



D O C U M E N T

THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE
SCAD WRITING PROGRAM

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SCAD WRITING PROGRAM

EDITORS

Lee Griffith and Catherine Ramsdell

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SCAD: THE UNIVERSITY FOR CREATIVE CAREERS.

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B.F.A., M.F.A.

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STUDY WRITING IN THE CREATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OF SCAD.

Savannah

Phone: 800.869.7223 or 912.525.5100

Fax: 912.525.5986

Email: admission@scad.edu

P.O. Box 2072

Savannah, GA 31402

USA

Atlanta

Phone: 877.722.3285 or 404.253.2700

Fax: 404.253.3254

Email: scadatl@scad.edu

P.O. Box 77300

Atlanta, GA 30357

USA

scad.edu/writing

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ADDICTED TO SATAN

Max Glaessner

Age Six

I saw a picture of the Delacroix painting *The Barque of Dante* in my parents' copy of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. There were a few men on a boat, traversing a river of fire. Frightened people thrashed about in what I thought was lava. Their faces were desperate, and it looked like they were burning up. A couple of the people tried to grab hold of the boat; they clung to the sides like it was their life raft. Confused, I asked my mom what was going on in the picture.

"I think those people are supposed to be in Hell," she said. *Awesome*, I thought. *This is awesome*.

Age Thirteen

I read *The Satanic Bible* for the first time in the 8th grade, and it changed my life. It was written by this bald, bearded guy named Anton Szandor LaVey, who looked like a cross between Genghis Khan and Ming the Merciless from the *Flash Gordon* TV series. On the back cover of the book, he wore a Dracula cape, and he looked like he could waste you with his squinty little eyes. I read that he lived with his family in a big black Victorian house somewhere in San Francisco. According to legend, they had a pet boa constrictor named Boaz, and a Nubian lion named Togare, who lived in the basement. The Black House, as it came to be known, was also the place where LaVey and his cohorts would practice "secret" Satanic rituals, most of which were highly publicized and involved a naked woman splayed across an altar. Right then, I

decided, when I grew up, I wanted to be this man. I'd have my own haunted house, lead an exciting *Addams Family* lifestyle, all in the name of Satan.

Age Fourteen

No matter how I tried to explain it, my parents did not understand my interest in Satanism and the dark arts. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that my family is Jewish, and not religious at that, so there was no reason for me to rebel against the Christian Lord. In any case, they soon devised a plan to purge me of the Devil.

Around the holidays, my parents convinced me to board a flight with them to Salt Lake City for a "family vacation," and the next thing I knew I was living in an adolescent treatment center run by Mormons. I had weekly sessions with a counselor named Ed. This guy was bald and bearded like Anton LaVey. But Ed was fat and he was missing an arm. He'd lost it to a bullet in Vietnam, and all he had was a pinkish nub that emerged from his shirtsleeve.

Ed was a proponent of Alcoholics Anonymous, so he felt that most problems in life could be summarized in terms of addiction.

"You know what your problem is, Skippy," he'd say. "You're addicted to Satan!" He'd point the blunt end of his nub at me, like he was trying to point a finger. I had to keep my head down to stop myself from laughing.

Ed gave me a book to read called *Schemes of Satan*. There was a rattlesnake with dripping fangs on the cover, which just added to my disappointment when I realized it was authored by an ex-Satanist turned Christian minister named Mike Warnke. In his book, Warnke described rituals he led as the high priest of a Satanic coven. Dark rites that included the drinking of urine, feces, and blood from a chalice; bestiality; even murder. The overall point of the book was redemption through Christ, but I was much more interested in reading his awful testimonies.

In the later chapters, Warnke wrote a lot about people like me who were seduced to Satan at an impressionable age. Besides listening to demonic rock bands like Mötley Crüe and Ozzy Osbourne, many youngsters were predisposed to Satan without even knowing it. According to Warnke, this was because their parents had ritualistically abused them.

When I read this I got really paranoid and began to wonder if maybe my parents had done something awful to me when I was an infant. I had nightmares in which my parents and their friends

encircled me in a flaming pentagram. There was a Rabbi with small horns on his head who led the group in strange chants. These sorts of dreams made me wonder why my parents had placed me in treatment in the first place. Could it be that they really just wanted me to forget that they had offered me at birth to the Great Beast? I imagined a day when they would tell me my suspicions were correct: that truthfully, I wasn't addicted to Satan; I was actually his offspring.

Age Sixteen

Once released from treatment, I spent about a year clean and sober from the forces of Satan until he came knocking at my door with his cloven hooves. I did some research on the ex-Satanist turned evangelical, Mike Warnke. As it happened, he'd embezzled a lot of money from his congregation, and no one could authenticate his claim of cult involvement. The people who knew Warnke in college described him as a nerd who never left his dorm room.

I read further and discovered that there was never one legitimate case of a Satanic ritual murder in the United States. The entire idea was spread by evangelicals during the "Satanic panic" of the 1980s. Meanwhile, I caught up on my Satanic reading and found that Anton Szandor LaVey was Jewish like me. He was born April 11, 1930 in Chicago, Illinois, and his name was Howard Stanton Levey.

More importantly, I realized that even though he was dead (LaVey passed in 1997), his worldwide organization was still up and running. The Church of Satan accepted applicants every month and processed inquiries from their office in Hell's Kitchen, New York. Membership cost one single payment of \$100, and you got a nifty plastic card, aligning you with the powers of darkness for life. I was going to have to join and that was all there was to it. Satan was still an integral part of my existence. But the membership age of consent for the Church of Satan was 18, so I figured I could handle all that business when I moved out of my house.

That summer at camp, a pretty girl gave me a very bad haircut, so I took a BIC razor to my head and shaved it bald.

"You're starting to look more and more like that Satan guy," said my father. "Tony Levey."

"It's pronounced La-Vey," I told him. I was always bald after that.

Age Seventeen

In high school, my Satanic research turned scholarly. For one thing, I learned about the people who gave LaVey all his

heretical ideas. Really progressive folks, like Friedrich Nietzsche and Ayn Rand. LaVey also had a couple of friends in the upper echelons of society. Buxom B-movie starlet, Jayne Mansfield, apparently, had been a Church of Satan member. So was Sammy Davis Jr.—between drug addictions.

The real philosophical framework behind Satanism was Social Darwinism. To LaVey, Satan equaled man and man equaled God. It was a religion of self-worship, and the Devil was merely symbolic. The only importance in the world of Satanism was yourself and the pursuit of power.

“This really fits me perfectly,” I often thought when I looked in the mirror. I was a teenager. I thought only about myself. The first hairs on my face were starting to grow in. I had an awkward mini-stache, but I let it fester. Kids laughed, but in a year it would look like the beard of an evil sorcerer. Then they laughed even more.

Age Nineteen

My freshman year of college was unlike most. When I wasn't going to parties, I produced Satanic propaganda for a website called UnholyGoat.com. The guy who ran it was Melvin T. Silva. He was a Pacific Islander with the hulking stature of a linebacker, and he acted as my Satanic mentor. We were Internet pen pals, kind of like a “Dear Abby” scenario, except it was more like “Dear Satan.” Melvin was part of the Bloodfire Grotto, a subdivision of The Church of Satan, which operated out of Honolulu, of all places.

The World Wide Web was the forum that linked all Satanists together and allowed established members to interact with rookies like me. I was building a platform from which I could finally grab the attention of my infernal peers. Melvin was quite impressed with my writing ability, and for a guy who resembled a pit bull (in his pictures anyway, which usually showed him holding a sword), he could be quite gushing in his compliments.

“I am truly flabbergasted at your grasp of our concepts and ideas,” he wrote once in an e-mail. “How marvelous that an iron youth such as yourself can manage to see the world with such brutal, astounding clarity. Hail Max! Hail Satan!”

Melvin wasn't the only one who took notice either. I'd been privately encouraged by two different members to join up with the Church of Satan. This was a society of non-joiners who deplored

solicitation, so I was feeling real spiffy. Then two things happened that I didn't expect.

First, the governing Council of Nine decided to up the Church of Satan membership fee to \$200. Joining was going to be a little more expensive than I thought. I was still on an undergraduate budget, and two hundred bucks was a lot for a plastic membership card. Then my girlfriend went messing around behind my back with a tattoo artist. We were planning this big Satanic wedding, but seriously, how does a nerdy Satanist compete with a tattoo artist?

All of a sudden, I had little time to update my Unholy Goat blog, in which I railed on the herd mentality of stupid humans. I was too busy behaving like a stupid human. I drank forty-ounce bottles of King Cobra and cried into my rug. I smashed windows, punched walls, and started sleeping during the day.

When I wasn't busy feeling morbidly depressed and pitying myself, I spent a lot of time contemplating how I could exact revenge on the tattoo artist who'd made off with my girl. After a while, the best solution I could come up with was to throw a death curse on him. In Satanism, that's what you do when somebody makes you mad. Anton LaVey's *Satanic Bible* contained specific directions for a “conjunction of destruction” ritual, in which one could symbolically destroy his or her enemy.

But LaVeyan magic was kind of sketchy. It was actually a lot like prayer in that one basically wishes for something to happen, and then if it actually does, all the better. The “psycho-drama” of ritual, as LaVey described it, was mostly an exercise in releasing energy. The real fun of it was dressing up in black, pointing a sword around and invoking the names of various demons in the hope that some person somewhere drops dead. Satanic rituals were supposed to be more effective if they were “group workings” I had read, and since I didn't know any Satanists who lived close to me, I decided to try and meet some.

I joined the Satanism group on MySpace and ended up connecting with a guy about my age named Ryan who, like me, was a collegiate, would-be Satanist. Living in nearby Champaign, Illinois, and attending UIC, it wouldn't take Ryan long to travel to Chicago where I went to school. Being a novice in black magic himself, he was more than happy to assist me with my destruction ritual and assured me over the phone that he even knew a girl in his dorm who would be willing to act as a nude altar for us.

I set a date with Ryan for what was sure to be a diabolical working.

Ryan showed up sans naked girl.

"Yeah," he said. "She couldn't make it, man. She had a party to go to."

I was willing to look past it. But then Ryan told me something else. Something he had neglected to mention via MySpace.

"You know, before I discovered Satanism recently, my life was getting to be really out of control. I was smoking a lot of crack, and I was spiraling into a lot of negative emotions."

"That's interesting," I said. "How long have you *not been smoking crack* for?"

"About two weeks."

