



SCAD DOCUMENT



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# SCAD DOCUMENT

The Journal of the Graduate Writing Program



## Introduction

At the Savannah College of Art and Design, creativity knows no bounds. Offering more than 100 degree programs, SCAD is uniquely positioned to prepare undergraduate and graduate students for careers in thriving, in-demand fields.

People from all over the world choose the SCAD writing program because of its widely published faculty, comprehensive curriculum, industry networks and high employment rate. SCAD offers uncommon access to industry leaders — agents, editors and publishers — and unmatched resources such as Ivy Hall, which is home to distinguished writers in residence and literary salons. Through the Ivy Hall Writers Series, *DOCUMENT* Reading Series and Art of the Mind Lecture Series, students on every campus receive coaching from acclaimed novelists, journalists, and essayists such as Walter Mosley, Jack Pendarvis, Karen Russell, Jamaica Kincaid, David Shields, Celeste Ng, and Jeannette Walls.

Our writing students are immersed in a curriculum that prepares them for creative careers across the writing spectrum. Courses in business writing, freelance magazine writing, travel writing, arts criticism, the book publishing process, creative nonfiction, fiction, fashion and design journalism, as well as courses in new media writing train graduate students in the art and craft of the written word while teaching them how to navigate its marketplace.



Students gain real-world experience through in-house writing and editorial positions at *DOCUMENT*, District and The Connector — the award-winning news sources — SCAD Radio, SCAD Atlanta Radio, SCAN Magazine, and District Quarterly. Our students master publishing and content management platforms, and even attend digital marketing boot camp, developing multimedia and new media skills that land jobs.

SCAD students often finish their degrees with publication credits to their names and are prepared to work as copywriters, freelance magazine writers, memoirists, ghost writers, speechwriters, editors, novelists, news writers, humorists, social media marketers, Web content writers and critics. Our students have been hired to write for such media outlets as Vanity Fair, TIME magazine, The Atlantic Monthly, The New York Times, The Huffington Post, Southern Living, Vice, Oxford American, Marie Claire and Paste Magazine. Some have found literary agents and sold books and book proposals even before graduation.

In the *DOCUMENT* series, you'll read the essays, stories, articles, profiles, travelogues and meditations that represent our M.F.A. writing students' best creative work. Much of it has been nominated for national awards or has been previously published in professional print and online magazines and journals. Each issue documents the diversity of voices, ideas and writing styles that our program fosters.

We invite you to experience the truly amazing work presented here, and see for yourself why students come from across the globe to study writing at SCAD.







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## DEATH RAY: THE TRAGIC AND TRUE STORY OF X-RAY EXPLORATION<sup>†</sup>

A Preface by Nancy Peck

*Don't talk to me about x-rays. I am afraid of them.* — Thomas A. Edison

It was November of 1895 when the shy, bearded Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen accidentally discovered the x-ray and realized its potential. As the afternoon sun was setting and his students left the physics laboratory, he began experimenting privately with pear-shaped vacuum tubes. Experimentation with bulbous glass tubes was not unusual at the time, but Röntgen was curious about electrostatic fields and magnetic disturbances found immediately *outside* an electrically charged tube. He worked into the night; it had to be dark for him to make his observations.

To protect the tube's tiny aluminum window and prevent extraneous light from entering or leaving the tube, he covered it with a layer of black cardboard lined with tinfoil. Then he passed a high-tension charge through the tube. He noticed a glow on one side of the room. Even with the glass tube completely covered, a fluorescent screen was flickering two meters away. The "faint cloud" trembled like a small mirror. Again, he sent energy through the tube. Again, the cloud flickered, mimicking the rhythm of the wavering discharges. Looking closer at the glow, Röntgen could see what looked like the faint shadow of a dense wire.

Something was coming through and penetrating the tube's cardboard shield — something he could not feel, see, hear, or smell. Could it also penetrate other objects like a piece of paper, a pack of playing cards, a piece of paper, or a

<sup>†</sup> A version of this preface first appeared in the author's M.F.A. thesis, a narrative nonfiction account of the x-ray and the pioneers of radiology.



one-thousand-page book? By placing these objects between the activated tube and the fluorescent screen, he saw that these items cast no shadow upon the screen. He repeated the experiment, checked it again with other things he found in the laboratory — pine boards, sheets of hard rubber, sheets of aluminum, platinum, lead, and zinc. Nearby was a set of nine circular weights, concealed within a box. When he applied the “excited” tube to the box exterior, the top of the box disappeared and the weights inside appeared along with the metal clasp on the box.

After weeks of study, he could make the claim that this new kind of ray left shadows of dense objects like metal and bone, but went right through paper, wood, and cloth, leaving little or no shadow.

Because he knew so little about this invisible ray, he could refer to it only as “x,” as in the algebraic unknown. It was all very interesting, but as a good scientist he needed to triple-check his observations and figure out how to demonstrate it to others. One evening, he persuaded his wife to lay her hand on a photographic plate encased in a cassette. He directed the glass tube’s emissions onto her hand. The ray penetrated her flesh for fifteen minutes. After the allotted time, the outline of her bones and rings were visible on the plate. It is said that upon seeing her own bones Frau Röntgen proclaimed — her words shadowed in premonition and superstition — that she had seen her own death.

This was a new form of light, invisible short waves undetectable to the human eye. During his experiments, Röntgen had not revealed this discovery to anyone. Once he was satisfied with the experiments, though, he was eager to see his findings in print. He handwrote a report and delivered his pages to the secretary of the Würzburg Physical Medical Society, who immediately printed it in the organization’s *Sitzungsberichte*. On January 1, 1896, Röntgen mailed reprints of the article and nine photographs each to eight physicists living in cities outside of Würzburg.

According to biographies, Röntgen did not care much for how lectures and newspapers had popularized science. He felt they did more harm than good. But his findings were now beyond his control. No sooner had these physicists received their mail than word got out. Some could barely contain themselves. One immediately took the liberty of showing Röntgen’s photographs in an exhibit. Another shared the photographs with attendees at a social gathering. One guest alerted his father, an editor at the Vienna *Presse*. Suddenly, Röntgen’s discovery



was an international sensation. The Vienna *Presse* implied that Röntgen's ray could be used to diagnose diseases and injuries to the bone; it could locate foreign objects within the body and might be used for therapy — all claims Röntgen never made in his report.

