin and tonic in water bottles. I never thought much of it, except as a kind of joke. Now wine is her royal jelly. As soon as five o'clock arrives, my mom pours herself a glass as if the time itself is adequate justification. A second swiftly follows the first, and then a third. My dad comes home from work to find her tipsy and says nothing. I find his passivity infuriating.

I attribute his inaction to fear — fear of disruption. Fear of becoming the enemy again. He does not verbally attack us anymore. He does not leave his stinger under our skin to disperse the slow poison of self-doubt. But he knows that forgiveness is conditional.

"I feel like I've been around this all my life," he told me once, talking about alcoholism and how we both want to find an Al-Anon¹ group. "First my parents, then my siblings, and now my son and my life partner." David is also an alcoholic. I think my dad is at a total loss, and I have no idea what to say to him. I can only try to keep the hive moving.

Dinner means two or three more glasses, and then a few more while watching TV. My dad provides the jelly, forever in denial that he is killing the queen.

There will be no replacement.

Q: What about the worker bees and the drones?

A: All worker bees are female.

The drones, or male bees, exist for the sole purpose of reproduction. Once they mate with the queen, the penis (a barbed organ) and abdominal tissues are ripped free from their bodies. They die soon after.

Q: What might this say about male desire?

A: Do I really need to answer that?

Q: Do all bees sting?

1. Al-Anon is not AA; it serves the friends and families of problem drinkers.

A: Only the female bees have stingers, including the queen, who may use it to dispatch rivals. These, too, are barbed and will kill the bee if they become lodged in the thick flesh of a mammal. Honeybees rarely sting unless they feel that their hive is threatened. They would, quite literally, risk their lives for the sake of the hive. I question if my family would do the same, or if I would do the same for them. (You know, I think I would. I think it is ingrained in us.)

I have never been stung by a bee, which is incredible considering the number of close calls I had as a child. I used to spend much of my free time outside practicing the sunbathing techniques I had seen on TV and in magazines. I did not know the difference between a cucumber and a kiwi — one used in spa treatments, the other in fruit salad. In the hot midday of mid-July, I lounged on a beach towel in our driveway and balanced sticky kiwi slices on my closed eyelids. Bees from a nearby hive, apparently drawn by the sweet scent, soon descended. I screamed and ran inside, kiwi slices plopping one-by-one on the concrete. Thus ended any love affair with nature.

I also had a honeybee hive under my bedroom floor when I was a toddler. Our neighbor drilled a hole in the floor and pumped the hive full of pesticides. The same section of my floor remains concave and creaks. I think the bees returned because they still show up in my parents' house during winter months, one at a time, perched on window curtains or light fixtures. I used to wonder if they were some kind of omen.

Q: What is the best cure for a bee sting?

A: The first time I was stung by a flying insect was two summers ago. A wasp — which is not actually a bee, but stings nonetheless — flew through the car window and stung my upper thigh. My friend bought a cigar at a gas station and told me to mix the tobacco with spit and press it onto the swelling wound. This did the trick. Also try meat tenderizer, tea, or prayer and time.

Q: How do bees make honey?

A: Bees collect nectar from flowers and carry it back to the hive. Once they return, the foragers kiss the other hive bees and pass the nectar from one mouth to another in a sensual exchange. Enzymes break complex sugars down to simple sugars, and bees deposit the new watery nectar to the walls of the hive like drips of graffiti. They beat their tiny wings to encourage quick

evaporation, allowing the nectar to become gooey honey similar to what we see in bottles and jars.

My grandmother used to coat my pacifiers in honey so that I would forget about crying and instead become enraptured by the taste. My aunt gave me chamomile tea sweetened with honey whenever I walked to her house. I used to collect honeysuckles from a prolific bush that grew in our backyard near a muddy pond. It seems hard to think of a bad memory involving honey, unless you consider nostalgia a painful thing.

Honey provides a number of health benefits to its consumers. Its antioxidants (flavonoids) reduce the risk of some cancers as well as heart disease. Honey is antibacterial and antifungal and can aid in the treatment of stomach ulcers and other gastrointestinal distress. The sweet stuff soothes burns, irritated throats, and wounds. It can also moisturize skin.

Liquor sits comfortably at the opposite end of the health spectrum. Alcoholism can lead to heart disease, liver disease, certain kinds of cancer, and nervous system disorders. Excessive drinking may also result in high blood pressure, inflammation of the stomach lining, and stomach/esophageal ulcers.

Q: I wonder if bees could become intoxicated?

A. What a sight! They can't even fly in a straight line.

Q: How do people keep bees and harvest the honey?

A: First you buy, or build, a hive. It should stand about eighteen inches from the ground to protect its goods from prying animals, such as skunks. The bees — once you order them, likely through a local beekeeping association — construct their nests in sheets of wax that fit inside the frames of the hive stand. They'll maintain their order, keeping honey near the top of the stand and the brood near the bottom. Electronic or manual honey extractors assist in the harvesting process. Strain honey through cheesecloth to remove debris before bottling.

The average worker bee will produce one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in her lifetime. This is not something to lament.

Many argue that the mass production of honey threatens the honeybee population. Small-scale beekeeping can be much more humane, and the bees will pollinate your garden.

It is important to protect yourself from bee stings. A beekeeper usually wears a light suit with a veil that shields her face. Plath, in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” calls the frock “hieratical.” She uses the word ironically. You need to carry a smoker, a small container where heat smolders and produces little storm clouds of ash. Smoke dulls the bee and jumbles its pheromones. The bee’s brain will relay that the hive is in danger, that there is a forest fire. It will gorge itself on honey in preparation to migrate — like we eat our feelings. Except bees always have a purpose. During this time, you go about your business while the bees dumbly feast. It is always best to keep a smoker on hand.

My mother started smoking at sixteen and is now sixty and never quit for a day. The acrid scent makes me sick but also strangely reminds me of home. I used to hide my mom’s cigarettes and send her emails citing anti-tobacco research and statistics. Briefly, in college, I tried smoking. My mom found a pack of menthols — the same kind she smokes — that I carelessly left in a drawer. She displayed it in the middle of the kitchen table. She called me a hypocrite. I didn’t know what to say.

David smoked for about ten years but was able to quit. Once, when I was much younger, I buried a pack of them in our backyard. He made me go outside in the middle of a thunderstorm and dig it up. The ground was soft and pungent and full of worms. I felt like I was digging a grave.

Q: Weren’t you?

A: We all have our vices. Bees work too hard.

Q: Do bees dream?

A: Unlikely.

Depending on their age and role, the insects nap at various seconds-long increments. Tucked away in the hive, their tiny legs dangle and antennae twitch — reminiscent of our own fluttering lids during REM sleep. Perhaps the workers, forever surrounded by warm female bodies identical to their own, dream of becoming fat and fertile. The drones, prophetic, dream of

sex and death. The queen dreams of rebirth — a life outside the hive. The hive hums with little zzz's.