I should have figured it out as soon as I laid eyes on this dude. When I had poured Ryan a cup of coffee in my favorite mug—the one with the inverted pentagram on it—his hands shook so bad that I thought he was going to drop the damn thing. I could see underneath his Sox hat that his eyes were really bloodshot too, like he hadn't slept in days. What kind of a Satanist wore a Sox hat anyway?

All the same, he'd come a long way to help me with my ritual, and it was too late to back out now.

In my room I'd compiled everything we needed for this working: a bell, a dagger, a chalice, and two black candles. I'd even thrown a black blanket underneath it all so it wasn't obvious that the implements of ritual were sitting on top of my dresser. Carefully lighting the black candles, I led the ritual according to the steps set forth in *The Satanic Bible*. I called out the name of the Devil in 30 languages while Ryan repeated them after me. Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* played. It's played in the chilling sequence at the conclusion of Disney's *Fantasia*, and it's generally agreed upon to be the most Satanic of classical compositions.

So far so good, I thought. Now if I can just get to the curse part, we'll be through, and I can get this crackhead out of my apartment.

In accordance with the destruction ritual, I had written out my curse on a sheet of paper. It was basically a grotesque supplication, petitioning for a Clive Barkeresque scenario in which the tattoo artist would be attacked by all of his own needles.

Once I finished reading this travesty out loud to whatever unholy forces happened to be listening, it was time to rip up the

sheet of paper and enact my will. This was where the "symbolic destruction element" was supposed to kick in. I was ready to channel all my anger into the prescribed ritual but, unfortunately, my new friend Ryan had another idea.

"If you want to really destroy this guy," he said. "Then you need to burn the curse. You know. With the candles."

I didn't like the way Ryan was looking at the candles. His stare was glazed and blank, yet eerily focused at the same time.

"I don't think so," I said. "I need to be careful in here, you know what I'm saying? I think tearing this piece of paper into little pieces will symbolize destruction just fine."

Ryan wasn't having it.

"That's bullshit, and you know it, man. Ancient traditions dictate: if you want to perform a human sacrifice, the curse must be dispatched by way of fire."

I was puzzled, trying to figure out what ancient traditions Ryan was referring to when he full-on rushed me, snatching for the cursed piece of paper with his outstretched hand. He caught hold of one end fairly well but I was still latched on to the other. We pulled back and forth like this until we crashed into the dresser, sending the two black candles toppling onto the polyester blanket.

As soon as those candles hit, the whole thing shot up in flames. I tried putting out the fire with water from the ritual chalice, but that wasn't nearly enough to do the trick. Then I instinctively tried to pat out the fire with my hands, but this turned out to be an even bigger mistake. My palms got covered in sticky black gelatinous goo that burned my skin. Plus, my beating on the blanket only fanned the flames into a blazing inferno.

"Follow me," I said and ran towards the kitchen.

I could hear him following. "Oh my god," he kept repeating. "Oh my god." Kind of ironic given the situation.

"Will you please get in here and help me out?" I yelled, pointing to a giant pot sitting next to the sink. I filled it full of water and handed it to Ryan. Then I reached into the cupboards and filled up another one. This one I managed to haul all by myself, though it hurt my hands to carry it. After dumping two full pots of water on it, the fire was finally extinguished.

I'll never forget surveying all the damage in my room. We'd been playing with the Devil all right, and there was physical evidence to prove it. The blanket was melted into my dresser and my hands were covered in seething blisters.

Ryan stood next to me, his White Sox cap still obscuring the vegetated look on his face. “So,” he said. “I guess I’m gonna get going now.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “Hail Satan.”

“Hail Satan,” he said and stuck out his hand. I held mine up in front of him so he could see that I wasn’t able to shake on it.

“We should do this again sometime,” he said.

I showed him out.

“Yeah, I’ll call you,” I said. Then I locked my door.

In the aftermath of this near-disaster, I thought a lot about Anton LaVey. I considered how his life had ended in financial ruin and pictured him sitting alone in the shadows of his Victorian house, rocking back and forth in his antique chair that had belonged to Rasputin. Like Lugosi on heroin, LaVey had become a bitter recluse. He was plagued by an endless string of lawsuits brought by his ex-wife and his daughter. He was a great showman and Devil’s advocate, though I wasn’t sure he had any better grip on this life than I did. I still remember thinking to myself one pathetic afternoon: *How am I going to overthrow Christianity when I can’t even get my shit together?*

I wasn’t a Social Darwinist; I was a stupid kid who drank too much. That \$200 fee was hanging over my head, and I realized I was never going to pay it. In fact, I decided to take the money I would have spent on my membership card and buy a new dresser instead.

I quit contacting Melvin and all my other Satanic cyberspace pals. Melvin e-mailed me with an invitation to publish in a new printed edition of *Bloodfire* magazine, but I never got back to him. Since I was supposed to be his protégé, I imagine he was mad. I wouldn’t be surprised if he put his own curse of destruction on me.

Age Twenty-Six (the present)

You think it’s hard to lose your faith in God? Try losing your faith in Satan. It sounds ridiculous, but ever since I diverged from his schemes I’ve felt out on a limb. It’s like I’m a demon without a home or a host to possess. In fact, I’m often convinced that I’m relapsing. Every day I doodle blasphemies in my notebook – inverted crosses, upside-down pentagrams, horned goats, blood and sex and death. I know it’s incredibly childish, but I don’t even think about it when I’m doing it.

In some ways, I guess the Satanist in me adds balance to my routine. I still shave my head to the point where it shines, and while I gave up on the forked Mephistopheles beard a long time ago, I think I keep a fairly wicked mustache. It’s just the way I’ve presented myself for so long. I couldn’t picture myself looking any different. A good Satanist knows how to evince a villainous appearance, and on a good day, I think I still live up to the role.

Now don’t get me wrong; it’s not like I can’t appreciate the humor in this. When you’ve been looking like a Vincent Price character for as long as I have, you have to be able to laugh at yourself. For instance, whenever I visit my parents, and I take their dog Maudie for a walk, the neighbors tend to stare. They’re probably gawking at that hot-pink collar and leash of hers, and how it doesn’t quite mesh with my black leather jacket. Maudie is an overweight, fluffy white cockapoo. She actually has a vicious, Satanic temperament in her own right, but you wouldn’t know it just to look at her. They’d expect me to walk a Nubian lion, or at least a Doberman, but instead, I’ve got this femmy little dog. What can I say? Even arch-villains have to walk their cute pets.

The incongruity makes me happy. I’d be lying if I said otherwise. You might find it strange that I watch *The Exorcist* while I’m having breakfast, but I think it’s odd when you pray before you eat. The world needs bad guys, and I’m willing to fulfill that role every now and again.

I guess I do have an addiction, after all.



A LEGACY OF RICE

Courtney Norton

I have strong feelings about rice, that humble starch. I have eaten it every way imaginable. In Chinese restaurants, it glistens with oil and jewel-colored vegetables. My husband's Cajun relatives smolder it with cayenne, filé, and hot andouille. My brother-in-law, a Frenchman, silken it with cream and stirs in wild mushrooms until it's a cumulus nest for Parmesan. But I think rice is best in its plainest state, with the grains fattened only by steam. Mounded into a sticky heap and then stained, with a salty splash of black soy sauce.

When I was born, rice was the only thing I could eat. My infant body had no tolerance for milk or formula. I was jaundiced and shivering with dehydration when, out of desperation, my grandmother took leftover rice from the refrigerator. She mashed it into a paste, thinned it with water, and fed it to me. After that, I began to thrive.

It was my grandmother, a first-generation Filipino, who taught me that the proper greeting in Illicono is not, "How are you doing?" but, "Have you eaten your rice today?" The answer to that question tells the asker all they need to know. She taught me other things: the importance of family; and integrity; and straight posture. But the lesson I always go back to is the one about how to make rice.

I see her in the kitchen, her long fingers washing the grains under cold water. A piece of good jade hangs around her neck. Her eyebrows are straight and thick, like a film star's. She shows me how to cover the rice with a half-finger's worth of water when it cooks. The result is not flaky rice, but something dense and chewy. It's scooped like gelato with a wooden paddle.

In October 2005, my grandmother passed away. With her went the connection to my Asian heritage. When we cleaned out her apartment, I found her old, aluminum rice pot and I took it. I went to the store and bought a one-pound bag of Calrose short grain and a bottle of Kikkoman soy sauce.

Then I went home and let the diamond-shaped grains fall with a soft musicality into the dented aluminum. I filled the pot with cold water and squeaked the grains together until the water turned milky. I rinsed it and covered it with a half-finger's worth of fresh water. Something happens when you cook rice in a cold kitchen. The steam clings to the windows like breath, like a handprint. The water bubbles and makes the lid clink against the pot. It's a soft, familiar chatter. The house smells warm, sweet. It smells like home.

When I was a hungry infant, rice kept me alive. And it did the same for me on that October night, when I needed something to hold in my hands to remind me of where I came from. The perfect bowl of rice is my grandmother's legacy to me.



GRIND IT UNTIL YOU FIND IT

Matt Terrell

I flicked through photo after photo of complete strangers. Some were faces, some were various body parts (G-rated, as per Apple's rules), and some were just blank. Taglines that let me know what they were looking for—to top, to bottom, to waste time, to find friends.

I was using Grindr, my favorite iPhone app, which shows how far other gay men are from you. I'm not talking about hundreds of miles away; I'm talking dozens of feet away. You can talk to the gay boy who is (literally) next door. You can trade pics (sometimes the naughty kind). You can even send a map of your location (for easy access). Grindr has more than a million users worldwide, and about half of them are in the United States.

On the surface, Grindr is all about allowing people to meet each other and (hopefully) hook up. But that isn't the whole story. This app is really about gay men's obsession with projection and perception. Gay men grow up fully aware of how queer we seem to others. We obsess over how normal and "straight-acting" we can appear. For each other, we define ourselves with labels like masc (masculine), musc (muscular), top (fucks you), bottom (gets fucked), poz (has HIV), ddf (drug and disease free—a.k.a. lies about not having HIV), etc. The photo becomes your first representation on Grindr. It lets you show off how sexy you are. Seeing is believing, and the photo is how you project to the world that you are a real person in this anonymous world.

I sat and contemplated my options for a new Grindr photo. I've been in a holding pattern of graduate-school education for

years—self-awareness, critical theory, and analysis have been drilled into my brain. I know that the photo is not real. It is an affected representation of myself. I settle on a photo that hides my double chin. You can't see that awful mole on my neck. The photo looks much more muscular than I really am. I'm not sure if it is really me at all.