The *Frankfurter Zeitung* followed the lead of the Vienna *Presse* and suggested that the new ray would be “destined to have interesting consequences” for medicine. Major newspapers in major cities tagged along with long articles and sensational headlines. Medical trade journals and journals for electrical engineers followed — all within two weeks of the day that Röntgen mailed his reprints. Professor Röntgen's how-to x-ray report was soon published for anyone to mimic without a period of testing.

Hundreds of journalists and men of science sought interviews with Röntgen. When H. J. W. Dam, a writer from London, asked Röntgen what he was thinking when he noticed the presence of the mysterious ray, Röntgen responded, “I did not think; I investigated.”

\*

One by one, doctors grasped the enormous potential for the new diagnostic tool and took up using the x-ray in 1896. Dr. John Hall-Edwards was one of the first in England to draw from his experience with photography. In the United States, instructor-turned-doctor Mihran Kassabian drew from his knowledge of electricity and experimented by exposing patients to the x-ray tube as therapy to treat migraine headaches, epilepsy, leprosy and other assorted maladies. But it wasn't just licensed doctors who took up x-ray practice. Elizabeth Fleischmann, a bookkeeper, quit her job on hearing about the x-ray, attended “Electricity School,” and set up her x-ray shop in the parlor of her San Francisco home. Her business bloomed. At one time the only x-ray operator in California, she worked long days perfecting her technique, demonstrating it to skeptical patients, and selling her services to dentists. Horse-drawn wagons carried Presidio camp military men to her office. X-ray apparatus inventors, manufacturers, suppliers, and salesmen found new purpose in their lives. Thomas A. Edison, too, participated in the x-ray trade, aiming to develop a practical and portable fluorescent screen for viewing the insides of patients. Under his supervision in the New Jersey laboratory, tedious testing would be assigned to his devoted employee, Clarence Dally, who spent years developing a fluoroscopic lamp and testing the subtle differences among fluorescent calcium tungstate crystals.



At the height of the x-ray's global acceptance, when many saw it as a panacea, some cracks began to show. Operators began showing hair loss, burns on their hands, radiation dermatitis — warts, ulcers, blisters, and calluses. For years, those working with the x-ray endured pain, hiding their ugly afflictions as best they could under gloves and long sleeves. Yet most just kept working. None of them knew the precise cause of their ailments. Elizabeth Fleischmann, who worked twelve hours a day without protection, found the x-ray had destroyed her hair follicles. Her skin grew hard and dry.

Edison's man, Dally, suffered as well. He too lost hair. Doctors tried to resolve his lesions with 144 skin grafts, which were just as painful as the lesions themselves; but underlying damage remained for Fleischmann, Dally, and many others. They would never recover. To cut off the cancer, doctors amputated the arms of those x-ray operators who agreed to the procedure, but this treatment was often too late. The affliction had metastasized into lymph nodes. Dally was the first to die in the United States in 1904, at age 39, leaving his wife and two children. The grieving Edison abandoned x-ray testing and concluded that they were "dangerous, deadly, in the hands of [the] inexperienced, or even in the hands of a man who is using them continuously for experiment."

The x-ray had been an immediate sensation, exploited just months after its discovery at the end of 1895. But the medical field was initially unaware of the full power of this "invisible ray." It was saving lives, but in a delayed reaction, it was also taking lives. At least seven persons had died from overexposure by the year 1908. Others would follow.













## SUMMER OF THE FROGS<sup>†</sup>

A Chapter From a Novel by Tonesha Jones

### Chapter Six: His House

Momma had a different way of getting angry. While Papa's face twitched and moved all over the place, Momma's face locked down like stone carved with deep lines. The deeper the lines, the angrier she was, and when we got back with one bag that had nothing but cornmeal, rice, and squished bread, her face looked like the cracked parking lot of Friends in Fellowship.

"What you mean he just took the money?"

We all tried to tell her at once, but she put her hand up to stop us, looking hard at my older brother, Kacey.

"What he say to you?" Her hand was parked on her hip next to her whipping spoon. Kacey didn't look at her hand or that spoon. He looked her right in her face.

"He told us Papa owe him twenty and he ain't gonna let us buy nothing from him till he get all his money. We got the groceries, but he just took the money and kept the food."

Momma looked up to the ceiling, eyes closed, patting her cheek like she was trying to wake herself up from a faint.

"Lord have mercy."

She opened her eyes and stared down at us in a way I had never seen before. There was a hard little H between her eyebrows where the skin had bunched all

<sup>†</sup> This story was nominated for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Intro Journals Project.



together, and her mouth was slightly open, not tight and angry or frowned up, just opened like it hadn't made up its mind how to feel right then.

"I got to go down there and set this right." She looked to the rug in front of the couch where baby Alice was asleep in her basket.

"Naw," Henry said. "Papa should set him straight. Papa should bop his head."

I tried to stop him from talking, but he kept going. He's only eight.

"Ooh, we messed his store up good, that ole rat face, keeping our money and food. He ain't even care about baby Alice."

Mama's mouth turned down into a deep U. Henry didn't have enough sense to back away, and her hand came down and landed a good lick up the side of his head.

"Don't go bragging about doing wrong." Momma was spitting mad.

"I wasn't bragging Momma, I was —"

"You was bragging. I done told you a million times that two wrongs don't make nothing right and here all you boys go," she looked up at me and Kacey, "acting a fool. It be God's miracle if I can get some groceries tonight."

She took off her apron and hung it on the peg in the kitchen.

"Kacey, watch your sister. Change her if she wakes up before I get back. And clean them dishes. I'll go see about getting these groceries."