Dreams about bees may signify several things. They may serve as symbols of wealth, creativity, good luck, and harmony. Bees are most often associated with production, which may be an asset or an excess. If bees swarm in a dream, the dreamer may feel overwhelmed by a specific emotion such as anger or loss. Bee stings might mean the dreamer has been wronged, and visions of hives stand for large investments, whether financial or personal. If the queen bee makes an appearance, she is likely standing in for a prominent female figure.

Q: Perhaps someone's mother?

A: How would I know?

I dreamt of bees once. My mouth was a bee trap. It held them there, and they couldn't escape. It was as if I had a lot to say, but didn't know how to say it, or maybe I was afraid of what would happen if I opened up.

Q: What does the future look like for the honeybee?

A: Honeybees are now endangered. This is unsettling for many reasons, the main one being that one-third of the crops in the U.S. are sustained by insect pollination.

Mites are part of the problem. Tracheal mites inhabit the honeybee's windpipe and suck it dry from the inside out like tiny leeches. Larger mites infest the inside of the hive, reproducing where young bees are raised. These mites carry diseases, like deformed wing virus, that threaten the bee population.

Honeybees prefer to live in the large cavities of trees, which are limited today due to deforestation. Agriculture and grazing practices can also destroy colonies of bees when not thoughtfully implemented.

Q: But who, day-to-day, would consider the bee?

A: Not me.

I try to imagine my family living like bees, orderly and controlled. I think this is impossible for humans. When I was a child, I chose to live in a fantasy

world where bees befriended fairies and where families held everything together in harmonious balance. My mom was my queen, and I would do anything to sustain her. This usually meant turning against my father — adding to the disorder of the hive.

Recently I grew up and realized that I am a worker bee just like the rest. The only thing I can do is my job. If I tried to carry someone else's load, my wings would tear like cellophane. My task does, however, involve something that insects lack: empathy, and the ability to forgive.

I've realized that my family is endangered. Aside from fostering my own growth, I am generally powerless to stop its disintegration. I feel like we have been drained by those tracheal mites. When I was a child, my family — though disorderly like everyone else's — was more of a refuge. Now, when we're all together, we become so easily exhausted. Alcoholism, distance, debt. One of my brothers, a pastor, remains distracted by his own growing family and congregation. My other sibling, a struggling lawyer, drowns in student loans and liquor. My dad kneels next to his dying queen.

Q: What would happen to us if the bees don't survive?

A: What would happen if we couldn't survive each other? I think the answer is to find or to create a new hive.



ACOUSTICS OF COLOR

FROM THE FIRST CHAPTER OF A MEMOIR

Shelley Danzy

Sound Check

We had communicated for months in the early '90s, Nameless and I. Our mode of communication? Telephone and fax, yes, a few emails, too. Months of multiple conversations about the logistics of convention recruitment booths at a national public radio conference. I was the employment outreach project coordinator for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which serves as a conduit for National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations throughout the United States.

Nameless was my liaison at NPR. She coordinated the conference exhibit booths, and I helped staff them. Those were the days when words like *multicultural* and *diversity* had just entered the corporate buzz. CPB funded stations that included minority staff — even if it was only one percent minority — so managers were in a quandary to diversify their typically all-white personnel. I traveled to national conferences to recruit minority journalists for managers who said that they couldn't find minorities themselves.

Nameless — who always sounded a little breathless — was perky. Her voice was a high-pitched squeal. I liked her even though many claimed she was ditz. To me, Nameless was bubbly, and she knew how to communicate with station managers. We knew each other's numbers by heart, and our conversations were infused with sound bites of her happy-hour antics. She had a hankering for wine and dancing, especially when she traveled out of town.

The conference was on the West Coast this year. From station managers to program directors, from newscasters to interns, exhibitors were bustling up and down the aisles with boxes and tubes of all sizes riding on too-small hand trucks and luggage carts filled with radio station paraphernalia. I was excited and kept asking colleagues where I could find Nameless amid the rows and rows of booths in the convention center.

Nameless had been faceless, yet I couldn't wait for us to squeal and hug like old friends reuniting, but the exhibitor registration booth was crowded. My head bobbed trying to read nametags that flapped from red, white and blue lanyards. Finally Nameless' name badge flapped in my direction. I anxiously waited for my turn to speak with her.

"Nameless?" I smiled.

"Yes, how may I help you?"

"Hi! It's me, Shelley!"

"Yes, how may I help you? You're with — "

Uh-oh. Blankness in Nameless' eyes. I twisted my shoulder slightly to make sure my name badge faced her face.

"Nameless, it's me, Shelley from CPB! I'm so excited to finally meet you in person after all of this time." I still smiled. Nameless was clueless. The rhythm of her eyes became a visual Morse code. Her mind finally deciphered the message.

"No way, Shell. I thought you were a perky little white girl."

Nameless was breathless and so was I. Her statement stung. I wasn't angry. I was hurt — again.

Sound Quality

I'm an only child to my space-applications engineering dad and my psychiatric nursing mom. We'd spend weekends at the Smithsonian and the zoo. We'd go to airfields to watch takeoffs and landings. I was a child of the '70s; we were the first black family to move into Forest Heights, a town within a town in Prince George's County, Maryland. I made friends easily, so I had plenty of "siblings."

Jan and I have been friends since first grade. We lived on the same street. We walked to elementary school together. Neither of us cared that Jan's hair was blonde and mine black or that her skin was cream-colored and mine brown. We were sisters. We even lathered on the Coppertone sun tan lotion and proudly lay upon beach towels on the front lawn, mimicking middle-aged Mrs. Sherman who lived across the street.

Away from school, Jan and I talked on the phone and played at each other's houses. We made up stories, roller-skated, read, and giggled our way through Barbie doll adventures. We blasted tunes from our 45s and albums

on our component sets. Our favorites? Pat Benatar, Led Zeppelin, KISS, and Culture Club. R&B was usually the Jackson 5. Jan and I were smitten — along with thousands of other little girls in “deep like” with Michael Jackson’s cute button nose. The first concert was Kenny Rogers, courtesy of my mother — who adored Kenny’s crooning.

Through elementary school, all was well in my world — loving parents, great friends and nice teachers.

Background Noise

Seventh grade meant a new school and the first time I’d have to ride a school bus. My friends and I were excited. There was a mix of ethnicities. We had known each other throughout elementary school and were true friends.

Junior high school featured the sounds of contemporary integration: a political urban-suburban mix tape. Low-income black children were bused from southeast Washington, D.C., across the tracks, to the Maryland line. Voluminous noises penetrated my ears. Curse words. Sentences ending in prepositions. Double negatives. The distracting destruction of the English language. Where’s the mute button? My dad says I came home and proclaimed that we needed to move.