To my surprise, my online persona recently attracted a wonderful and handsome man on Grindr. And he was really perfect. I find myself thinking this often—that I've managed to sort through the schlock and find "the one" via my iPhone. He was handsome. He was muscular. He was masculine. He was nearly twice my age.

When I have a good hookup, everything seems real—not like the sham sex it probably is. I imagine myself ten years into the future with my older man. We have a Yorkie named Molly, an adjustable-rate mortgage, and on the weekends we go antiquing in the countryside. I want to remember every detail of the hookup so I can tell people that I knew *this is it* when it happened. I remember his age (forty-six), and that his birthday is coming up (next month). I'm so consumed that I think every detail on the car ride home is important: I thought I could see my breath because it was so cold; Pat Benatar was on the radio; I notice he buttoned my shirt wrong. I start to fix the button, and then leave it. I want to savor the realness.

That wasn't reality though. It was just another anonymous hookup. The next week, I managed not to call and he managed not to call either. It was a month later when I realized we were both too busy to know the other's name. The "realities" of the hookup were never there. It was all sex and no substance.

The true reality comes every three months when you go get your HIV test, which Grindr kindly reminds you to do periodically. At the testing place, reality is simpler and truer. You are infected or you are not. You will live with a disease for the rest of your life, or you are safe for now. You always go alone to the testing place. The lobby looks like a basement, all of the furniture very used. Maybe there is a real nurse working there on any given day—but you're just as likely to be tested by a volunteer from some local college.

As you sit in the testing place lobby, you wish you were hooking up right now. Months ago you thought the older man was the one. You thought his voice was real. You thought his smiling Grindr pic was real. You thought realness was the smell of the chlorine from his hot tub. You thought life couldn't get realer than

when he held you to warm you up from the cold air outside. The HIV testing people tell you none of this was real. If anything is real, it is probably dangerous and will make you sick.

Every detail of your HIV test is the new realness. The singsong voice of the Jamaican woman while she swabs your mouth. The crooked pictures of a syphilis infection on the wall. The smell of latex gloves as they brush under your nose. The cold, stale air from the unclean floor vents. You want to forget every detail of the HIV test. You don't want to tell people that you knew *this is it* exactly when it happened.

The Jamaican woman tells you to wait 20 minutes. At that time she will tell you if you are poz. You sneak a look at Grindr while you wait in the testing place lobby. Nobody interesting is on Grindr when you are at the HIV place—only the same sad sacks you blocked because you thought they were ugly and you had hotter prospects waiting for you (you didn't).

The Jamaican comes into the waiting room. You hide your iPhone so she doesn't see that you are Grinding. She already knows what your HIV status is (they always look at the test before you come in so they can be prepared to deliver bad news). She sits you down, as she always does. She begins to read you your results. You start to have a panic attack, as you always do.

"You are—"

You take a huge breath. You come here every three months. You have safe sex. You don't use drugs. But this is the moment when you are going to be told you are infected.

"I am?"

"Clean. HIV Negative."

You could swear she really sang that. Then you gasp in relief, as you always do.

"Alright, well, awesome." You are totally out of there.

But the Jamaican woman stops you. She speaks flatly, like your mother.

"You Grindr?" she asks.

"Yes. Sometimes. I Grindr. On occasion." A lie, again.

"Just—be careful. And have these condoms."

You don't want the condoms she has to give you. You try to explain that you use condoms every time you have sex, and you have your own brand you prefer. You know how to use a condom, and you would actually prefer not to have two-dozen chocolate-flavored-off-brand-crazy-colored condoms. But the Jamaican woman doesn't let you leave without your bag of condoms. She

probably thinks you do meth or share needles. Who would turn down free condoms?

You say goodbye to a volunteer girl as you walk out. She hands you a syphilis brochure before you can think to decline it. You take this as a hint to come back soon.

It seems the people at the testing place don't have much faith in us. Gay men are told that if we have sex, we shouldn't. If we still have sex, then we should use protection. If we use protection, we should still get tested. If we get tested, we will probably find out we're HIV-positive. We've been told that we will make each other sick, and that we have to detach ourselves from real intimacy. Condoms, mutual masturbation, and dry-humping are our new best friends. We are told that after HIV and crystal meth, hookups are the most dangerous thing to our health and well-being. We are told that if we hookup off something like Grindr—well, then, we are fucked.

I put down my phone. I look at my bag of condoms and my new syphilis-prevention brochure. I worry that people have come to expect so very little of me because I am gay. I believe that sex can have meaning. Tomorrow I'm going to lie in bed with that older man. My toes will pop out from under the covers. He will turn over and scoop me up in his arms. His arms will be bigger than mine. I will laugh at his corny joke. I will remember every detail of our first nights together. I will even remember his name. I will remember everything because I will make it real.



MY DAUGHTER, SURGERY, AND QUESTIONING GOD

Kim Wade

I'm not sure how I finally nodded off, but I knew the lack of sleep would eventually catch up with me. The knock at the door nudged me back to reality, and it took me a few seconds to remember where I was. My neck ached. I hated sleeping in a chair.

The nurse didn't wait for me to respond to her knock. She walked into the room and reached for the light switch. Before she could flip the switch, I quietly but firmly said, "Please don't turn on the light. You'll wake her up."

I could tell the nurse was annoyed. She gave me a pinched smile and squinted her eyes. "Well, I'll see if I can do what I need to do in the dark." She reached for the electronic thermometer in the front pocket of her scrubs.

"Do you have to check her temperature?" I whispered. "She just fell asleep about 20 minutes ago and the other nurse checked her temperature last time."

The nurse looked up at the ceiling and sighed. I was really bothering her.

She looked over her shoulder at me. The pinched smile was back, and she was gripping the thermometer in her white-knuckled fist. "Dr. Loveless won't be happy with me if I don't get her vitals."

I stood up and walked over to the bed and looked down at my daughter, Veronica. She looked peaceful despite the IV in her tiny hand, the blue wires attached to her chest, and the beeping machines surrounding the head of her bed. "Look at her—she's worn out. Can you please come back later?" I tried to sound like the voice of reason.

The nurse looked at her clipboard. She tapped her foot as she read the monitors and compared the numbers to the ones the other nurse recorded an hour ago. She bit her lip. I felt like I was getting through to her.

"I'm supposed to record her vitals every hour," she whispered. I noticed she was not smiling anymore.

I knew it was better not to say anything at this point. I also knew that if she tried to take Veronica's temperature, then I would reach out and block her. She was not going to wake her up.

She sighed again and looked at the monitors. I saw her jaw flex, and I could tell she was gritting her teeth. "I guess it won't hurt if I come back in an hour since she seems to not be in any pain."

I did my best to muster up a real smile and say, "Thank you so much for understanding." I stood on guard by the bed until she was out the door.

I looked back down at Veronica and watched her chest slowly rise and lower with each breath. "You owe me," I whispered.

I stood for another five minutes, watching her. The rhythm of my breathing began to match hers, and my heart the beat of the heart monitor. I could barely feel my fingers; they rested on the cold, metal bed rails. My eyelids slid down. I was about to fall asleep standing up.

It was almost 3 a.m. I longed to be a regular person asleep at home in my own bed. I wished I didn't know this familiar feeling of sleeping in a chair beside my daughter's hospital bed—all alone. I had not had a bed to sleep in for almost 24 hours, and I knew we still had at least one more night in the hospital.

The coffee machine down the hall was my new best friend. Unlike the last hospital we went to, this one was free. The thought of the warm Styrofoam cup in my hand was inviting, but I decided to sit back down and try to get a little sleep before the nurse came back. I wouldn't be surprised if she brought backup next time—I had learned to expect it.

After I sat down in the stiff plastic chair, I thumbed through my backpack for a flashlight and something to read. I felt the familiar, smooth leather cover of my Bible, but I wasn't in the mood to be reminded of God's plan. I fumbled around until I found my unread copy of *Vanity Fair*. I wanted to numb my brain with celebrity interviews and gossip until I could sleep again.

Having a disabled child is one of the most rewarding yet heartbreaking and frustrating gifts God can give you. It has been almost 11 years since Veronica came into my life, and I am not sure I

can remember what my life was like before her. I do, however, remember the day I found out that my little girl would be different.

The doctor looked down his pointed nose through his wire-rimmed bifocals and said, "There is something very wrong with your baby." In that instant, my life changed completely.

Most pregnant women schedule their five-month ultrasound with excitement. It's the appointment known as "the big one." Mommy- and daddy-to-be finally lay eyes on their little bundle of joy and find out if it is a girl or boy. I could not wait for my first ultrasound. I called everyone close to me to let them know it was the big day. Even my husband Jay planned to leave work for a few hours and meet me at the appointment. The Army kept him busy and away from home, so I was excited that he had the chance to go with me. Up until this point, he had shown little interest in the pregnancy.

We arrived at the hospital on time, and we went into a narrow, white room for the ultrasound. The ultrasound technician moved the small, white sensor across my exposed rounded belly for almost an hour. Our casual conversation of "there's the baby's head" and "there's the baby's legs" slowly turned to an awkward silence. I got the feeling that something was wrong, but I was afraid to ask questions. Jay fidgeted with his cell phone the entire time. I wished he had stayed at work.

The technician finished taking measurements and printed out a few keepsake photos for us. She helped me wipe the jelly off my stomach and mentioned that we needed to speak with Dr. Newman before we left.

Jay said he needed to go to the bathroom. My stomach sank; he was notorious for disappearing for long periods of time. I would be alone with the doctor.

I sat waiting on a cold metal bench in the sterile hallway. I fixed my eyes on the small pictures of my baby, which I cradled in my hands. I did not notice the man standing in the open door calling my name. He raised his voice, startling me out of my daydream.

He appeared to be a seasoned physician with the physique of a basketball player. His wire-rimmed glasses were pushed to the tip of his nose in such an annoying fashion that I wanted to take my finger and slide them into place.

He looked like he was in a hurry and seemed to have better things to do than chitchat with me about my ultrasound results. "Where's your husband?" he asked. I shrugged my shoulders and

smiled. The doctor rolled his eyes. He sighed and looked down the hall and tapped his foot as if that would make Jay appear.

"I can just talk to you by myself," I softly suggested. He looked at his watch again and then angrily motioned me into his office. I sank into the plush chair in front of his desk—I felt like I was in trouble with the principal.

"Mrs. Yancey, I'm sorry to tell you this, but the ultrasound shows that there is something very wrong with your baby."

I shook my head. "I don't understand," I whispered.

He continued speaking with the speed of a machine gun, making me want to take cover behind the desk.