When the screen door slammed behind her, I started dreaming up ways Momma would get Mr. Wilson. I could see her whuppin' him in the head with her spoon even though she'd left it in her apron pocket in the kitchen. I imagined her with Big Ma's hard-backed white Bible with the rose on the cover, popping Mr. Wilson upside the head with it, saying loudly like the Pastor did, "Repent for all you have done wrong. God don't like ugly and he sure hate you, you ole whale-bellied oatmeal face!"

I could see her thin arms lifting that big Bible like a final judgment and bringing it down on his fat nose, his big ears, anything. I hoped she'd punish him like she punished me and Kacey when we accidently set the wooden plaque that used to sit on her dresser table on fire. It had the Lord's Prayer carved into it and had been given to her by Nana Lyles. Nobody could get you for being bad quite like Momma could.

I set to work scrubbing a pot, digging grit clumps from the bottom. As they fell into the water, I imagined Momma slugging Mr. Wilson, knocking his teeth out on the counter. He would look like Heyou then, all gums and no bite, then they could both be hitched to a pole outside, barking and growling without anyone paying them any mind.

"You think Momma can get our groceries?"



Henry was looking at Kacey, who sat by Alice on the rug, looking at her like Momma looks through windows. Henry kept talking.

"Can't nobody say no to Momma. Bet he wouldn't have tried that if she had gone to the store first. Bet he scared of Momma. And Big Ma. We should all go to the store and—"

"Shut up, Henry."

Kacey said it soft enough so he wouldn't wake Alice, but his face was starting to look mean. He's thirteen, and three years older than me.

"He would have done it to any of us cause he know he can get away with it. There ain't no other place to go."

I didn't think Mr. Wilson would have done it to Papa. Papa had slick hands and could pop a knot on someone quicker than they realized they got hit, but something told me that even Papa's quick hands wouldn't have gotten our groceries.

It was almost four o'clock when Momma got back. Ms. Lynn, the pastor's wife, was with her, and they both were carrying groceries. I took the bags out of Momma's arms and set them on the table. She went over to Kacey and took Alice out of his arms. She was kicking up such a fuss, probably mad because she woke up to me, Kacey, and Henry instead of Momma. Ms. Lynn set her bags down on the table and looked at Momma.

"You want me to cook dinner while you take care of Alice?"

She stood behind the couch, her hands clasped at her stomach looking like the Jesus that was on the front my children's Bible with her white linen suit and big toothpaste-ad smile that seemed to say, "Trust in me."

Mama shook her head. "Don't worry yourself, Ms. Lynn. You go on home. You've given me more than enough today."

Ms. Lynn's smile seemed to dim a little, like her eternal bright light of good had blown a bulb.

"You sure, Ms. Deanna? I don't mind."

Momma shook her head again, "It's Bible study tonight and Pastor needs you. Tell him I can't make it tonight. I got to get this house straight."

Ms. Lynn unclasped her hands and backed toward the door. "All right, I'll tell him. Make sure you stop by next Wednesday. We'll be planning for the church anniversary."

Momma waved Ms. Lynn out the door, still soothing Alice who was half fussing and half crying.



"Ooh, Momma, how you get Mr. Wilson to give us our food? Did you whup him up?"

Momma stood up so fast and got in Henry's face so quick that Alice even got quiet.

"You shut your mouth right now. I oughta whup all you for what you did in that man's store. Couldn't get the groceries cause you all messed up his candy, fussing at me about damages." Momma shook her head like she had a fly on it. "If it hadn't been for Ms. Lynn, we wouldn't have nothing tonight."

Kacey stood up and got between Momma and Henry.

"He deserved it and he better be grateful we ain't burn it down."

Momma lifted Alice higher on her hip. "Don't you go talking like that—"

"No, Momma, that's the God's honest truth. He took your money and called Papa a thief and had your name all bad in his mouth. Then he gone give us some cornmeal with no milk or eggs like that make him Jesus. What was we supposed to do? He took our money and ain't even gives us the food to feed Alice. And he didn't care, not one bit."

I looked from Kacey to Momma and back to Kacey, waiting for Momma to pop him in the mouth for back-talking, but she didn't. Momma just shook her head at Kacey, and he was looking at her steady, all stubborn-headed, but brave, brave because he felt he was right. I felt he was right, too.

"You don't go acting like him."

Momma put her hand on his shoulder and shook him a little, not in a rough way like she tossed rugs to get the dust out, but the way she shook pepper, just hard enough to move a little bit into the pot.

"I raised you better than that and when people be low, you don't get low with them. Now go put them groceries away."

She looked up at me and Henry and we followed Kacey to the kitchen table. None of us said nothing else. We put boxes in the cabinets and the meat in the refrigerator. I stacked all of Alice's food in the little cabinet under the sink where her bottles were.

There was a quiet in the house that hurt my ears because I knew it was going to break in a big way. Momma was fixing to say something to Papa, and when that happened, their voices would be like two heavy-hitting boxers in the championship bout.

It was too late for Momma to cook the greens, so she just fried up some more bologna on the stove and made sandwiches. She made Henry finish his grits from



breakfast, but he didn't even complain. He shoveled them down with his sandwich without a word. She didn't let us linger at the table or go outside into the yard. By six o'clock we were washed up and in our room while Momma waited on the couch for Papa to get home.

Henry took his bucket of army men and crawled under his bed. He cut on a flashlight because the room was getting dark and Kacey didn't want the light on. He was sitting up in his bed with Big Ma's afghan on his lap, his finger poking through a small hole on the bottom. Everyone had his place to hide except me, and all I could do was wait and listen like Momma was doing in the living room. Then there it was. The crunch of gravel as Papa's truck pulled up. His door opening. *Creeeak*. Then shutting. *Bam!* The screen door. *Screech*. The main door. *Crick*. Then Papa's voice.

"You ain't cook dinner."

Momma didn't say anything.

"Where them kids at? I know they still ain't outside."

Momma didn't say anything.

"Deanna, I ain't in the mood for this."

The couch groaned and I heard Momma's feet on the floor. I got off my bed and crawled to the door, looking through the small gap. One of the hinges was busted and wouldn't let the door close all the way. Through it, I saw Momma with her hand planted on her hip in front of Papa. I looked back to ask Kacey if he wanted to look too, but he was already under Big Ma's afghan.