The majority of black children began to tease me merely because I didn’t sound like they did. I sounded like my parents. Many evenings my mom and I would play Scrabble. The mini-assignments in the book *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary* were part of my home life, not school homework. At some point in the school day I would hear:

“Why do you talk white?”

“Why do you act white?”

“You talk too proper.”

“You need to turn in your black card.”

“You’re just a white girl in black skin.”

“Are your parents white?”

The one that stung the most was said when I tried to get into an organization: “Look, our first white member.”

I never thought I was better than anyone else. I made friends easily and was involved in clubs. There was a comfort with my friends. I was in class; I’d still smile and laugh. I didn’t realize it then, but I barely spoke. Though I felt I had something to say, I was scared to raise my hand in class. There was much tension around “them” — the blacks who teased me. There were a few others who joined the “black-white-like-me club.” Eric, Pam, and Reggie. We were in AP classes together.

A few years later, my world got a little bumpy when a note was slipped into my locker: “You need to stay with your own kind.”

I never showed the note to anyone except Jan.

I wished I were white.

Cross-talk

Baltimore, Maryland. The only place I knew where you could “warsh” clothes, put dishes in the “zink.” Where sentences generally concluded with “hon.”

“Balmer” is also home to Morgan State University, an HBCU. Not only had I not heard of a historically black college or university, I was also not tuned in to the fact that that term meant that the overall student population was black. I knew I didn’t want to attend the University of Maryland — too large. I also knew that I didn’t want to venture too far away from my parents. MSU was a perfect choice — only an hour and a half away.

I’m sure I saw brochures. I just never understood or even considered what HBCU meant other than there was some black history in there.

Day one of freshman orientation. I arrived at the designated dorm for my weeklong stay. We were early. No roommate yet. My parents and I walked across campus to the cafeteria. I finally looked out the window and said, “There’s one.”

The entire morning I had wondered where all the white people were. I was upset that I didn’t see the ethnic mix of people that had made up my world. Not a bunch of “them,” I thought. Would the teasing start all over again? In my dorm room I turned the radio dial until I heard my comfort music: pop and rock. I heard voices coming down the hall. Broken English. Hurriedly, I switched to an R&B station when I heard “them” coming down the hall. I’m not sure if it was at the end of day one or the beginning of day two when I called my parents to announce, “I don’t want to live in the dorms.” Within a week, my parents had located off-campus housing.

My housemates were sophomores. Barb from California, Pat from New Jersey, and Tracey from Washington, D.C. They were kind, nurturing, and black. If they hadn’t taken me under their wings, I probably wouldn’t have lasted at MSU.

Barb took me to my first college basketball game. Sitting in the stands, I noticed the sea of black faces. As the teams got on the floor, the loudspeaker boomed and everyone stood up and began singing. “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us . . . let us march on ’til victory is won.” Everyone was singing. I had assumed that they were singing the school song. Tracey peered at me. When we got home, everyone gazed

at me. Voices finally broke the silence. “Don’t tell me, you really never heard that song? Don’t ever say that to anyone.” I was speechless when they informed me that the song was the black national anthem.

This was all new to me.

I later realized that my “white” voice had a place. I went to the student radio station and “hid” behind the newsroom’s microphone, which became a catharsis for me. At least a radio audience wouldn’t care about my color. Finally, I found a place where I spoke without restraint. The news director used the moniker Larry Dean, often identifying himself in his DJ heyday as “tall, lean, Larry Dean.” He took me under his experienced radio news wing and taught me well. His eloquent, bass voice is what commanded attention, not his black skin color.

Newscast after newscast, my confidence increased. The sound of my voice could no longer lead to unwanted jokes, questions, or embarrassing situations. Without pretense, I recorded intros, outros, and sound bites for stories. I spliced tape, pulled headlines from the Associated Press wire service, and learned to bang out local stories two-finger style on the old typewriter. I would put on the sci-fi looking headphones and adjust the microphone. When the red on-air light glowed and I began to speak, all fears gave way. The newsroom was a place where the tone of my voice was colorless. I was a reporter. A broadcaster. I no longer had to hide.

Then came the phone call.

The program director found it funny. A listener had called the station to find out why a white girl was doing the news. My safe haven was trespassed; I was trapped.

Noise Reduction

It took time and lots of tears for me to realize that I was prejudiced against blacks. “They” had hurt me, bullied me and made fun of me in childhood, and I carried those feelings into adulthood — only my pain wasn’t audible. I had allowed their collective voice to silence my own. I realized that it was going to take a lot more effort. Hiding wasn’t working. I had command of the English language, but I didn’t have command of my own life.

It was time to break my sound barrier.



EDISTO

Hally Joseph

As my grandmother tells it, it was on Thanksgiving Day in my grandparents' overheated family room, over the steady drone of the TV, that my mother said, "No more football. Let's get away."

My grandmother didn't say the room was overheated, but I know it was because it always is.

I was three months old when I first went to Edisto Island, the South Carolina paradise that became our Thanksgiving home-away-from-home, our turkey-and-stuffing Lowcountry, our chilled November isle. Forty minutes outside of Charleston, Edisto Island hides beneath a veil of Spanish moss. I know it's hidden because when people try to pronounce it, they say, "Eh-deest-stow?" I know it's hidden because there are only four bars on the island, one gas station, and one Piggly Wiggly. I know it's hidden because it still feels like a place lost in time, a place where your cell phone service won't hold up but your mid-afternoon napping will.

In Miami, neon-thonged women strut the beach. Beer cans stick out of the sand like miniature lighthouses. On Edisto Island, Gullah women sell aluminum pans of tomato pie and glass jars of pimiento cheese. Seagulls and pelicans go kayaking on their bellies across the bay. Rock jetties nest in blankets of wet moss. Bike paths wind beneath the live oaks, and one family has strung up thirty birdhouses like a deluxe neighborhood in the sky. Down the highway, small art galleries sell watercolor paintings of the ocean, glass sea turtles, and pottery coffee mugs. The Serpentarium, a veritable house of snakes, boasts a holiday light show: strings of Christmas lights entwined with boa constrictors. Long, quiet stretches of driveway come to rest at the

wide, white columns of hundred-year-old plantation homes. Even one mile inland, you'll find seashells beneath your feet: thick olives, iridescent shards of fans, spiraled turrets of brown-band wentletraps. Out on the beach, jellyfish, starfish, and horseshoe crabs wash up in a shimmering organic graveyard. Smooth crab claws wave as you walk by; those detached arms are somehow so pretty in their solitude, left to consider all the things they grabbed at in life. Elsewhere, the beach is very much alive. Ankle-deep in a tidal pool, you'll look down and see it seething with the tiny motions of hermit crabs, hundreds of them scuttling around, bumping into each other, haggling over new shells.