I saw the door open to my right. Jay muttered the usual, "Uh, sorry I'm late. What did I miss?" I didn't have the energy to be mad this time. I felt like I was floating in the air—I was numb to everything.

The doctor rolled his eyes at the sight of Jay and motioned him over to the empty chair beside me. Dr. Newman caught Jay up to speed and continued: "The baby's legs are crossed at the hips in an unnatural position. The fingers are overlapping each other and the hands are pulled in tight to the body like this." The doctor leaned back in his chair, crossed his extended legs, pulled his arms to his chest, and forced his clenched fists into an unnaturally twisted position. He even closed his eyes and dropped his head down. He looked like a deformed mummy. I was mortified at the thought that my baby looked like that.

Shut up! Shut up! Stop talking! My mind repeated these words over and over but my mouth was speechless. I needed to give my brain a moment to catch up. But Jay and the doctor continued talking, like I wasn't in the room.

I just stared out the large picture window. I thought to myself, "This doctor must be important—he has a great view."

We lived just south of Seattle and the weather outside was as gloomy as my soul. Small drops of water formed on the pane. It was too foggy to see Mount Rainier that day—another disappointment.

The rest of the conversation was a blur. I remembered he told us that the baby appeared to have a rare chromosomal defect—giving it a one-percent chance to live. "Your baby will probably die in the next few months," the doctor said. "We can send you to a clinic in Seattle for an abortion if you choose to take that option."

I had come to the hospital for a harmless ultrasound. How did I end up sitting in the doctor's private office talking about nearby abortion clinics and dead babies? I wanted to believe that this was happening to someone else—anyone but me.

I didn't remember the drive home from the hospital except that Jay drove, and he asked me to please stop crying. I shuffled into the house and went straight to my bedroom. I slipped under the covers, not bothering to even take off my shoes. I couldn't open my eyes for fear I would see something that would remind me I was pregnant.

I felt like someone had yanked out the cord that powered my heart. My body was an empty shell. I wanted someone to drop me off the top of a building and shatter me into pieces. For the first time in my life, I did not want to live.

Except for the few hours I spent at the doctor's office for my amniocentesis, I remained in bed with my head under the blankets for a week. I was in shock, thinking that the baby would die inside of me. I had wanted to be a mommy for so long, and I couldn't believe that God would do this to me. I secretly promised God that I would remain faithful if he would save my baby.

While I was hidden under the layers of blankets on my bed, I heard the phone ring. I knew the doctor was calling to tell me the results of the amniocentesis test. I reached my shaky arm out of the covers and fumbled for the phone on the bedside table.

I pulled the receiver close to my ear and answered the phone without opening my eyes.

"Mrs. Yancey?" I recognized Dr. Newman's nasal voice. He sounded like he was in a hurry.

"Yes," I replied.

"The test results are negative."

I couldn't remember if negative was good or bad. "What does that mean?"

"It means that the baby does not have a chromosomal defect."

My eyes shot open and I sat up in the bed. I felt dizzy.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it just means that we can rule out a chromosomal abnormality," he said.

I felt the warm glow of sunshine coming through my curtains for the first time in over a week. "But I don't understand. You told me in your office last week that you thought the baby had a one-percent chance to live."

The phone was silent for a moment, and I could hear him breathing on the other side. I wanted an apology. I wanted him to admit to me that he had been wrong about everything.

Instead he said, "I can tell you the sex of the baby if you want to know."

I didn't want to share this moment with this jerk, but my curiosity got the best of me. "Okay, what is it?"

He said, "It's a girl."

And several months later we found out that the doctor did get one thing correct: Veronica was definitely a girl. I never allowed myself to forget the blessing that my baby did not die. The doctor's initial prognosis of a deadly chromosomal defect was incorrect, but there was something wrong with her.

Veronica was born with a rare joint disorder called Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita, which means hooked or crooked joints. Luckily her case is mild compared to others. But it is still a daily struggle for her to get dressed, to feed herself, brush her hair, or anything else that requires her to use her arms and legs.

When Veronica was born, she couldn't move her left arm. Both hands were flat against the inside of her arms, her hips were dislocated, and she had very severe clubbed feet. She looked like a pretzel. I was told many times that she would never walk.

She now walks around quite well but with a pronounced limp. She tires easily and has to use her wheelchair for long distances. She has full use of both arms, but her left arm is still very weak. Her hips were successfully reconstructed when she was about two years old. But her feet have been a constant source of pain for her.

This past April, the day finally came when I felt it was time to do the finishing touches on Veronica's feet. Most people seem to believe that surgery is an easy fix for crooked limbs; it actually doesn't work that way.

During Veronica's ten years in this world, she has had nine major surgeries. That does not include the follow-up surgeries to remove the pins and plates holding her bones together.

She had her first surgery when she was six weeks old. The doctor cut the Achilles tendons on both sides to stretch out the backs of her feet. Apparently those tendons grow back just like a severed lizard's tail—I had no idea.

Seattle Children's Hospital was our home-away-from-home for her first year. They fixed her hands, started on her feet, and botched a hip surgery. I learned the hard way that just because a

doctor is really good at fixing feet, that does not mean he can fix hips, too. He underestimated how shallow Veronica's hip sockets were and tried to force the ball joints into her pelvis.

Then the Army moved us down to Georgia, and Scottish Rite Hospital in Atlanta became my new second home. They fixed her hips in a miracle surgery that even surprised the veteran surgeon performing the operation. The surgery took six hours and two blood transfusions, but her hips were finally in the right place—she was 2 ½ years old at the time.

After the hip surgery, Veronica started walking, which made me believe God really did have a special plan for us. We went back to Atlanta to have the same doctor fix her right foot. Unfortunately for Veronica, he was better with hips. But as my grandma would say, that's how you learn the hard way. Surgery isn't a quick fix—and it can be a total disaster.

The surgery did not fix anything. Veronica's foot was not permanently damaged, but it really slowed her down for a while.

I never made this mistake again.

I did my homework. I cannot calculate the number of hours I spent in front of my computer screen, researching doctors, reading medical journals, and e-mailing other parents whose kids suffer like Veronica.

When it came time to fix her left hand, I was able to pull a few strings and use some important contacts back home to get Veronica into Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas. She was seven years old, already a veteran of the surgical process.

The gamble paid off: she has full use of her left hand now.

*

We took a break from surgeries for the next three years. Veronica was doing great, and I wanted her to be a regular child for a while. Jay quit the Army after two combat tours to Iraq, and I thought this meant that we would finally have the chance to spend time together. I was wrong. It was the beginning of Jay's spiral into depression and solitude.

After a late night of drinking, Jay wanted to talk. I sat frozen as he said, "I always thought the Army made me depressed, but I realized that being around you and children makes me sadder." He left us in the spring of 2009 to return to Iraq as a private contractor. Divorce papers followed, and we rarely speak anymore.

Being alone was not a new feeling; I had organized most of the surgeries and doctor visits on my own. But now I did not have the option to call Jay and ask for help in making the right decisions

for Veronica. So going back to Dallas in 2011 to get her right foot fixed was a choice I had to make on my own. If the surgery did not work, it would be my burden to carry.

There is one direct flight from Savannah to Dallas. The plane makes three trips per day going back and forth from Savannah to DFW. We know most of the flight attendants and pilots who make that trip. It's easy for them to remember us since we stick out in a crowd—a single mom loaded down with bags, wheelchair, and two children, one in a fresh cast.

Veronica's last surgery in Dallas was in April—she was ten years old. It was time to fix her feet once and for all. But no matter how many times I read over the data and checked my facts, the surgeries never got easier. They seem to get harder—especially now that Veronica is getting older and becoming more aware of the fact that she is different.

And to be honest, as much as I try to be that person who accepts things because “that's God's plan,” I have been having a hard time accepting Veronica's disability. I have never felt this way before.

The day Veronica was born was the first time I realized my need to believe in God. I accepted his plan for Veronica and me, and I chose to never doubt it.

Imagine having a child with a disfigured limb. You learn to live with the fact that it is, “Just the way God made her.” Then you find a doctor who can fix it. You make the appointment. You sit by the phone every day waiting for the call that tells you, “Sorry, but we can't do the surgery.”

You never get that call. You realize that this surgery is meant to be. But you are taking a big risk. Your child's foot may be “fixed,” but if she cannot bear weight on it then she will never walk again.

You buy airline tickets and plan for another miracle-surgery of a lifetime. Your close friends ask you, “So, what's this surgery supposed to do?”

You give the standard answer you know they want to hear: “It's supposed to make her foot flat so she can walk better—you know, help with her balance.”

But in the back of your mind, you know that there is no way to know what this surgery is going to do. It takes faith to believe that it will work and that you are making the right decisions for your child.

As we were sitting in the hospital in Dallas in April making the rounds for our pre-op blood work and X-rays, I looked at all the sick and crippled children surrounding us in the waiting room. And then it hit me—what is the purpose to all this pain and sickness?

I felt a little scared, because I had always feared retribution for questioning God. I had never once questioned God about Veronica's disability—until then.

Sitting in the waiting room that day, I asked myself, “Why does God let this happen?”

I understand the purpose and effect of Veronica's disability on my life. Through Veronica, I have learned how precious life is. Every minute of the day has meaning and purpose. I never take her two-armed hugs or spilled glasses of milk for granted. I clearly remember her first steps and the way her face lit up as she headed toward me with outstretched arms.

I didn't see God until I saw Veronica the day she was born—legs twisted and arms lifeless. I believe God puts these amazing people in our lives—even if they are only here for a minute—to soften our hearts and force us to look beyond ourselves.

But despite all of that, I just don't understand what good Veronica gets out of all of this. Sure, I could be Miss Polly Sunshine and go on and on about how she touches people's lives and makes us realize what a gift walking is, but I can't do that anymore.

Veronica is a happy and outgoing child, but her feet and legs are a constant source of pain for her. She hates sitting in a wheelchair while her friends are jumping in the inflatable bouncy house at the birthday party. She can't wear normal shoes, and she probably won't be able to wear heels to her prom. She will never know what it is like to run in the rain or jump rope.

*

The foot surgery in Dallas was a success.

When Veronica healed from the surgery and began walking again, she attended a summer camp in Texas for children with Arthrogryposis. The last night of camp, while performing in the talent show on stage, she fell. I watched my baby trip and fall backward and cry in pain. She lay on the stage with her legs twisted underneath her, and I wanted the world to stop moving. I wanted the pain to stop. I wanted to be dreaming. “Oh my God! Oh my God!” she screamed.