"Why you owe Mr. Wilson twenty dollars?"

Even though I could see only one side of his face, I knew Papa's face was twitching.

"That ain't no concern of yours —"

"Oh yes, Lord, it is when I send my babies to get food and that man don't give no groceries because of what you done did."

It sounded like a big balloon popping. Like a rubber band snapping when Papa's hand met Momma's cheek and it scared me so much, I fell on the floor, back flat. I had barely seen it, but that sound made me feel it, and I rubbed my face as Papa's voice got louder.

"I been at work all day and you wanna talk about what I done did? What have you done? Ain't no dinner cooked and you telling me Charlie ain't let the kids get the groceries. You should have got the groceries, as many broke eggs and candy bars them boys show up with."

Momma was breathing hard. It was like she had a high note stuck in her throat.



"Don't go blaming our babies for what you done. You wanna talk about a candy bar? A candy bar ain't never messed up this house the way you do at that pool hall."

Papa's voice got so loud it was like he was in every room of the house. Alice started crying, but Momma didn't go to her.

"You trying to tell me how to run my house, Deanna? Gone on and tell me. All these kids running round ain't doing nothing, and you wanna grab your Bible and tell me about making money?"

There was a sound like a choir moan before they start a big hymn. I was scared, but I sat up and looked through the crack anyway. Papa had Momma by the shoulders, and he was shaking her hard. I never knew how small she was. In Papa's hands, she looked no bigger than Kacey, and he was shaking her like he was trying to break her, his face close to hers. I couldn't see Momma's face, but I heard her voice rattling around in her chest and wondered what she was trying to say, if she was trying to say anything at all. Momma always had good words just like Big Ma, but the way Papa was rattling her around, her words were getting stuck like a rock in a lawn mower. Just *chu clink, chu clink, chu clink*, as she tried to speak to Papa.

"You ain't got nothing say? Huh? Huh?"

He let her go, and she stumbled back against the couch, and he was out the door.

Momma just stood there as Papa left. As the screen door slammed. As the tires of his truck crunched back out the driveway. Alice was still wailing in her and Papa's bedroom, but she just stood there.

Henry still had his flashlight on and I heard him playing a game.

"Captain Leroy, how we gonna defeat the pirates? We don't have no good soldiers no more and they coming to get us."

Kacey was breathing hard under Big Ma's afghan, but he stayed on his bed, not saying anything. Momma was still standing by the couch, her eyes still on the door, Alice still crying in her room, and Papa was still gone. His tires didn't crunch on the driveway again. His door didn't open and slam shut. The screen door stayed closed.

\*

The house had a hard quiet. Alice wasn't crying anymore. Henry wasn't playing anymore. There were bugs making noise outside. There were voices in other houses, maybe from radios, but in my house there was no noise. I felt like I was squeezing between everybody, trying not to step on anybody's space.

I sat in the doorway of our bedroom, afraid to go in the living room. I could see Momma's back, sitting in the kitchen, her eyes out the window. She had tended



to Alice and put her back in her crib, and now she had nothing in her lap but her hands. Even with her back to me, I could see her cheek in my mind, that pudgy little spot of skin that held a dimple and now the pain of Papa hitting her. It was still brown. Still pretty. But I couldn't think about her cheek without seeing something ugly — like at any minute that memory was going to pop out from under her skin.

I walked to the kitchen and stood by the table. She looked up at me. Her cheek was a little red, but still brown. Still pretty. And if Momma had anything worth smiling about, that dimple would show. I wished I had something to give that would let that dimple show. I knelt down on the floor and rested my head on her knee. Big Ma used to call me knee baby because when Momma had Henry in her lap, I would come lay on her knee, wrapping my arms around her legs. Momma brushed the top of my head with her fingertips.

“Forgive your Papa, baby. I will.”

I shook my head. “No, Momma.”

She kept rubbing my head. “It’s okay, baby.”

I shook my head again. “No, Momma.”

She put her hand under my chin and gently lifted my face. “It will be.”

She bent down and kissed my forehead, something she usually did when I was sick. She would say kisses make the hurt go away while I lay in bed, all snot-nosed and shivering. I would feel a little better, thinking my Momma had magic healing powers. Her kiss faded on my forehead like sweat at noon, and it just felt like my regular forehead.

She stood up. “Come on, time to get in bed.”

I stood and went to my room. She followed me, and when I climbed into bed, she pulled the covers up to my chin and tucked me in. She did the same for Henry, and after a little nudging and pulling, got Kacey from under Big Ma’s afghan and tucked him in, too.

Before she left out the door she whispered to each of us.

*Forgive him. Forgive him. Forgive him.*









## PERFECT STRANGERS†

A Feature Article by Stacy Verner

His hand felt like a block of ice. A tingling sensation crawled up his arm and inched toward his shoulder. He tried to shake it off, hinging his knuckles with the little strength he had left, but the thick leather strap kept him firmly in place.

Trapped.

His fingers were numb; his hand was numb. The cold crept higher still until his arm was a paralyzed block of frostbitten flesh — only he wasn't frostbitten at all. He was sitting in a room in the middle of July, the air conditioner blazing, a white fleece blanket draped comfortably across his six-foot-two-inch frame.

"You're about done, Mr. Willingham." The woman in white checked his once tan, muscular arm, now as bleached as his blanket, and walked back across the room to tend to the whirring machine in the corner. "But if you'd like to keep going, we could always use more."

The last thing he wanted to do was to keep going. But he knew he would. "Sure," he said, leaning his curly brown hair back down onto the cool, green hospital plastic, closing his eyes, trying his best to get comfortable. "Let's keep going."

On a normal Monday, Britt Willingham would be making office small talk, secretly checking the score of the Braves game and counting down the minutes until five o'clock — closing time. On a normal Monday, he would be meeting his friends for happy hour, cooking dinner in his two-bedroom Atlanta apartment and spending the evening watching National Geographic — most likely a fishing show.

† A version of this article was first published in *CURE* magazine.