There's something slow and old about the South Carolina Lowcountry: from the bottled heat to the drip of the Spanish moss. In Charleston, Gullah men weave sweetgrass baskets, beautiful echoes of their coil-basket ancestors in Senegal. The Gullah culture is preserved along the Southeast coast. Slow and old, their earthy Creole language is an uncracked mystery to the pastel-pants-wearing white folk of Charleston. While diseases like yellow fever and malaria drove white plantation owners inland, the Gullah people's natural immunity kept them in the creeks and marshes, where they continued to carry out their customs and cooking, largely unchanged. Ms. Ruby keeps her tiny store on Edisto so hot the pies sweat; in 50-degree November, she misses 100-degree days. She points out that her grandbaby is in the local paper: a skinny girl who has started a reading club at school. Clutching a tower of wrapped pies for Thanksgiving dinner, I wonder how that girl can be so skinny when her grandmother makes all this food.

As picturesque as Edisto is, my family is not. Each year my uncle brings a guitar so he can sing horrible Josh Groban songs at full and irksome volumes. My cousin, now into her mid-twenties, brings a horde of reptilian pets, the largest of which is roughly the size of a small alligator. My parents do all the cooking and glare at the rest of us when they're left with the dishes, too. My grandmother is cheery with everyone except for my cousin's overweight boyfriend, who looks like Hurley from *Lost*. She's always commenting quietly on his food intake.

Ten of us — grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins — used to share one Groban-filled, reptile-walked beach house. Now that fiancés have joined us, and some dogs (maybe some babies will join us some time soon), we've spread into a second house. In our own space, my immediate family can breathe a sigh of relief.

Edisto is what keeps us together; in our annual pilgrimage, we have all found something magic there. It evens out our differences. We — a strange collection of nomads, archaeologists, redheads, veterinarian techs, fallen Mormons and Mennonites, atheists, comedians, and people who don't know when it's socially inappropriate to talk on the phone — we all want to eat

pimiento cheeseburgers from McConkey's Jungle Shack and read novels with our toes in the sand. One benefit Edisto provides: when the house gets too crowded, there's always the beach for a stroll.

And stroll we do, several times a day. When we're not strolling, we're debating our next stroll, or stepping barefoot onto shells and cursing. My shoes stay on the boardwalk and I surrender my feet to the sand, giving in to every sink-in stretch, every sharp-edged step, every softly spilling shift it has to offer. In my twenties now, I mainly use the sand for walking. When we were young, my cousins and I used to fling sand like confetti. We used to make castles, create coral gardens and mud moats, move crab princesses into the castle. The princesses always ran away, wayward Rapunzels in a sand tower. During its scuttling escape, one clamped a blue-tinged claw down on Courtney's finger when we were ten or so. Courtney shook and shook her hand and the crab's body went flying. Its claw remained staunchly clipped to her index finger. Did you know when a crab loses its arm, the claw — free of its control system — grips down harder?

By the time November rolls around each year, I want Edisto so badly I can taste tomato pie. Sometimes we take summer vacations there as well to fill the place in our hearts where we just cannot get enough Spanish moss. I pass the secret on to friends; my photographs on Facebook scream *otherworldly paradise*. I am not afraid of sharing. The island stays the same: the restaurants open and close with the seasons, the tide comes in and goes out, the cellphone service blinks to two bars then putters to none. The only thing that changes is my family. We slowly multiply and I wait quietly for the year my grandparents are too old to go, the year they are no longer with us. The island will still be there when that happens, but our Thanksgiving will have changed.

Still, I suspect I know exactly where I'll be every November.

Like the Gullah culture, some of my culture is preserved out there on that Lowcountry coast. My Thanksgivings will always be hanging in the trees, crawling in curlicue shells, sweating down the sides of pies in Ms. Ruby's store. Every Thanksgiving I will listen for the echoes of my family on that island. I will sit on the back deck admiring the sunsets I grew up with, and I will grip down harder.



LETTERS TO MEG

Alex Keith

Thursday, June 14, 2012

My dearest Megan,

Okay, no. I'm not going to write this entire letter in creepy Old English. But, you *are* my dearest. It's pouring here, so I'm at Black Tap. The coffee here is almost *too* strong, but the man behind the counter with the moustache makes it drinkable. You know how I feel about moustaches. Unfortunately, today I came in here with teary eyes and that lame T-shirt Jeremy bought me in London that has the giant book on it. You know, the one wearing glasses and smiling with "I read books" plastered across its pages/face. I had kind of forgotten I was wearing it (bra-less too, Jesus, why do you let me out of the house?) when the mustachioed man asked me what book I happened to be reading. I wasn't going to tell him I've been reading *Bodies* by Susie Orbach, because the title sounds disturbing, and if he happened to know the content he'd think I was crazy. Which today, I kind of feel like I am.

One day you're totally normal and the next day you're on a blue crushed-velvet couch talking to a therapist with enormous hands. (And no, I'm not just saying that because her name is Dr. Hand. She really does have huge hands.) My session this morning went okay. I still have this two-week grace period before I have to actually gain weight while I "learn to deal" with the idea of gaining weight. She still weighed me today though: 106 pounds. I've lost three pounds since the first visit, but Dr. Hand says this is "normal." She says I'm doing it subconsciously to compensate for the fact that I know

I'll be forced to gain soon. She uses that word frequently, "compensate." Apparently, I do it a lot, like when I won't let myself have the apple I took to snack on at work because of the carrots and celery I ate off of someone's plate of wings. Or if it's a brunch shift and I eat some of the cut strawberries that go with the cinnamon rolls, and then I skip lunch. Oh, she's making me quit work, too. Did I tell you that? I have to tell my manager after my shift tomorrow — that's going to be awkward — that lady loves me. Dr. Hand thinks it's "too stressful" of an environment for me to be around all that food. I'm kind of glad, honestly. Looking at all those cheeseburgers and bacon burgers and pork-belly burgers and French fries last night just made my skin crawl. Barf.

But I'm rambling, as always. I miss you. I want to come to D.C. so badly. I've already been researching all the places we have, have, *have* to go for brunch when I come. There's this place in Logan Circle, you've probably heard of it, Birch and Barley — they have blood orange mimosas for me and chicken and waffles for you. I've been looking at so many menus online. And *Bon Appétit*, and *Cooking Light*. And so many food blogs. Isn't that weird? I read a list of anorexic behaviors online a few days ago and "preoccupation with food" was its own category. That's when I knew some serious shit was going on. *Constant thoughts about food, cooking for others, reading food magazines*. You'd think I would want to stay as far away from food as possible. I mean that's what people with normal fears do, right? It's not like Allie seeks out spiders and traps them in jars to set out around the kitchen. But I constantly bake chocolate chip cookies and pumpkin muffins and banana breads that then just sit on the counter and stare at me until I throw them away. It's pretty fucked-up.

So, 106. Fourteen pounds to go before they'll let me come visit you. You're the carrot on the stick dangling in front of me. At least you aren't a donut. A carrot I'll eat!