I have been told that I appear composed and rational even when the world throws me curveballs. After the accident, I was able to keep my composure, remain calm, and get Veronica to the emergency room without losing my cool in front of everyone.

But despite my outward appearance, I just wanted to hold my daughter close to my chest and scream at the top of my lungs. The moment I reached the stage and looked down at my baby's twisted legs, I thought to myself, "I hate God." If he had been standing in front of me, I would have told him to fuck off. I would have asked him, "Is this some sort of sick joke? Has this child not suffered enough for you?"

Later in the evening, when Veronica and I were waiting to see the doctor in the back of the emergency room, I felt it was time to address the reality of the situation. We had not spoken since the accident. I had spent the time holding her in my arms and stroking her soft brown hair while she cried.

But now she was sitting in a wheelchair and I was sitting across from her on the gurney. We were alone and she had finally stopped crying. I put my hand on her arm and looked her in the eyes. "Honey, I'm not sure if your leg is broken, but you have obviously done something very bad to your knee."

She began to cry again. "Mommy, why does bad stuff always happen to me?"

I again held back the tears and took a deep breath. "I don't know, sweetie. But I do know that everything happens for a reason, so let's try to look at this situation and see what God is trying to tell us."

We sat silent for a moment and then I said, "Sweetheart, you want to know what I think?" I paused for a moment to regain my composure. "I think it's time for you and me to come to terms with the fact that you are disabled, and falling and hurting yourself is just going to be a fact of life. You can't let this destroy you—you have to find the strength inside yourself to overcome this pain and frustration and become a bright light in a dark world." I felt guilty for not believing my own words; I did not know if she would believe me either.

Veronica sat quietly in her wheelchair for a few moments—she seemed to be soaking in my words. "I guess, but I'm just so tired of all of this. I just want to be normal."

And I thought to myself, "I do, too."

The doctor put a cast on Veronica's broken leg, and we flew back home to Savannah to try to catch our breaths and make sense of everything. She had surgery in Jacksonville at yet another new hospital later that week.

We were both exhausted. I wasn't sure how we would survive another surgery and another painful recovery. As I sat alone

in the waiting room during Veronica's surgery, I knew all I wanted to do was sleep. I wanted to sleep for days uninterrupted. I wanted to wake up and find out that all of this was just a nightmare.

That night in the hospital room, I was determined to let my little girl get some sleep, too. That is why I asked the nurse not to wake her. I insisted on giving her one night of uninterrupted sleep and, for the first time in ten years, I succeeded. Maybe it was God's way of cutting her some slack—or maybe we just got lucky.

Either way, I'm working on accepting the hand Veronica was dealt. I pray she is more forgiving of God than I have been. Despite my shaken faith, I believe that all of these painful surgeries will make sense to me one day—and God knows it. But until then, I will be mad at him, and he will just have to be understanding of me for a change.



FOOD FOR LOVE

Rebecca Grace

The tables are too close to each other. The decibel level is so high that we lean across the foot of space separating us and pepper our conversation with shouts of “what?” All around us, white-smocked waiters weave expertly through the Saturday night crowd, balancing \$30 to \$60 plates of steak. I am proudly wearing the dress we picked out at GAP together, long before I realized that GAP never fits me. I don’t have any suitable shoes for this fancy dress, so I am wearing brown, strappy sandals, popular for young girls at the time. I’m glad that they are now hidden under our small table. I am 14, and this is my first date with my father.

The day before, my father picked me up to go to the mall. He needed new shoes. At the mall entrance, we each grabbed a door handle and opened opposing doors. They swung towards each other and caught my hand in the middle. My father decided to buy me something to make up for it.

“Anything you want,” he said, striding energetically beside me.

His hand swept out to indicate the merchandise, which could assuage my brief pain. I held my stinging hand in the other and forced back the tears in my eyes. I didn’t want this first meeting in months to be the first time he saw me cry.

We hit up the GAP sales rack.

“That’s beautiful,” my dad said, stopping my hand on a long black dress. “That would look really good on you.”

I tried it on. It fell to my ankles. It had no waist. My father cheered me on from outside, hollering into the changing room. He didn't want to see it. He just wanted me to get it.

"Come on. Every girl needs one great dress."

I rubbed my hands across my stomach and down my sides where the fabric ballooned around my non-existent hips. The satin was thin and silky on my skin, like lingerie.

"Plus, it's on sale!" my father said as he took it to the counter. To him, a sale was like the bowl of free peppermints at the cash register—you must take as many as you can hold and leave them to melt in your glove compartment.

I don't know if I liked the dress or if I liked that he liked it. But now, sitting at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse, I feel like a worthy dinner partner for my fast-talking, suit-wearing, Vassar-educated father.

When we sit down at our table, he rehearses his Santa-like role of "Father." After glancing at the menu (and the prices), he puts it back down, rubs the back of my hand, and says, "Have whatever you want." He uses this same line every time we eat, whether it is a fancy sit-down restaurant or Taco Cabana. I think it is one of his chief joys in life that, having had a deprived childhood himself, he now has the ability to offer his own children a feast.

When the waiter comes over for our order, my father orders his filet mignon medium-well. Having never been to a steakhouse, I copy him. Later, my dad congratulates my choice.

"Always get the filet. That's the best one. There's no comparison. And it's gotta be just a little bit pink. Not red. That's medium. I don't like it red. But it still has to have a little pink."

"Yeah—Yes." I nod to show my full agreement, though the only steak I've had was a frozen Nighthawk dinner with hash browns and green beans.

He crosses his legs and leans back in his chair, angling his body toward the rest of the room.

"How's Adrienne doing? I really like that girl," he says of a girl he has met once when picking us up from soccer practice.

"She's good," I say, wondering if he likes the dress on me, if he's noticed that I am wearing it. I sit up straighter and fold my hands in my lap.

"She's great. I love how friendly and outgoing she is. She just seems so bubbly and happy. I love that in a girl."

"Yeah," I say, picking at the black satin sticking to my legs. "She's really nice."

"Happy girls seem more fun. You know, girls who are lighthearted and laugh a lot. Everyone loves a happy girl."

Part of me wants to say that her parents are divorced too, and she's not really any more lighthearted than I am. Another part of me wants to tell him that there are other things to love about girls besides laughing and lightheartedness. The third part, the only part he can see, nods and agrees with him, eager to make this dinner different, to make it happy.

Our waiter returns with my father's iced tea. "Thanks. I'm going to need lots more," my father says to the man, who has already turned to leave. He laughs loudly. "I drink a *lot* of tea. In fact, you can just bring a whole pitcher and put it right here."

The waiter's laugh stutters as he nods. He is not sure if my father is joking or not.

I take a drink of water and try to think of something interesting to say. The heavy goblet is perspiring into my hand, so I am forced to put it down and wring out my fingers with the starched linen napkin, which refuses to be of service. Nice napkins, I realize, are not used to soak things up.

Finally, our steaks arrive, steaming deliciously in a bed of butter. My father digs in. What a good idea this was, he says. I can tell he is happy. Suddenly, I am telling him all about myself. Things I never thought I'd say—or he'd want to hear. It is all I can do to show him that I can be outgoing and happy, a worthy daughter. Under the table I press my hands into my knees, which are trembling from excitement.

At least half of the time I've ever spent with my dad has been in a restaurant of some sort. When I was three, my mom took my little brother and me back to Texas with her; my dad stayed in New York. Through the lens of my limited, toddler memories, New York was a mythical place. I went to kindergarten propagating the notion that it snowed there *all the time, even in the summer*. I had even less knowledge of my father than I did of New York. He was someone I vaguely remembered pausing a *She-Ra* video for me. When we went back to Texas, we lived with friends of my mother's. Tim and Dori had kids our age, and for two years, we were one big, happy family. Tim called me his little princess and enjoyed telling people that all six of us kids were his, although his kids were all blonde and fair, while my brother and I looked like little brown refugees. By the time my father came back into our lives, I had almost forgotten I had a real father—one who'd given me

his brown skin, eyelashes that grew straight down, my short stature, and full lips.

Growing up, my father was painfully aware of two things: being Chinese and being poor. He hated both. So he went to a prestigious college and married a white girl. When my mom got pregnant with me, he dropped out of school to work, but being poor again was too much for him to face, and the marriage ended. Eventually, with the help of his mother, he finished school, got a good job, and moved to Texas.

When I was nine, he pulled up in front of our rental house in a silver Porsche 928 that looked like it could travel in outer space. It had a black leather interior and buttons in the middle console to control the windows. He scooped us up, introduced us to Toys-R-Us, and said to call him “Daddy.” Since then, he’s been getting to know us over migas and fajitas and plenty of iced tea.

By the time the dessert menu arrives, I have run out of things to say and fear that I am losing his interest. Silence hums between us as the waiter scrapes off our table with a silver tool, magically tucking away the crumbs. I fix my eyes on it as if it is the most fascinating thing I’ve ever seen. My dad clears his throat, asks for more iced tea, and looks over the bill while I fold my napkin into a tiny triangle and surreptitiously watch. He frowns at the bill, takes out his wallet, stuffs his credit card into the top. Then, he looks at it again and exchanges the credit card for a \$100 bill. He leaves it on the edge of the table, where he will glance at it a couple of more times and add or take away a dollar or two, continually changing his mind. I am glad when it’s finally taken away.

From my father I’ve learned to say “please” and “thank you,” to sit up straighter, to open doors for him, and to substitute money for love. Whatever he gives comes with a hidden price tag: when he is angry, I am reminded of every dress and every meal he’s provided, proof of how much he’s done for me.

I hear my father swallowing his iced tea.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod and follow him out of the restaurant and down the street toward the car. I am exhausted.

“Thank you, Daddy,” I remember to say. “This was really generous of you. I’ve never been to a steakhouse.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice place, really expensive. My mom never took me anywhere like this when I was a kid,” my dad says. “You’re lucky. For us, even McDonald’s was a treat.”

I do not say that for us, too, McDonald’s was a treat. Instead, I pat him on the shoulder, wrap my arms around myself, and wonder how long I will be getting to know the child my father once was—and still is.

**GADJE***Ida T. Ronaszegi*

1970s Budapest, Hungary

"I see loooong life,
faaaar-away places, goooood health,
looooove and children...
gooood fortune, Miss."

"We'll take any used articles, used clothes, dishes, pottery, cutlery, anything, Miss, and God bleeeess you, God bleeeess you, Miss." The Gypsy woman got down to business after she summed up my fortune. She still held my right hand. I was 11 years old, and right then and there I couldn't imagine any better fortune than to be in some "far-away place." Instead, I was negotiating in front of my house with a Gypsy fortune-teller.