But this wasn't a normal Monday. It was nearly two years after he'd joined the Be The Match registry. It was the day he was called upon to donate stem cells. It was the day he got the chance to save a life.

### **We're All Connected**

For patients with blood cancers like leukemia, lymphoma, and other life-threatening diseases, a cure exists. It exists in the veins of neighbors and in the bone marrow of friends. The cure is in the hands of the public.

Be The Match is the world's largest community of donors, volunteers, health care professionals and researchers who deliver cures to life-threatening diseases by helping patients get the essential bone marrow or cord blood transplants they need for a second shot at life. The registry has nearly 12.5 million potential bone marrow donors and more than 209,000 cord blood units on hand. It has facilitated more than 68,000 transplants since 1987, when it was called the National Marrow Donor Program; its name was changed to Be the Match in February 2009.

The organization stemmed from the love of parents with a ten-year-old daughter who had leukemia. In 1979, Robert and Sherry Graves were the first to ever agree to a bone marrow transplant from an unrelated donor. It worked — and the success inspired them to give other families the same hope for a cure.

Now, the organization is at the forefront of the effort to get patients the marrow and stem cell donations they need. According to the website [marrowdrives.org](http://marrowdrives.org), all other marrow/stem cell donation programs in the United States recruit on behalf of Be The Match, and Be The Match has cooperative relationships with many registries outside the country, too, allowing it to seek and offer matches among donors and patients on those lists.

Most people know that healthy bone marrow and blood cells are needed to sustain human life. When a major disease like blood cancer affects the marrow so that it cannot properly function, a bone marrow transplant is often the best — and for some, the only — treatment. For transplants to remain an option, people need to be informed about their ability to access a cure — or to be the cure.

The bone marrow transplant procedure is astonishing, not only because it's possible to destroy cancerous cells and replace them with normal ones that multiply throughout the body, improving health, but also because of the emotions that are often involved, says Tina Saadat, Be The Match's southeastern supervisor for community engagement.



“I’ve facilitated about six donor-recipient meetings myself, and every one of them becomes instant family,” she explains. “A perfect example is one we did about five years ago with a donor who lives up in Connecticut; the recipient was in Atlanta at the time. One of them is Caucasian and one of them is African-American, but they consider themselves sisters.”

With a new diagnosis of blood cancer every three minutes, the need for donors is high. And while most patients assume they can find a match in their sibling or parent, approximately 70 percent of people in need of a transplant cannot, making the process nearly impossible without a robust registry of volunteers.

“This is a tissue-marker match, it’s not a blood-type match. It has nothing to do with blood type,” Saadat explains. “We’re looking for someone who has similar DNA. And now that we’re kind of a melting pot of a country, there are so many mixed ethnicities out there due to mixed marriages producing children of mixed backgrounds, it makes it even harder to match a patient.”

But that’s also what makes it so remarkable.

Despite the successful match of the Caucasian and African-American who shared a “very, very rare African gene,” Saadat says, it is “highly unusual” for two people of different ethnicities to match.

“When the two of them met, there were obviously some questions. Many hundreds of years ago, there could have been some overlapping between the Caucasian family and this African-American gene pool,” Saadat explains.

“We’re all, to a certain degree, connected.”

Even when there is a match found within a family, some refuse to donate to a loved one, partially due to a fear of the procedure — which, nowadays, is simple and relatively risk-free. It’s highly uncomfortable, but hardly considered dangerous. Some donors are back at work within one day of the donation. When no family match is available, patients rely on Be The Match. In order to survive, they place their lives into the hands of strangers.

### One of Those ‘God’ Moments

In 2006, Sarah Langville was making her way through the GE Healthcare Institute in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, prepared to give up. As a GE Healthcare employee, Langville worked in this building every day. Today, however, she wandered through maze-like passages without the slightest sense of direction, her patience washing away faster than the dirt on the sidewalk during an afternoon storm.



Long a donor for blood drives, Langville was headed for a cheek swab drive being held by Be The Match. Cheek swabs are how the organization collects DNA from potential donors to look for matches. Once Langville arrived, she almost turned around to leave, until something stopped her.

“Something at that moment was like, ‘You’re here, you might as well just do it.’ I think that was one of those ‘God’ moments.”

Two months later, Langville got a phone call. She was a potential match for a three-year-old boy.

At the time, peripheral blood stem cells, or PBSC, which are taken from a donor’s blood before the rest of the blood is returned to his or her body, were not a common donation method; today, approximately 77 percent of donors donate stem cells this way. After her phone call, Langville began preparing to donate liquid bone marrow instead, which would be surgically removed from her hip while she was under anesthesia.

“I was going to donate at the end of November, and a month before that, you have to sign this paper, and that was one of those moments when all of a sudden it’s very real what you’re doing,” Langville recalls. “You’re literally signing this paper in black and white, in very basic language, that says ‘I realize that if I don’t show up on November such-and-such a date, my patient will die.’”

When a match agrees to donate, he or she begins preparing for the transplant. For marrow donors, this simply involves showing up and going under anesthesia. PBSC donors take a regimen of a growth hormone called filgrastim, which produces an excess of stem cells in the bone marrow that are later kicked out into the blood stream. Over the course of four days, donors drastically increase their stem cell count until the day of their donation.

At the same time, the patient has been notified of the match and begins his or her own kind of preparation called “conditioning,” also known as “bone marrow preparation” or “myeloablation,” a treatment of high-dose chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy — although now sometimes lower-dose or nonablative chemotherapy is used. There are several reasons for this treatment: to make room in the bone marrow for the transplanted stem cells; to suppress the patient’s immune system to lessen the chance of graft rejection; and to destroy all of the cancer cells anywhere in the patient’s body.

Put simply: these patients get much, much sicker.

“I had these nightmares about not being able to get to the hospital for some



crazy reason,” Langville recalls, noting that throughout the entire process, her only concern was something happening to her before she was able to donate. “When you consider what the recipient is going through, living in a bubble for a month and killing off their entire immune system, it’s a lot on the recipient compared to what’s going on with you.”