Xoxoxoxo, Alex

Thursday, June 29, 2012

Meeeeegan,

Hello love, I hope this letter finds you two glasses of red wine deep in a *Mad Men* marathon. I know you think Jon Hamm is the essence of sexy, but all I can picture is his smarmy face in *Bridesmaids*. Capital D Douche.

I'm sitting at Metto on Coleman Boulevard — have I ever brought you here? We have to go next time you're in Charleston; they have the best green tea lattes. Okay, that might be a bit exotic for you, but their baked

goods do look insane. Red velvet cake, anyone? Your favorite! I'm working myself up to trying one of their massive blueberry muffins with the giant chunks of crystallized sugar on top. Whenever I leave Dr. Hand's office I feel like I have to eat something seriously calorie-laden or I'm going to drop dead right there. She tends to have that effect.

Today was my first *real* weigh-in. Signing that contract last week was probably the scariest thing I've ever done. It was like one of those scenes in a movie where I just stared at the "X" followed by the blank line that awaited my signature and everything around me just slowed down. I must have gone through like twenty-seven Kleenexes last Thursday, two-ply, the kind with the lotion added that make you feel like you just blew your nose and then wiped what came out of it all over your face. But, I signed. I didn't really have any other choice. My dad says he won't let anyone send me away. But he doesn't really know what's going on (does he ever?) And Dr. Hand is a pretty imposing figure. She's like 5'11" at least. I think she'd send me away, no problem, if I don't gain my agreed-upon one pound a week. As for now, I'm safe. I managed to gain a pound so now I'm sitting at 107, thirteen pounds from what Dr. Hand calls my "goal weight." It's hard to see it that way. It certainly doesn't feel like my goal. But then again, neither does dying. Did you know that eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental disorder? Twenty percent of people with anorexia will prematurely die from complications related to their eating disorder. When I read those statistics I felt pretty goddamn stupid. I still do. How hard is it to eat? Well, when your own hand, the vehicle for your fork, refuses to put anything in your mouth, and everything you read or see tells you to lose weight — it's pretty hard. Not to mention the pain. Last night my mom made me eat two servings of eggplant Parmesan. I cried what I call post-meal guilt tears at the table. And then I *really* cried. The pain in my stomach was unreal. I spent the rest of the night cross-legged on the couch like a little brown Buddha, my stomach hanging over the waist of my unbuttoned jeans as if to mock me. *See what you've done.*

But Dr. Hand says it will get easier. The more I eat, the more my stomach should expand back to its "normal" size, whatever that is. She says to think of food as medicine for my body, and the more I eat, the easier eating will become. It doesn't feel that way. But the more I eat, the sooner I get to squeeze you, Megan! I'll drink (eat) to that! Now I'm off to shove a jar of almond butter down my throat. Ugh.

Much love, xoxoxo, Alex

Thursday, July 27, 2012

Meeeeeg,

Hello lovely. Not a good day. I was going to call you, but I can't catch my breath. Palmer always says I'm "the ugliest crier she has ever seen," and I think she might be right. I'm doing one of those sobs where you can't breathe so you sound like you're wheezing/choking/have a piece of pork lodged in your throat. Which you know I don't, because you know I don't eat pork, but the lady at the register at Metto doesn't know that, so she probably thinks I'm a crazy, crying, pork-eater who is also bad at chewing before swallowing.

So I didn't gain a pound this week. Dr. Hand shook her head at me like I'd just beaten her first-born child in front of her. Doesn't she know I've never been able to handle another person's disappointment in me? Hence, my extreme perfectionism? Aka one of my major predilections for anorexia? I would have preferred that she open-palm slapped me, then shoved a Dove chocolate in my mouth, rather than look at me with that saddened expression. Also, don't you think it's funny that she has a dish of Dove chocolates in her office? Yeah, right next to the box of Kleenex. As if any of us, her patients, are going to voluntarily reach over, unwrap one, and set it willingly on our tongues. Maybe she has some gutsy patients who consume them in front of her, and then go home and run seven miles, or skip dinner, or whatever they do to "compensate." But then again, the level of chocolates in the bowl never seems to change, so I can only assume those chocolates have been there, and will continue to be there, until she cures us all.

But at least I didn't get sent to the nuthouse straight-out today. According to my contract, there is a week's grace period in which I'm given the opportunity to gain the pound I missed. If I haven't gained two pounds by next Thursday, I'm fucked. Poof. Gone. Will you send me books in there? And crossword puzzles? Do you think they'll even let me have a pen, or is that considered a "sharp object?"

No. No, I'm going to gain two pounds. I refuse to wear a paper nightgown and have someone watch me go to the bathroom. I refuse to drink Ensure like my dead Nana and I refuse to share a room with any of the characters from *Girl, Interrupted*.

We talked a lot about my mom today. Dr. Hand suggested that it might help if I lived at home for a while, where my parents could monitor my eating, where I would be held responsible for all meals. I laughed in her face. I don't like that expression, but that's what I did. I cackled hot coffee breath onto her face. She wanted to know what I found so funny. Where do I even begin?

My mom hasn't eaten breakfast since maybe 1973. No, my mom eats coffee for breakfast. And then for lunch, she eats forty-five minutes on her

elliptical, in her personal gym, that she had personally installed in our house. My house has a gym literally inside it. It's like kids with prescription pill or alcohol problems and their parents are left to wonder where, oh where, did little William get into these things? Well, your own medicine cabinet and liquor cabinet might be a start. I didn't get into pills or booze, but I found the gym.

I told you I haven't run in about two months now though, right? I haven't done anything, I promise. I have no energy for it anyway. My joints are starting to feel a little better. My elbows and shoulders still kind of hurt, but my knees don't ache so much at night when they hit together. Dr. Hand says that's how you can tell I've gained some weight. I look the same, and all my clothes still fit the same but, apparently, I've gained weight around my organs, she says. Isn't that sick? My organs had literally lost weight because there was nowhere else to lose it from. I picture my stomach, the size of a premature baby's fist, so small it's nearly lost in the folds of my shrunken intestines. Okay, enough with the visuals. Sorry. I love you, and I'm going to gain two pounds, because I want to see you, and live, and not have teeny organs and aching joints. And while a few weeks in the loony bin would probably supply me enough material for my first book, I'd rather be on the outside having a boozy brunch with you.

Xxxxxx and oooooo, Alex

Thursday, August 2, 2012

MEG!

Two pounds, two pounds, two pounds! Eight pounds from goal weight, which means, if I stay on track, I see you in two months! Thank God. I need your sanity in my life. At least I have you to ramble to about this. I haven't told anyone else. It's pretty embarrassing. And then there are times I'm embarrassed that I'm embarrassed. Does that make sense? I just know how cruel girls can be. I can hear the whispers now. I just hope my mom doesn't tell Mrs. Cooper. Because she'll tell Allie, and then everyone will know. I don't want to be the girl with "the problem," though I know it had to have gotten pretty obvious. There's this picture on Sullivan's Island of me, Calli, Katie, and Bridget — like two months ago — and it's just awful. You probably saw it. It's on Facebook. You can even see my kneecaps. Barf. Whenever I'm having a really shitty time eating or feeling like shit because I'm eating, I look at it, and it helps, kind of.