This was her second attempt to barter. When she and another Gypsy woman first rang the bell of our front gate, I had explained to them that I didn't have time for any dealings and would leave soon and that they should move on. That was a mistake. They knew I had to leave the house, so they waited me out. They gathered the many layers of their full, floor-length, colorful skirts and sat down in front of my gate. They even unbundled the day's collection of used articles and set them on the ground. One of the bundles had turned out to be a baby, who had also come undone and was now hanging on its mother's breast.

I hope they leave soon, I had thought. But then I realized that they had more time than I did. I needed to go back to school

for a class, so I decided to take my chances and leave unnoticed. That's how my palm ended up in the fortune-teller's. She got me right as I was opening the gate and grabbed my hand. After my fortune was thrust upon me, I knew that she expected payment. After a few minutes of searching the house, I chose to part with a deep-yellow glass bird that I had won at raffle in a church fundraiser. "God bleeeess you, Miss, anything else, anything, dear ... " I also found some scrap metal in the shed. "God bleeeess you, Miss, some linen, perhaps ... " I found an old throw in the attic. "God bleeeess you, Miss, old jewelry, used silver, anything, Miss ... " I gave her a small vase that was in my room. "God bleeeess you, Miss ... " After a slow and ceremonial gathering of the goods, after assuring themselves that *this* Miss wasn't going to give them anything else, the Gypsies strapped their bundles on their backs and slowly moved on.

*

"Moving on" is what Gypsies do; that's what they have been doing ever since they left India more than a thousand years ago. The *Roma*, as they call themselves, migrated to Europe in the 14th century and have maintained a kind of nomadic, traveling lifestyle. Among themselves they speak Romani, a language traced back to Sanskrit, the historical language of the Hindus in India; otherwise they speak the language of the country of their home base. In Hungary the *Czigany*, as they are called there, are noted knife grinders, trough makers; they are workers of copper and menders of chinaware. But most of all, they are peddlers of *anything*. What they are not noted for is their respect of property rights. And that's why, even as a child, I picked up the unspoken rule for dealing with the *Czigany*: avoid them or get rid of them. I followed this rule, mainly because I was scared of them. Their dark, sun-aged skin, their deep-seated, black, "seeing-the-future" eyes, their peculiar accent and costume (I heard stories of Gypsy women carrying knives between their layers of skirts) were all too eerie for me. Best left alone.

*

It was a warm afternoon in late August; it hadn't rained in Budapest for a while, and the dirt road in front of our house was cracked and dusty. Maria and I were home alone when she noticed a Gypsy boy strolling down the road. Maria was a foster child, and she had been in our home for a year. She was almost 16 years old, thin and feminine. She had blue eyes and dark, dirty blond hair that in the summer sun picked up a shade of rust. She was barely taller

than me even though she was four years my senior, but she had a very self-assured, "watch-me-do-it" attitude. She liked it when I called her my sister.

"Look at that little *Roma chavo*," said Maria, pointing to the Gypsy boy. "Looks like he could use a bath." I agreed; he was very dirty. And something else—he was butt-naked. No shirt, no shoes, no pants. Nothing at all. He was maybe five. In his hand he was carrying a stick; with his feet he was kicking dust.

"Let's give him a bath," Maria said, as if this was the perfectly natural way to proceed. I agreed that the little urchin was covered with dirt. I even felt sorry for him, but to give him a bath? *In our bathroom?*

"We can't give him a bath," I said, trying to come up with a good explanation for my position. "He probably doesn't like baths."

"We'll bathe him and make him a pair of shorts." Maria obviously did not hear my protest. She grew more excited about her amazing cure for boredom.

"Shorts?" I asked. I knew that her mind was made up. The idea, the challenge, of washing the filthy little body clean and dressing him with a pair of shorts was starting to appeal to me, too. My mother had a shelf where she kept scrap fabric—that's what I used for creating all my doll's clothes—and I knew that Maria could do the sewing. She had already spent a whole year in seamstress school. My initial worry that my Mom might not like our mission quickly disappeared when I thought about the many times she had helped the poor and needy. The boy sure looked poor, and he sure looked like he was in need of at least one thing: a thorough scrub from head to toe. Mom would approve.

"Let's get him before he gets away," Maria said resolutely. And off she went. I might have agreed to wash him, and even sew shorts for him, but I was too shy and embarrassed to approach him. I watched from a safe distance as Maria talked to the boy and grabbed him by the hand. Whether or not he liked her proposal, it looked like he had resigned himself to her care.

We were able to get him to tell us his name, Jancsika, but I don't remember him saying anything else. If we asked a yes-or-no question, he nodded or shook his head, but uttered nothing.

Maria and I didn't care. We set out to accomplish our noble act whether he spoke or not. So we filled the tub with warm water and told him to get in. He quietly obeyed. I don't know if he had ever been in a tub or even seen a tub before, but I was surprised how stiff his body was; he did not look at us even once.

The main thing was that he was in the water, which by the way, started to turn the color of mud. Maria and I started with his head. We squeezed out a generous amount of shampoo and began to scrub. I scrubbed hard; Maria scrubbed harder. After the hair, we moved to his face. We were merciless, reaching inside his ears, behind his ears, into the corners of his eyes, the cranny of his lips. We used our bare hands and a sponge and, for rinsing, we used the hand-held showerhead. We knew we were doing a great job because the more we scrubbed, the dirtier the water became. It took an extra-long time to clean his feet; the soles had a layer of dirt that appeared to have become part of the skin. It was hard to tell whether we were still scrubbing dirt or just trying to remove a layer of the epidermis. But that little fellow just sat in the tub like a martyr enduring it all. At one point our boy looked up, and I detected a faint smile in the corner of his dark eyes. *He enjoys it*, I thought. Then I scrubbed even harder. Finally, after making sure that he was sparkling clean all over (yes, we even washed his dirty little butt) we dried him with a towel and combed his hair. Maria and I were super satisfied with our job. It was one of those before-and-after moments, where the *after* hardly resembled the *before*. We did it. We transformed the filthy little street urchin into a clean, good-looking kid, and we felt good inside. I even forgot that he was a Gypsy, *Czigany* boy who, if we hadn't stopped him, would have been home by now.

Maria set to work on the shorts. We found some red, cotton/wool blend material—enough for a pair of shorts. While Maria was cutting and sewing, Jancsika sat quietly on a bench with a towel wrapped around his waist.

I am not sure how long it took Maria to finish the shorts, but our guest did not budge. Sometimes she would make the boy stand up for a try-on, but that was the only time he moved. He just stared and waited. By the time Maria finished the final stitches, it was evening, and the shadows were slowly lengthening. We had worked on our project for several hours.

"You don't have to be naked anymore," Maria said as she pulled the matching shorts onto the boy. She admired her handy work. "You look good. Go home now."

I went and got an apple from the pantry as a prize; he reached for it eagerly. He must have been starving by now, but he never said a word. We let him out the gate and watched as he took off. He picked up his stick that he had dropped outside; then he kicked some dust. I watched him go down the road until he turned

round the corner, and I could see him no more. I felt good when I saw the transformation a "little" soap and water did to that little *Czigany* boy and now, as I thought about him returning to his hovel, I imagined his mother's expression. *She would be pleased*, I felt; *she would be very pleased*.

*

A couple of days later—I don't know what I was doing, or why I was on the street—our Gypsy boy reappeared. His hair was messy, his face, his hands and feet were dirty; that would have been enough, but on top of that he was naked. Again. No sign of the pretty red shorts that Maria sewed him just two days before. At first I was angry. *All that work for nothing*, I thought. *Why wouldn't he wear the shorts? Didn't he like them? But he looked so handsome with them on. They fit him so well. Maybe they got dirty and he doesn't know how to wash them. But he is dirty, too. So what if they got dirty, at least his body would be covered*. I honestly couldn't figure out why anybody would discard a gift that was prepared with such effort and care. The lingering emotion, however, was not anger or wonder: it was disappointment. I am not sure what I had expected, really. When I told Maria, she said, "We'll get him." But she didn't sound serious and she didn't seem bothered by what had happened. Nevertheless, I hoped that she wouldn't spot the little dirty fellow and that we wouldn't "get him."

*

The school bells rang out the following week, signaling the end of another summer. It was September; it was time for school. I packed my book bag with fresh new textbooks and notepads all wrapped in indigo-blue paper. Each notepad had a sticker with my name, the subject, and my grade on it in my best cursive. I was ready for sixth grade. I liked autumn, I liked school (the beginning of the school year, anyway). Summer was over, and so were the disappointments of yesterday. I would have forgotten all about our failed mission project, had it not been for a visit to the school nurse.

Each year, a nurse would examine each student and record the information on a chart: how tall we were, how much we weighed. She also took and recorded our vital signs. She checked for head lice. For this we all stood in line, girls and boys separate, and she would check our heads one at a time. She would comb through our hair with her fingers, look for a few seconds, then say, "Next." And we would be done. This year I was standing at the back of the line since I was one of the taller girls. When it was my turn, I bent my head down, the nurse checked for a little while, then said

thank you. When everyone had been checked, she told us to go back to our classroom, everyone except me and my best friend Rosa. The nurse told us that we both had head lice, and she wondered if we knew how we could have gotten it, or if anybody else in our home had it. Rosa had no clue how she got head lice in her thick, wavy brown hair. She didn't know, but I was pretty sure that I did. I told the nurse about Jancsika, the Gypsy boy, how my sister and I bathed him and washed and combed his hair, how we made him shorts to cover his bare bottom. "You used your own comb," she said. "Well, that explains it. Do you know the boy, does he come to school?" I shook my head. I didn't really know him, and I never saw him in school.

That evening my mother treated me, Maria, and my other sister Tuende for head lice; we were all infested by then. My mother looked anxious, so Maria took charge; she had ample experience with lice from her time in the orphanage. Plus, she probably felt a *little* responsible for the surprise. I felt sorry for my sister Tuende, who had nothing to do with the whole affair, yet was affected the same way we were. *Head lice. I wasn't supposed to get head lice.* I couldn't figure out why I should be punished for doing something good. And even though I realized that it was certainly not the little *Czigany's* idea to jump into the tub in the first place, I couldn't help but feel that it was unfair. If he had at least appreciated it, then I could bear the consequences. What hurt the most was that instead of us "cleaning him up," we ended up getting "dirty." With lice. I should have known better not to mess with a Gypsy. After all, Gypsies are best left alone.