Langville arrived at the hospital at eight in the morning, and within forty-five minutes was in the recovery room. After experiencing several days of soreness, as if she’d “run a marathon,” Langville’s life continued as usual, but the impact she made will live on.

Although someday she’d like to, Langville has never met the little boy she saved. “I feel like the ball is in his family’s court,” she says. “When I think about all that his family went through during that time of being so, so sick, I don’t think that I’m the most important thing they need to hold on to. But it’s reassuring to know that he’s doing well. He’s thriving.”

According to Be The Match’s confidentiality policies, in most cases, donors and patients are allowed to have “anonymous contact” during the first year after the transplant — they may send cards, letters and gifts without revealing their identities, or simply rely on Be The Match employees to receive health updates. Langville receives an annual Christmas card from her patient’s family, a consistent visual reminder of the growth and life that, without her, would not have been possible.

Despite having never met him in person, Langville speaks about her recipient with such loving tenderness one would assume they were related by blood — which they are, in a way, since her blood now runs through his veins.

“He pulled through,” Langville says, the affection in her voice unmistakable. “He’s now a little boy in school, doing well. He’s actually eleven now, so I probably shouldn’t call him a little boy anymore,” she laughs. “Even now, even never having met him, just knowing that I happened to be at the right place at the right time for someone in their life, that’s just a little bit of God working. And that’s fate.”

### A Very Bleak Prognosis

In another part of the country, Karen Gibson was at the pinnacle of young health. As an outside sales rep for a company in Savannah, Georgia, she was on her feet a lot, traveling, stretching her legs. She was thirty-eight. She was healthy.

She spent countless hours chasing after her three children, aged thirteen, nine, and three, driving them to sports practice and cheering from the sidelines. In



her free time, she volunteered at church once a week and spent time with her husband. She donated her platelets to the American Red Cross. Until one day, they turned her away.

"They told me my iron was too low," Gibson explains. "So I started taking some iron supplements, and I went back a while later to donate again, and they turned me away again. So I setup an appointment with my doctor to see what I needed to do to get my iron back in check, and they did a complete blood work on me. It came back completely abnormal. Nothing was right."

On March 6, 2012, Gibson was diagnosed with myelofibrosis, a rare cancer that affects the bone marrow, disrupting the body's normal production of blood cells.

"It was a complete shock," she says. "First of all, we had never heard the word myelofibrosis before, so not only did we learn a new word, but we learned that I *had* this new word, this rare disorder."

Within the next few weeks Gibson and her husband would learn more. Her doctor informed her that myelofibrosis did not have any treatment plans. They took to the Internet, desperately searching for answers, but "found out that what our doctor was saying was accurate," Gibson says. "It was a very bleak prognosis."

Her survival was estimated at two to four years. She would never see her children get married, would miss the start of first grade for her youngest and college orientation for her oldest. Her husband, who is in the military, would be a single father of three. Myelofibrosis is typically diagnosed in people in their seventies or older; often, the disorder is brought on by treatments that people have received for a previous form of cancer, or it develops from a myelodysplastic syndrome, in which immature blood cells in the bone marrow fail to mature into healthy blood cells.

At thirty-eight years old, and otherwise completely healthy, Gibson's myelofibrosis was "primary," making it even more rare and difficult to treat.

With very few options, they traveled to Minnesota to consult with Aref Al-Kali, a Mayo Clinic hematologist and myelofibrosis expert. It was there that they learned about Be The Match, and a possible cure through a bone marrow transplant.

The process for finding Gibson a match was grueling. They checked her brother, who was not a match. They held multiple bone marrow drives, recruiting over three hundred potential donors to add to the Be The Match Registry, but none were eligible to donate to her.

All the while, her health was declining. In January 2013, she was receiving blood and platelet transfusions on a regular basis, no longer able to keep up with the busy schedule that consumes the days of a working mother of three.



“We decided to do a half-match transplant,” Gibson says, which means that the donor’s tissues are only half identical — not ideal, but better than no transplant at all. “My mother was going to be my half-match donor. As we were preparing for that, we were on the road to Atlanta to begin the transplant process, and I received a call from my doctor saying that my mom had antibodies that were incompatible to me, and she could not be my donor. My heart completely sank.”

Prepared to turn the car around, her doctor then informed her that she had another option — one he hadn’t mentioned before. They had searched the umbilical cord blood bank through Be The Match and had found a cord blood unit in Europe that was not only an exact match, but was a large enough unit that it would be the only unit she needed to complete the transplant.

“I was overjoyed,” Gibson says, the relief still audible in her voice. “I pulled over to the side of the road, and I cried. I cried out of shock and excitement. Every emotion you can imagine, I experienced in that moment.”

When Gibson had given birth to her own children years before, she’d known she had the option of putting their cord blood in a bank; however, “the fees associated with that were fairly expensive,” so she didn’t do it. She was unaware that she could have donated their cord blood to an organization like Be The Match for no cost at all.

Umbilical cord blood plays an important role in the treatment of leukemia, lymphoma, sickle cell anemia and other life-threatening diseases. After a baby is born, the blood is collected from the umbilical cord — not the baby — and tested, frozen and stored. Cord blood transplants offer some advantages to patients: unlike stem cell donations, they don’t need to be a perfect match, and they are associated with a lower chance of viral infections and GvHD, Graft versus Host Disease.

While bone marrow and PBSC donors have the option to reveal their identities to their recipients after one year, cord blood donors always remain anonymous, so the identity of Gibson’s lifesaver will forever be a mystery. Still, that doesn’t stop her from wondering.

“I think about them all the time,” Gibson says. “I tease with my family because I love Italian food, especially after my transplant, so I insist that my baby donor was Italian,” she laughs. “It’s fun to fantasize.”

Saadat, from Be The Match, says this recipient fantasy is common.

“We’ve had a lot of recipients that will keep a journal, and then that way, if they ever get the opportunity to meet that person, they can share their thoughts and feelings,” Saadat says.



In addition to wondering about the identity of her donor, Gibson finds herself yearning to get inside the person's head, wanting to know what made him or her donate in the first place.