This morning we had our first "family therapy" session. Me, Mom, Dad, Dr. Hand. Awkward. In a way it was nice though, because Dr. Hand explained everything about anorexia to my dad that I haven't been able to. For someone who does nothing but read, you would think he would have

gone and bought a book on it, looked it up in a medical journal or something. But nope. He just kept making ignorant remarks like, “How could someone as smart as Alex get consumed (nice pun, Dad) by something so petty (read: stupid)?” And doesn’t he think I know it’s stupid? Logic and rationale have nothing on anorexia’s mind games. Once it sinks its teeth into you, it will literally devour you. There is nothing telling it to stop, don’t do it, you’ll gain weight! Anorexia is weird like that. The smarter you are, the *better* you are at it. That’s what my dad just doesn’t seem to understand at all.

So I cried a bunch — standard. And my mom snapped at my dad — standard. And my dad made stupid, poorly timed jokes — standard. But at least now maybe Dr. Hand sees where I’m coming from a bit.

So two months, eight pounds. I can do it. I know it’s going to be cold in D.C., but I promise I won’t complain — much! Let’s make fools of ourselves again at the ice skating rink at the National Gallery of Art. Then let’s drink cranberry-apple sparklers with the drunk freshmen at The Tombs until we blend in. Loving you infinitely.

Xoxoxoxo, Alex

Thursday, August 23, 2012

Meg,

I hate myself. And no, Dr. Hand, I don’t mean my body. Today I don’t hate my body. I hate myself. I lost three pounds. I hate my family. I hate New York. How do you lose three pounds in a week? Ask my stressful family, or Dr. Oz, or the creepy lady on the SlimQuick commercials, I don’t know. But I did it.

We left last Friday afternoon to go see Susan and Howard for the weekend since we can’t go up there for Thanksgiving this year. Susan was doing her usual, calling ahead days before we even got there to see what foods I wanted her to have in the house. I had told her specifically not to treat me like someone “with an issue,” and to just buy whatever. I have to learn to eat like a normal person, not a kid with a peanut allergy, or a diabetic, or an anorexic who needs non-fat half-and-half, skim milk, egg whites, and lettuce to survive. But she kept calling and asking anyway. So then we get there and I immediately regret not being more specific because dinner is waiting — a cream-based tomato soup, salad covered in feta cheese, and some sort of crusty bread loaf that is literally oozing cheese as my aunt pulls it out of the oven. I nearly had a heart attack just looking at it all.

I don’t know what happened. I lost it, I freaked out. One day we went shopping in Greenwich, just my parents and me. I must have been feeling particularly irritable (read: hungry, as I had been unable to get much down)

and I told my dad to “stop trying to buy my affections.” Well, that hit home, and he stormed off. We finally found him in a bookstore two hours later. Not surprisingly, he wasn’t reading anything about anorexia. He hasn’t spoken to me since. Then my mom and my uncle got into an argument one night over “how to deal with me.” My mom called me a “little bitch” (she even used the word “little,” oh the irony, Mom), and I slept on the floor in the living room. So it was a good time overall. Aren’t you shocked I didn’t gain weight? Aren’t you surprised I wasn’t so filled with glee and the warmth of my family that I didn’t stuff my little bitch face with my aunt’s pumpkin cheesecake? I would’ve chucked the graham cracker crusted confection at her head before I would have taken one bite of it.

So I’m back to being under 110. And D.C. feels like an impossibility. Every bite of food feels like a punishment. Only I don’t know what I’ve done wrong. They’re punishing me by not letting me see you, the one sane person who understands.

Hugs and kisses from my foul mouth and black soul, Alex

Thursday, August 30, 2012

Meggggg,

How are YOU? How are classes? I can’t believe senior year has begun. I still remember sitting in my freshman dorm back at UNC, crying on the phone to you about how much I wanted to go home to Charleston. Thanks for always being the sane to my crazy. At least walking up to the third floor of the English building yesterday didn’t take all the breath out of me. I’m feeling stronger, better, though I know I have a ways to go.

I’m 110 pounds, back on track. Convinced as I was that she was going to send me away the minute I stepped off her scale last week — three pounds lighter — Dr. Hand has agreed to give me this one slip-up. But that’s it. I’m fresh out of get-out-of-jail-free cards. I’m a cat on its ninth life. And you know I hate cats. Dr. Hand listened to my New York fiasco and agreed that it was a special situation, and had I been at home, with my routine eating agenda, I would have gained my pound. Who is to say, really? But I agreed with her nonetheless.

Ten more pounds. Ten weeks. Two thousand calories a day. Thirty-five hundred calories more than your body needs a week to gain one pound. For someone so averse to math, I can’t catch a break from the numbers that consume my daily thoughts. One egg (70 calories, 45 from fat), one piece of toast (80 calories, 10 from fat) with a generous amount of Cholula. A Greek yogurt (100 calories, 0 from fat), a banana (approximately 100 calories, 0 from fat). Three hundred and fifty calories total. I’m so tired of counting.

But I've got to do the math to get better. I'm going to get better. I'm going to come see you in your new apartment. Even if it takes me these next ten weeks, which it will. I want to meet your friends, put faces to their names, walk down M Street with you and eat brunch at Kramer Books because I'm hungry, and because it's fun, not because I have to get the numbers in. So make us a reservation. Ten weeks from now. I'll be there, maybe even a little chubby, but that's okay, just get us a booth for my fat ass. I love love love you.

Xoxoxoxo, Alex



THE LAST SALTWATER COWBOYS

I. Hartman

I. Hartman heads to the coast of Georgia to find out why America's shrimping industry is drying up.

The trawler is an awkward and rusty metal contraption. It's topped with an unsettling mess of ropes, cables, hooks, doors, and nets. When it's on the water, two tall outriggers are let down, and the boat looks like a bird with outstretched wings. But when it's closed up, it looks like a splayed Swiss army knife.

On the deck, four wiry men deftly adjust the rigging and bring the boat flush with the dilapidated dock. Toleman, an experienced shrimper, swings out from the boat's cabin.

"Did you get it?" he shouts to his crew.

"Yeah," someone yells from the back of the boat.

Then Toleman spots me. "Can I help you?"

"I was hoping to just talk to you guys for a little while."

"You're going to have to wait a minute," he says.

"You're fine," I shout, as he ducks back inside.

"No, you're not," Pee-Wee says before he throws his head back and laughs, exposing a meager and jagged smile.