And I did leave them alone for 21 years—until I took a sociology course called Ethnic Relations.

*

Most of the books written about Gypsies are fictional and saturated with the exotic. This is understandable, as Gypsies actively discourage "snooping" and are often on the move. I had never read anything about them until I came across some information in a required sociology course. One day I flipped the pages of *Strangers to These Shores* to read the next assignment. The chapter title was "The Gypsies." I instantly felt uneasy. Even though I had not studied Gypsies before, I had a certain experiential knowledge that touched one of the many layers of deep emotional memory. Nevertheless, I began to read; it was homework.

The introduction sounded familiar. I knew that the core of Gypsy culture was the *familia* and the *vitsi* (clan), that they

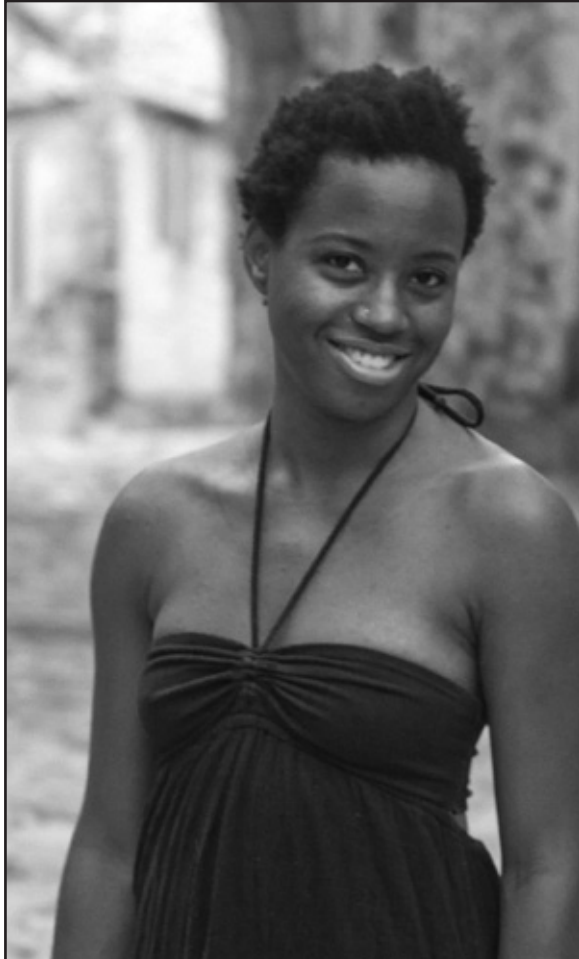
probably came from India and spoke Romani. I also knew that they married young, mostly between the ages of 12 and 16, and that they use superstition to create and enforce law and order. But then I learned a concept that I had never heard before, one that had to do with *marime*, a term meaning "defilement" or "pollution." Apparently, Gypsies believed there is a rigid line between good and bad, unclean and clean, health and disease. This is especially true for the upper and lower portions of the body. The pure and clean upper body cannot come into contact with the lower half of the body, which is invisibly polluted and physically contagious. It is shameful, for example, for a Gypsy woman to show too much leg, but her breast can be exposed. They also use towels and soaps of different colors for the two body sections. Any non-Gypsy is called the *Gadje*, and *Gadje* are both physically and spiritually defiled; their only value is economic. Gypsies do not consult fortune-tellers. Fortune-telling is done only for the *Gadje*.

Over and over again, I looked at the paragraph describing the body parts. No doubt I was a *Gadje*. My mind raced back to our summer "mission project" with the little *Roma* boy. Maria and I didn't use separate soaps to wash him, we didn't treat his upper body any differently than the lower part, and we certainly did not have separate towels for his top and bottom. He was sitting silently in one large towel covering it all. And even if we did, I was a *Gadje*, a non-Gypsy who was inherently defiled. Therefore, everything we touched that touched him—to the Gypsy—was toxic. *This is ridiculous*, I thought. *This is one of those superstitious "laws" that they govern themselves with.*

Or was it ridiculous?

What if his mother had ripped the shorts off as soon as she heard that some *Gadje* had touched her boy? I wondered, too, if the grin I thought I saw on Jancsika's face had really been a sign of surrender. I remembered how upset I had been when our "cleaning him up" ended up making us "dirty" with head lice—how disappointed we had been that our good deed had backfired. I wasn't so sure anymore about just what good we had really done.

The words on page 196 of *Strangers to These Shores* were staring at me: *marime, defilement, pollution, Gadje.*



FINDING LIFE AT FOREST LAWN

Osayi Endolyn

My grandmother patted her palm against the smooth, dark marble. “This is it,” she said. “But I won’t really be here. You’ll have to go to El Capitan to visit me.” Grandma had always loved Yosemite more than any other place. I looked around the mausoleum, then stared up at the crypt, her future resting place, like it was a shiny new car just delivered from the manufacturer.

“It’s nice,” I started out. “Pretty.”

Only a bit of daylight trickled through the entrance, a shift from the bright, open space of the rest of Forest Lawn. It was a sunny, windy Mother’s Day in 2003. I was 21, and we had driven down to the Hollywood Hills location to lay flowers on her mother’s grave. Her mama, my Grandma Violet, was buried here. I could still remember the funeral even though I’d barely turned 10. It was sad, but only in a way that burying a 102-year-old woman is sad.

Grandma and I had driven down from Pasadena, down the Ventura Freeway, or the 134, as it’s known. I’m from California, so I have favorite freeways, and the 134 is one of them. Partially because I never seemed to be on it during rush hour and also because it epitomizes the beauty of SoCal. If it’s not too smoggy, you can see grassy hills in the foreground and the giant mountains beyond them. It’s the freeway believed to be Tom Petty’s freeway in “Free Fallin’,” and Michael Jackson decided that “Billie Jean” was not his lover along the same route. The 134 has a magical quality for me that extends to Forest Lawn.

We had ambled up the driveway, crawling along the small side streets until we got to the right section. Grandma and I stood

together, looking down at the bronze plate that showed any visitor that my great-grandmother was down below. “Hi Mama,” Grandma said, as she placed the bouquet. We just stood there for a moment. I didn’t ask what she was thinking.

Then Grandma came back from wherever she was. “Do you wanna see my crypt?”

“What?” I thought. “Yes,” I said.

Even though Grandma Violet, Aunt Frances, her husband, and Aunt Elizabeth were all buried on the hill of Murmuring Trees, Grandma had bought her crypt a bit further down the road.

“Why don’t you want to be buried up here?” I asked. “It’s so beautiful.”

“I know,” she sing-songed. “I just don’t want to be underground.”

*

Forest Lawn is an esteemed Southern California cemetery chain, known for its optimistic take on dying. The “memorial park” carries prestige. A friend had asked me to lunch the same day I was meeting my grandmother, and when I told her where we’d be paying our respects, her eyes grew wide.

“You have family buried at Forest Lawn?” she asked.

“Yes?” I responded, unsure of what I had just confirmed.

“Nice,” she said.

It’s believed that Forest Lawn was the first U.S. cemetery to ban aboveground tombstones. No moss-covered markers will be found here. No angular, decrepit trees casting shadows in the moonlight. Forest Lawn is a cemetery so vast, airy, and dream-like, you might fancy getting married there. And people do.

The visual message is evocative: instead of the towering, upright headstones that turn color with age, lush trees cluster in landscaped perfection; rolling, manicured lawns make you want to tuck yourself in a ball and tumble downhill; sculptures catch your breath.

The Hollywood Hills branch sits across from the NBC Universal Studios lot, over the hill from the fêted Hollywood Bowl. Visitors and future residents take pride in the unfettered views of the San Fernando Valley. And where families come to grieve and say goodbye, so too appear out-of-towners hoping to glimpse the resting place of Lucille Ball, Sam Cooke, or Walt Disney. Many entertainers are buried at the Glendale and Hollywood Hills locations and—although staffers won’t say where to find their graves—the public forever seeks them out.

Death is not a popular topic in most places, especially in the land of entertainment. In L.A., every waitress is an actress. Contracts specify how long the camera should focus on a body part, and performers don’t perform unless their preferred Scotch is waiting in the green room. The focus here is on your eternal image. The only certainty of life is readily ignored. Until the day that it isn’t.

Southern California has an ease to it, a sense of, “Don’t worry, if not today, tomorrow.” It is a perspective on life driven by people who believe they live in the best place in the world. With all of life’s problems, they still have the beach, the mountains, the street food, the high-life, the languages, the sun. There’s the audacious fragility of living on fault lines. It all fosters a kind of arrogance. Yet these people work themselves to death seeking recognition, and they are likely to gross even more money once they die. This is the oddity of L.A.—even when your time has run out, it hasn’t.

Forest Lawn has profited from that starry-eyed perspective on the end of life. Hubert Eaton, Forest Lawn’s general manager in 1917, disliked the sparse landscaping of the day, so he vowed to make the cemetery experience a new one. He recorded his thoughts in “The Builder’s Creed,” which was eventually carved into stone at the original Glendale location: “Cemeteries of today are wrong because they depict an end, not a beginning.” Perhaps that’s what my grandmother wanted when she began researching places to bury her mother, and in turn, planned her own arrangements. A place that felt more like a warm greeting than a somber farewell was attractive not just for the peace it offered, but for the sense of home it inspired. You can’t help but feel that you belong somewhere when you look down and see several generations of family names. Los Angeles may be home to Forest Lawn, but a few plots of land at Forest Lawn belong to us. We weren’t just walking on some random burial ground—this was personal.

*

The mausoleum was cold. What had been a breezy morning out in the sunlight became chilly inside the walled structure. Grandma sat on a bench in front of her crypt, and I slid down next to her.

“People leave flowers or notes,” she said, pointing to a holder. To the left, I saw a small bouquet.

I nodded. “That is nice.” I reached for my grandmother’s hand. She took mine and clasped her other hand on top of it, her cane trapped between our mini-embrace. I squeezed her hand.

"I just wanted to get it all handled," she went on. "So your mom and aunt wouldn't have to worry." By worried, she meant bothered. That was just like Grandma, I thought, always 23 steps ahead. Her whole life has been a lesson in settings goals, then setting out to accomplish them. Not everything always went the way she planned, but she struck me as a woman who bent the program to her will. Born in Jim Crow-era Mississippi, she spent forty-some-odd years rising up through California's social-work department, then she ran the state's correctional system, reporting to the governor. She'd figured out how to get things done. Of course she had planned her burial. Not out of mistrust, but because of her decisiveness, her willingness to see something as far as it could go. "You have to walk things through," she'd say.