"But since I can't," she says, "the best way I can share my gratitude to that family is to tell others about how their decision to be a donor has impacted my life. If I could meet them, I would say, 'Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for making the simple decision to donate.' There aren't enough words to describe my gratitude to that family. Because they made that huge decision, I get to be here on this earth to watch my three beautiful children grow up. And I absolutely cherish every moment and every day that I get to be with my family."

Like many recipients, donors also tend to be interested in spreading the word about Be The Match.

"After my donation, my brother joined the registry," Langville says. "Last year, he was matched to a recipient as well, I believe to a thirty-eight-year-old father in North Carolina. Just a couple of weeks ago, after my brother's donation, he then hosted a drive at his church and someone else matched. It's really a prime example of paying it forward."

Saadat likes to urge prospective donors to look at the process as if they were in a recipient's shoes. "I would like the public to think 'This could be me,' or 'This could be somebody that I care about, and boy, how I would really like to have a match in the registry if that was the case.' Because a lot of our patients are coming to us desperate," she says.

"The exciting thing about Be The Match is they're not an organization that is in search for a cure," Gibson echoes. "They have the cure. They *are* the cure."



If you are in need of a bone marrow or cord blood transplant, call Be The Match at 1-888-999-6743 or email [patientinfo@nmdp.org](mailto:patientinfo@nmdp.org) to learn about payment options and insurance coverage, or to seek support or education. Those interested in joining the Be The Match registry — ideally adults ages eighteen to forty-four — can sign up by visiting [join.bethematch.org](http://join.bethematch.org) or by registering at community donor drives. The full medical requirements for joining can be viewed at [bethematch.org](http://bethematch.org). Those unable to join can consider donating money or their children's cord blood. Learn more at [www.bethematch.org/support-the-cause](http://www.bethematch.org/support-the-cause)











## **I HAVE KNOWN MEN<sup>†</sup>**

A Short Story by Alex Keith

I have known men, men with small minds and big hands. Men with dark suits and darker hair, curls creeping down the napes of their forty-year-old necks. I have seen men's hands clasped in prayer, holding the Torah open on Saturday morning, those same fingers later clutched around my mother's upper thigh, the only thing between their skin her ecru pantyhose. I have known men to scramble eggs, to slosh orange juice, to make a mess of our kitchen in last night's rumpled Oxford button-down. I have known men.

I have met the lawyer, the sales clerk, the accountant. All of them blend into the background of my memory of our kitchen in Charleston: yellowed wallpaper and battered white tiles, a scuff mark near the door from my sister Susan's black boots, back when they were new. She had gotten them for her birthday. It was February and cold and they weren't the color she wanted.

Susan is nine years older than me. I was an accident, a surprise conception to be followed by my father's even more surprising death eighteen months after my birth. He was the only man I didn't know. But I could imagine him: a textile businessman, soft black hair and dark eyes, a cigarette stuck between the two fingers he freed from the handle of his briefcase. He would have been a man with a briefcase. Maybe he would have hidden things from me inside its leather shell, like candy or books or small change. Helen, my mother, doesn't speak of him.

There were pictures of him of course, neatly hung on the walls of our one-story home, black and whites of him and my mother smiling together, arms around one

<sup>†</sup> This story was nominated for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Intro Journals Project.



another's waists. My mother worked in fashion. Slender and beautiful, she modeled for clothing advertisements in our city's newspaper, *The Post and Courier*.

My seventh-grade nickname was "Elephant."

My mother knew lots of men. They came into Berlin's, the department store on King Street where she worked, carrying khakis and dress pants to be hemmed, desperate for her slightest touch at the base of their ankles. Maybe she'd even slide her hand up the back of their calves as she folded over the excess wool or serge before pinning it. They could only hope. While their wives browsed the scarves and sweaters, middle-aged men flocked to my mother, their distended bellies straining against their over-starched work shirts. My mother knew them all, called them by name, laughed at their jokes. She would smile and touch them lightly on their dampened backs. "See you on Saturday, Allen."

Red lipstick, pumps, and a pencil skirt — my mother was a sight in synagogue. She called it "dressing the part." What part she was playing, I wasn't sure. But I knew my job, to "sit still" and "follow along with the service, even if you don't understand." Susan sat beside me, trying to catch glimpses of the boys in her Hebrew school class. She didn't listen when I reasoned she couldn't possibly tell who was who, their yarmulkes making identification nearly impossible. The dark, silky black backs of their heads blended together into a sea of the sons of the men I had come to know. "Susan stop craning," my mother whispered out of the side of her red mouth, never drawing her attention away from Rabbi Sitner.

There was always a gathering afterwards. My mother and her older sisters, Sadie and Rose, sat out on our small front lawn, enveloped in a cloud of cigarette smoke, gossiping about the outfits donned earlier that morning at Temple. The usual crowd attended, bearing their usual dishes. Mrs. Lipov with the brisket, Mrs. Baron with the lox. The kids were largely ignored, and I used the time to climb the big magnolia in our yard that I had so frequently climbed to catch glimpses of the neighbor's pool.

\*

Susan was gone away to college, out in the world where you weren't required to go to Hebrew school and Temple, where you could eat pork sandwiches on Saturdays, at any hour of the night even, whenever the craving hit you. My mother was going to see a play downtown at the Dock Street Theater with a doctor. She never spoke of them by their names, only their professions. I had sat and watched her dress. It was the same long, drawn-out process, regardless of the man. The same steps from the shower to the goodbye at the door that I'd always loved to



watch. She rarely asked my opinion, but I was twelve now, and tonight I was in charge of shoes.

"The puce or the olive?" my mother asked without looking at me, her eyes fixed on her reflection in the floor-length mirror at the back of her closet.

"Puce?" While I'd pored over the fashion magazines that littered our coffee table since before I could read, this was a new one to me.

"It's like a purplish color, Harriet," my mother answered, finally turning to look at me. I was lying on my stomach on her bed, my stocking legs spread out at an angle behind me, hands under my chin so as to better study my mother. Her actual clothes always came last. Hair and makeup first, then jewelry, and finally clothing.