Pee-Wee is a semi-retired shrimper with a fluffy gray beard that stands out against his leathery face. Decades of grueling work under the beating sun have taken their toll on his body — along with heavy drinking and smoking. His red plaid shirt and ratty khakis hang from his frail frame, and he wears thick white sneakers on his twisted feet, which have curved out at the ankles over time. Pee-Wee clumsily sits down on the dock, and I join him.

While he's no longer able to work on the shrimp boats, Pee-Wee still spends much of his time hanging out with the tight-knit but dwindling community of shrimpers at the Lazaretto Creek dock on Tybee Island, just east of Savannah, Georgia.

The Lazaretto Creek dock is one of hundreds of shrimp docks and ports that line the Southeast coast of the United States. While the Chinese, Greeks, and Romans ate shrimp before Columbus even conceived of a round world, it took decades for shrimp to rise to their current level of popularity in the United States. Canning, combined with a shrimp-peeling machine invented in 1943, made shrimp available nationwide. Soon, more and more trawlers began scraping the ocean floor, looking for these perfect little pieces of protein that could be headed, shelled, and cooked in less than five minutes. In 2001, shrimp finally edged out canned tuna for the title of America's favorite seafood, and this demand changed the industry forever.

*

Born William Daniel Turner, Pee-Wee got stuck with his nickname by one of his first boat captains. He started shrimping when he was just a boy and a friend from his inland hometown of Swainsboro, Georgia invited him to go out for an afternoon. "I'd never seen a shrimp boat before," he says.

Pee-Wee's been shrimping ever since. He's been to dozens of ports, experienced the open sea in every mood, and acquired a lot of stories. "I got shanghaied to Mexico," he says. "I passed out in a bar in Key West. Drug me out and put me on a boat." When he woke up, he found out that the boat wasn't scheduled to return for another thirty-three days.

Now, sixty-two years after he first saw a shrimp trawler, Pee-Wee picks up odd jobs doing what he knows and what he's still able to do. He often gets work taking the heads off shrimp — a task known as "heading."

"That's the fastest header on the East Coast," Toleman says, throwing Pee-Wee a familiar smile. He wraps a rope around the last cleat hitch before walking over to join us.

Toleman is not a young man, but he's sturdy. He has a medium muscular build and navigates the warped dock beams with authority. He looks like an original saltwater cowboy, with gray stubble and deep creases around his eyes from years of squinting into the horizon. Instead of a ten-gallon hat, he wears a white bandana tied around his head and a black T-shirt tucked into his jeans.

His birth certificate reads "Toleman Botkins" but, he says, "Both of 'em are misspelled. They misspelled my daddy's name when he went to Korea so now it's *B-O-T-K* instead of *B-O-D-K*. I had my first name in the hospital misspelled. They just stuck an 'e' in it."

He speaks with a charming Southern lilt. "Darlin'" and "Yes, ma'am" roll off his tongue as smoothly as dew off a leaf.

Toleman got into shrimping the same way Pee-Wee did.

Gesturing to the trawler, Toleman says, “That idiot that owns that boat lived next door to me — him and his daddy. He came up to me and said, ‘Hey man,’ — when I was eighteen, nineteen years old — ‘you wanna go fishing?’ And I said, ‘Hell yeah, let’s go fishing.’ I said, ‘You gonna pay me to go fishing?’ And they did and I’ve been stuck like chuck just about ever since.”

It seems like every man on the dock had the same story about falling into the life of a shrimper: a guy across the street had a boat, a friend’s dad was a shrimper, a neighbor invited him fishing. It’s funny how easily a day of fishing can turn into a lifetime career as a shrimper.

“We’ve been coming here about 50 years. We don’t pay no dock rent, but for every pound of shrimp that comes off that boat we give the guy that owns the property a quarter,” Toleman says, pointing past Pee-Wee toward a tiny wooden shack.

The decrepit dock juts out fifteen feet above the creek, which runs through the marsh until it hits the open sea. It looks like settlers built it shortly after they arrived in America, and plywood sheets cover areas that have given out. The dock is constructed from large beams that may have been lined up at some point, but they have twisted under the pressure of time, just like Pee-Wee’s feet.

“A quarter doesn’t sound so bad,” I say.

“Not so bad?” Toleman screeches. “He’s making more than we are!”

He laughs in loud quick bursts, and I find it hard not to like him.

*

Right now the guys are on a four-month down season. They say they’ll take a test boat out and see if it’s time, but it all depends on the weather and when the shrimp are ready.

“Shrimp close the season and they open the season,” Toleman says. “Can’t say for sure ‘cause we don’t know what the weather’s gonna do. The water temperature’s gotta hit seventy degrees. Simplest fact that there is. Season’ll start when the water hits seventy degrees. That’s when they’ll start movin’ out of these creeks. Shrimp don’t live in the ocean. They live in this marsh, in this grass. That’s why the marshes are so important.”

There are more than 1,900 species of shrimp in the world, and of those, fewer than twenty are important commercially. But Toleman’s talking only about white shrimp, which, on average, make up eighty percent of Georgia’s annual harvest.

“The type of shrimp that you’re used to eating, what they call the white shrimp, they’re indigenous to nowhere but North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia,” says Toleman. “Once you get past St. Augustine, they run out. It’s the only place you’ll find true white shrimp.”

White shrimp live mainly in the marshes, but they don't go up river to spawn like salmon. Instead, adult shrimp mate and spawn in deep water. After a brief courtship, the male and female grab each other's feet, and the male glues a packet of sperm to the female's belly. Almost immediately, the female expels somewhere between half-a-million to a million eggs, which are fertilized as they pass the sperm. Then they sink to the ocean floor and hatch within a day. The teensy larvae move into the water column where they continue growing and molting.

A month later, when they are nearly worthy of being put on a salad, they instinctually and mysteriously begin catching currents that sweep them back into the brackish marshes. As opportunistic eaters, they feed on anything that comes their way, including algae, decaying animals, organic debris, even other shrimp. They stay and eat in the marshes for about three months before migrating back to the ocean and heading south for the winter. Those that survive the treachery of predators and shrimpers who are indiscriminate about the shrimp's age become next year's spawning stock. The lucky shrimp live for about a year or two, and most of that time is spent aimlessly drifting around the ocean. In an endless sea of blue, finding them is the tricky part.

"It ain't like it used to be," Toleman says. "Climate changes and water temperatures not being right. Drought conditions change everything. It's just a crapshoot." According to Toleman, shrimp go with the flow, literally. "If it hurts, run from it. If it feels good, stick around." The shrimp don't like it when the salinity goes up, so they stay further up in the marshes and the rivers.

"It ain't so much the luck of the draw, you know. You get to learn it pretty good. You could ask some of 'em, 'Well, why are we dragging here?' Say, 'Well, I know you ain't gonna catch none over there. This is usually where we catch 'em at this time a year.' Whatever the weather, the tides, the moon, the wind, the rain — " Toleman trails off. "You get a pretty good little idea about where you need to be."

Even so, there are still just as many misses as there are catches.