"No one would be worried," I said. As if those early days following the end of her life would be a nuisance to any of us. I was suddenly exhausted.

"Well, I just mean, there are so many other things to think about when family dies." She paused. "When Mama passed—there was just so much to deal with."

I leaned into Grandma and felt the damp heat behind my eyes and the hollowness in my throat. I thought about the time she took my brother and me to Yosemite, that place she says her spirit will dwell when she dies. I was 12 and picky, believing that any trip that did not include the words "Disney" or "roller coaster" was merciless punishment. Accordingly, the whole car ride up, I tried to be the boss. I attempted to commandeer the musical selections, but Grandma wouldn't have it. She declared the CD player broken.

Sitting on the bench in the mausoleum, I asked Grandma if she remembered that car ride. "Oh yes," she said, her whole body laughing. Her shoulder bumped against my ear, so I lifted my head to look at her. "You and your brother just thought Yosemite would be the end." She was right. And she proved us wrong.

When we saw El Capitan, the solid rock with a sheer granite surface that juts 3,000 feet into the air, it stunned us into silence. We were both bigger than we'd ever felt, yet shrouded in awe.

"I'll visit you there," I told Grandma, looking back at the marble crypt. The name placard was empty, and I tried to envision her name carved into the stone one day. I couldn't picture it.

"I know you will," she said. She patted my hand. And then we went home.



PHANTOM

Lynn Schneider

MARGE: It almost feels like you're missing something, something important.

BART: Like I don't have a soul?

MARGE: Aw, honey, you're not a monster!

—"Bart Sells His Soul," *The Simpsons*

My fingers are slick with butter; I fumble some popcorn en route to my mouth. The kernel has barely hit the floor before it is intercepted by a small dog. Oz licks his chops. On the television screen, handsome men in sharp suits argue with each other; I feel like I should be dressed up, too. Didn't people used to dress up to go to the movies?

"Yeah, but they also smoked there," my brother says, like he doesn't smoke himself.

Sometimes I wish that we still lived in the civilized times when men wore hats and women wore jewelry that didn't have the Playboy bunny on it.

"And women couldn't vote, either," Alex says.

I guess everything has a give and take.

My little brother, Alex, studied German in school; I took Italian. If we could just get our sister to learn Japanese, we'd never need subtitles for a World War II film again.

We are watching *The Godfather*. Never go against the family, Michael Corleone tells his brother. My brother says, “How do you say that in Italian?”

“Non fare mai contra la famiglia.”

Alex repeats it, ruminating over the unfamiliar shapes on his tongue.

“Non fare contra famiglia,” he says.

“Non fare *mai*,” I say. “*Never*.”

*

I am in the hospital trying to explain to the nurse about blood. The inside of an emergency room is like the inside of a refrigerator: cold and ultra white. The woman in her shapeless scrubs just stares at me, mute, as I repeat over and over, I’m a donor, I have this card, I give blood, so if he needs blood—

Is it impossible that he won’t need blood?

*

Last summer, my little brother, Alex, took a stair funny, tripped, and fractured his skull. He had surgery. They used screws and metal mesh to sew the bones back together so he wouldn’t have a crater in his face, so another fluke wouldn’t push pieces of his skull into his brain.

There was a side effect, though the surgeon wasn’t sure if it was from surgery or the original injury. All that’s certain is that somewhere between my brother starting down the stairs and leaving the operating room, a cluster of nerves on his scalp was damaged beyond repair. He now has no feeling there. There is a thing called neural plasticity, which means that when the brain is injured, it will take steps to repair itself. This might happen, the surgeon said, and the feeling might come back. Or it might not.

It’s like a phantom limb. Sometimes his brain imagines sensation on the spot, a tickle or an itch, but when he goes to scratch it, he is unable to feel the physical reality of his fingers. There’s feeling there, but nothing can touch it.

*

Alex and I are only three years apart, which makes him something more than my sibling. I lived for three years before he was born, but I have no active memory of this time. As far as my mind is concerned, Alex is a constant: he has always been there. Intellectually I know that the world went on without him, that it will again some day, but instinctually, you could sooner convince me that the moon has fallen from the sky, and we won’t be seeing it anymore.

Alex is the youngest and the only boy. These are only facts, not excuses. Or maybe they are; I’ve never been either of those things, so how could I know? But his mind works differently. It’s like *Memento*, where he’s stuck in these few minutes. He cannot think ahead. He cannot link actions to their consequences. When he was five or six, he carved his name into the walls all over the house; every time you’d turn a corner, it was there, all points and strict angles: ALEX ALEX ALEX ALEX. When my mother confronted him, he just shrugged. He had not thought of an alibi because you need an alibi only if you get caught, and you get caught only if your actions extend beyond this time, this place. If your actions affect other people. He has never been able to put these things together.

*

My brother and I play this game. One of us will text the other a line of dialogue—from a movie or a cartoon, usually *Futurama* or *The Simpsons*—and the recipient will text back the next line.

ME: Would you like a donut?

ALEX: No thanks. Do you have any fruit?

ME: This has purple in it. Purple is a fruit.

*

It was just minor mischief until middle school, and then he stopped turning in his work. Even the in-class assignments. He would work on them with everybody else, but he could not be bothered to turn them in. He never did homework. But his teachers were all charmed by him, because he is charming and so very smart. They wanted him to succeed so badly that he was pushed through six grades by good will and benevolence.

Then he started having sex, smoking, drinking. And all of them indiscriminately. He left cigar butts and condoms in the flowerbeds and let his girlfriends walk in on each other. These behaviors were not, as far as I know, joyless, compulsive—only self-contained. He could understand the actions only within the contexts of themselves and no further.

My family and I are perfect enablers. I should be happy, I suppose, that it was only dodging schoolwork and bedding easy girls; if his drug of choice had been heroin, we would be the people lecturing him about overdose and then giving him \$50 for another bump to keep him from going through withdrawal. There is a point

where emotion overrides logic, and I suppose at this point you, too, pick up a form of the time disease. Tough love might save his life in the long run, but the problem is so huge that you cannot see the long run. There is only this moment, this crisis. So, like his teachers, Alex failed spectacularly, and we bailed him out every time.

And none of it was ever his fault. Maybe to justify our own bad behavior, our own time blindness, we blamed everything else. I remember my father screaming at me one night after Alex had failed to complete his homework because days ago I had given my brother a book. How could Alex possibly be expected to function when there were distractions everywhere? It was like removing the sharp objects from a suicidal person's home. Only we didn't do that. I have bipolar disorder and started showing symptoms in the seventh grade. I had three suicide attempts notching my wrists by the time we had that conversation but, despite calls from my teachers and my friends' parents, that was never dealt with. The knives stayed in the kitchen, and the pills stayed in the hall closet. All our emergency operations were for dealing with Alex.

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ALEX: Don't worry, guys. I'll never be too good or too evil again. From now on, I'll just be me.

ME: Do you think you could be just a little less evil than that?

*

The weird thing is that no one's ever angry with Alex. Maybe it's because we have convinced ourselves that he is not responsible for any of the shit that happens to him, or maybe it's because we're constantly in crisis mode, and when that shit hits the fan, you just have to keep your head down and do what you can to fix things. Maybe it would be easier if we could be angry. If we didn't love him so much. Then we could cut our hearts out of it and be logical. We could shake off the time disease and do something that might have long-reaching results.

Alex enrolled in a big, state university because he wanted to play in the marching band. And because it was a lock that he would get in, and filling out applications and writing essays is not what he considers a good use of his time. He finds these things, the hoops of everyday life, insulting. People should automatically recognize him as superior and adjust.

Big schools have big classes, and even if the classes were small enough for him to charm his teachers as he had done since the sixth grade, he never showed up. He lived on campus; he

traveled with the band. My parents went to every football game to watch him. To hear him tell, things were going swimmingly.

Christmas break he moved all his stuff back home. At first it was just a few suitcases, things he would need over break, and then it was everything: dishes, bedding, his television. This is how we found out he had flunked out.

"College isn't for everybody," he says. "I don't like it."

"Nobody likes it," I say. "But it's shit you have to do."

He shrugs.

He went to work for a friend from high school, his drum line coach. Jimbo works construction jobs here and there. Mostly there. Alex works three days a week if he's lucky. He started drinking more; he totaled three cars. He charmed the cops, too, I guess, and wasn't charged with DUIs, only trifling things—open-container tickets and moving violations. He didn't pay the fines; the judge put out a bench warrant for his arrest. He moved in with his girlfriend after leaving college, but let her catch him with another girl, so she threw him out. He moved in with my sister, which works out well, because he rarely has enough money for rent on time, and she's the sweetest loan shark in town.

*

ME: Your soul is the most valuable part of you.

ALEX: You believe in that junk?

ME: Well, whether or not the soul is physically real, Bart, it's the symbol of everything fine inside us.

*

When Alex fractured his skull, I filled out the indigence paperwork with the hospital, and I signed him up for food stamps, welfare, and unemployment, all sorts of government money he could have been collecting, had he been willing to go through the proper channels.

I moved away for graduate school not long after that. Sometimes Alex and I talk on the phone; mostly we text. We talk about cartoons, action movies; he's the only person I know who can keep up with my literary analysis of *Futurama*. To hear him talk about his life, you would think everything was going exactly to plan. Later, I call my sister, and she tells me how things actually are. He hasn't worked all week; he needs to go to the social services office to have his EBT renewed, but that is unlikely, until they make it into an Xbox game.

He came over the first night I was back at my parents' house for winter break. I thought he had come to see me, but really he needed a buffer.

"There's going to be a baby," he says. "It's a boy. We're keeping it."

The girl is six months pregnant. He hasn't known the girl long, but he has known this for six whole months.

I call my sister, and she tells me how things actually are. He doesn't know the girl well. He met her while he was working as a drum line instructor at her high school. She isn't that much younger than he is, only a few years, but she was his student, and this, more than anything, breaks my heart.

He doesn't want a paternity test for the same reason he decided to step up and lay claim to the child. She told him it was going to be a boy.

"What the fuck is this?" I say. "*The Godfather*? Perché lo fai questo? Sei un'uomo male. Non saresti un padre. Hai spezzato il mio cuore."

He shrugs.

Oh, my heart. Oh, Alex's heart. I know he has one. I know it works. But I wonder if it's like the phantom spot, the destroyed nerves left by his fall. There's feeling there, somewhere, but there's nothing you can do to touch it.

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