"Most every one of these boats has its own pod of dolphins that eat what we call the bycatch," Toleman says.

Bycatch is just a fancy word for the other stuff that ends up in their nets. The process of shrimping is a lot like vacuuming blindfolded. Sometimes you get the crumbs and sometimes you get the cat. The large trawl net has a big rectangular opening that is dragged along the bottom, literally raking the ocean floor. For every pound of shrimp caught off the South Atlantic (Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas), the nets dredge up four pounds of other sea creatures. It's like wanting a coconut and chopping down the whole tree.

The result of all this throwback is that the shrimpers make friends with the dolphins pretty quickly. Toleman swears he sees the same ones come back every year. He even names some of them. The tourism industry has caught on, too. Since intentionally feeding dolphins is illegal — and subject to a wallet-breaking fine — following shrimp boats is the closest dolphin tours can get to a sure thing.

While shrimping is still hard work, the newer boats come equipped with modern creature comforts: TVs, electric stoves, hot water, air conditioning. They're like tiny, smelly yachts. Well, they're more like weird cabins that float. But a life on the water, fishing and hanging out with friends and dolphins, doesn't sound half bad.

I ask Toleman if he's happy.

"How could I not be? I get to fish all day," he says, laughing. "Most of the time it's pretty nice. Ocean's just as slick as glass."

But Toleman has weathered many storms. In 1979, he got caught in Hurricane David. "Hundred-and-twenty-five mile-an-hour wind. I spent three days on a boat. We was at Georgia Port Authority. It was blowing so hard you couldn't stand up."

Toleman and his crew typically head out for three or four days at a time. He says some of the younger guys stay out longer, but Toleman and most of his crew are over sixty years old. "Brad, he's married and a granddaddy and all that stuff," Toleman says, but makes no mention of anyone else in his crew having ties to the mainland.

It's not just their ages that dictate how long they stay out. They run an ice boat that can keep the shrimp fresh only as long as the ice lasts. Others run more expensive freezer boats that don't need the ice, but those aren't as common. Plus, they need to come back in for fuel. Toleman says the boat goes through twenty-two gallons of fuel an hour, and at nearly five dollars a gallon, that's a lot of money just to get to the shrimp.

Fuel is just one of the ways that Toleman says the government is breaking the backs of shrimpers and diminishing their profit margin.

"Bill Clinton killed us. Free trade agreement. All that imported shrimp and stuff like that. You got the option of buying imported shrimp, which is not cheap — they still ten dollars a pound at Publix. Let me tell you what them Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish folks do. A pond is not a pond. It's just concrete vats. It's only a couple feet deep. And that's how they raise them shrimp. And what they do — to kill two birds with one stone — they raise chickens over the top of them so the shrimp eat the manure out of the chickens."

If you've ever been to one of those large koi ponds where hundreds of fish strain to slither on top of each other as you throw out meager bits of food, then you have a pretty good idea of what shrimp farms look like. In a

one-acre pond, there can be as many as 170,000 shrimp larvae in about five feet of water, and that acre can yield six thousand to eighteen thousand pounds of shrimp in three to six months. And because it's free and there's no law against it, most of these farmers feed animal and human feces to the shrimp. All this and their own waste make it necessary for the shrimp to be treated with very powerful antibiotics, some of which are not even legal in the U.S.

Even so, shrimp farming has quietly taken over the market. By 1980, half of America's shrimp came from foreign farms, and by 2009, ninety percent of our shrimp — more than one billion pounds a year — came from foreign farms. If you're getting seafood at a chain restaurant, including Red Lobster, you can guarantee it came from a shrimp farm.

Chris Deboed, chef at Coco's Sunset Grill located on the same Lazaretto Creek dock, told me he uses only fresh-caught shrimp.

"The wilder the better," he says. "A good shrimp is from out there, and it tastes sweet and delicious. And a bad shrimp is raised in Indonesia in a pond with a chicken coop above it. The ones from Indonesia taste like rubber when you cook them. They don't have any flavor at all."

*

The margin for survival is slim for Georgia shrimpers. When asked if he would ever own a boat, Toleman says that he knows better. But I spoke with boat owners Doug and Jack Coursey, who say that owning a boat is the dream.

"You can be your own boss and make more money," says Jack as Doug nods.

Jack and Doug are brothers. You can tell because they have the same well-fed figure and share the same tanned and amiable face. As they talk, they drape themselves over separate corners of the truck bed. The vehicle bounces when they move. While they both have families, they stay out for about five days at a time to make the trip worth it. Jack says his wife knows the drill. "I was shrimping when we met and we've been married over thirty-three years." He says that toward the end of the down season she's telling him, "Get your ass on that boat and get gone. I want to see some money coming in."

The brothers grew up around shrimpers and started out heading shrimp. Now in their fifties, they know that owning their own boats means more money, but it also means more risk.

"I just spent fifty thousand dollars on that boat right there. Put a motor and clutch in it. It takes fifty-five gallons of paint to paint it."

Last year alone, Jack spent seventy-six thousand dollars in fuel. When you're burning more than one hundred dollars an hour on fuel, having a hunch come up short is hard. And unfortunately, the return just isn't what

it used to be. “I’m fifty-five years old, and when I was eighteen years old, we got six-twenty-five per pound and now we get five dollars. And it just went up to that. Used to be about four to four-fifty.”

To compare, the average price of bread thirty-seven years ago was just thirty-five cents. In 2012, the average cost was \$1.88 — a 537 percent increase. If shrimp had held at the same rate of inflation as bread, shrimp would cost \$33.56 per pound today.

Sadly, Jack and Doug have no choice but to take the market rate. They sell their haul to the dock, which ships the shrimp down to Louisiana to be processed and packaged. To help make ends meet, Jack also sells on the side to a clientele his wife has built up in his community.

*

Jack, Doug, Toleman, and Pee-Wee are among a dwindling number of survivors in a sinking industry. When the economy tanked in 2008, at the same time fuel prices went up and more imports came in, the number of shrimpers working in Georgia plummeted. Jack says that in a three-year period, the number of shrimping boats in Georgia dropped from six hundred to two hundred. When I ask what happened to the four hundred boats, he says most of them were so old and in need of so much repair that their owners just let them sink. I couldn’t help imagining that somewhere on the bottom of the ocean floor there is a city of old trawlers, burgeoning with the tiny, spider-like buds of shrimp life.

While these shrimpers do whatever it takes to get by, life for them is hard and getting harder. They are scraping to turn a profit in spite of the obstacles stacked against them. Pee-Wee has resorted to living in a busted-down van behind the dock shed.

Before I leave, I ask Jack if, after all these years, he still likes being a shrimper.

“I never hate to go to work. I’m the boss. I know what I have to do,” Jack says, adding, “I’m too damn old to do anything else now.”

Then I’m reminded of something Pee-Wee told me: “It’s all we know.”

D O C U M E N T