It was at this step in the process that I loved her most — her stark beauty against the drab décor of her small bedroom, stockings and a bra, the gold necklace from my father she always wore, hair down to her shoulders. A deep orange skirt lay on the bed, draped by a silk blouse, one I hadn't seen before.

"Put on one of each. Let me see." I gave her my best fashion critique face as she slipped the different pumps on her size ten feet. I would never be able to wear her shoes.

"The olive," I decided.

"Ah, my favorite color. You know my weakness, love. You head on to Aunt Sadie's now. She made kugel. Tell her I should be home by eleven." I left my near-naked mother standing there in mismatched shoes, and I headed down the street, still dressed in my plaid school uniform.

Seven years older than my mother, my Aunt Sadie hunched over her stove, her small feet tucked into her house-shoes. I could smell the egg noodles and raisins cooking in the oven. My mother didn't cook. It was widely recognized by every member of our family that Aunt Sadie had received that gene. I didn't mind that my mother knew nothing of making perfectly round matzo balls or frying my favorite potato latkes — Aunt Sadie was there, four houses down on the left, to feed me and clothe me and ask me about school and boys when my mother could not be bothered.

Aunt Sadie walked me home that night, after stuffing me with kugel and letting me stay up an extra hour to watch "The Partridge Family." I was going to marry David Cassidy. I kissed Aunt Sadie goodnight and slid in through the screen door and tiptoed to the room Susan and I had shared, now filled with only my things. Her empty twin bed still stood across from mine, holes in the walls where her Sex



Pistols poster used to hang. Mom hated that poster. I heard sounds emanating from the other room, low whispers and laughter. I have known men to tell funny stories, make my mother laugh for real. But they were rare. More often I knew boorish men, who slobbered over their punch lines, laughing with their lips apart, cavernous mouths open to the night air. But tonight she was really laughing.

The paper-thin walls of my house crackled and bent as her low moans came through. At twelve years old, I should have known far less than I did. Pulling my blue duvet cover over my head, I imagined his doctor hands running over my mother's broad shoulders. He would have steady hands, hands softened by years of rubber gloves and anti-bacterial soap. My mother would say, "Stop, you're tickling me," only to burst into giggles. And he wouldn't stop. He'd wind his fingers through the same hair that she had let me brush earlier that night, tangling my work.

My father had rough hands. I don't remember his touch, but I've seen pictures. I've felt the hardened edges of my sister's rocking horse, the one he'd built when my mother was four months pregnant with Susan. I've traced over his fingers in my parents' wedding album, seen him holding my mother's hand, fingering the lace on her dress. He wouldn't have tangled her hair. He'd have been there, standing behind her in our musty bathroom, tucking loose pieces behind her ears, smoothing the back parts that she couldn't reach.

Turning away from the sound of my mother's faint laughter, I focused my eyes on the light that streamed into my room through the open door. I saw the olive pumps cast off next to our faded leather couch, the left one lying on its side, its scuffed sole staring back at me. Empty wine glasses sat on top of my mother's latest issue of *Vogue*, the one with Beverly Johnson on the cover, dressed in a gauzy blouse. "She looks like one of Aunt Sadie's cream puffs," my mother had commented. Now covered by empty wine glasses, I could imagine the woman's eyes magnified underneath the glass, frightened and confused.

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At five-foot-eleven my mother could have been on the cover of *Vogue* herself. "I wouldn't have gotten to have you," she always answered when I asked, as I often did, what had stopped her from pursuing modeling. I would be sitting at the kitchen table doing my schoolwork, a thick slice of Aunt Sadie's meatloaf in front of me. My mother would come home from work, allowing me to capture her in the most domestic of poses. Pouring hot water into a mug, straightening the chairs around the sofa, loading the dishwasher, her legs bent at a comical angle as the heels she



wore added three inches to her already lanky frame. “Freeze!” I’d shout. Quickly and without hesitation she’d give me her best model pose, arching her back and pouting her lips to make me giggle. “Not like that! Come on be serious, Mom.”

“Sis is serious, yah? Sis is how all ze models in ze magazines do it, yes?” she’d retort in her best Veruschka accent. I’d snap imaginary pictures of her with my stubby fingers, forever distracted from my math homework and the ugly reality of middle school.

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I have known men to make pancakes, to attempt to win me over with blueberry smiles and syrup hair. Waking up to the smell of sizzling eggs early in the morning meant only one thing to me — the doctor had spent the night. I rolled over in bed noticing that my mother had shut my door in an attempt to let me sleep. I hadn’t slept.

The doctor was wearing his slacks from the night before, their pleats now rumpled and in need of ironing. That, my mother could do. He wore my father’s old bathrobe, the one my mother left hanging behind our bathroom door. It no longer smelled like what I imagined it had — my father’s musk-peppermints and pipe tobacco. Instead, it smelled like bacon and grits, like the breakfasts of the strangers who had worn it. I don’t know why she never washed it, or why the men who wore it didn’t seem to notice the obvious markings of its previous users — a brown hair by the collar, a blonde one on the back. Maybe they didn’t care. Maybe they talked about it, an emblem. “I’ve worn Helen Dwork’s bathrobe. Yes, that old plaid one on the back of the door.”

The doctor attempted small talk with me, asked me about school. I’d learned to be polite; I didn’t want to embarrass my mother. Sitting on the side of our kitchen table that housed a bench instead of two chairs, the bench my sister and I had shared, I faced my mother and the doctor. He blinked back at me, clearly out of things to say. My mother wore her hair up, a wayward piece falling by her mouth as she sipped her usual black coffee. She seemed to never eat. Her white chest was visible underneath her thin cotton nightshirt, which hung off her shoulders. Dropping a piece of toast onto the floor, I stooped to pick it up, pushing my head between my knees and the lip of the table. Slow to resurface, I caught the smooth doctor’s hand inching its way across my mother’s torso, sliding up underneath her shirt. The hand that had mended my friend George’s arm when he fell from the oak tree in the park now cupped my mother’s left breast. It stayed there for what felt



like minutes as I crouched, frozen, under the table, watching it brush itself furiously back and forth across her nipple. I saw her kick her feet together, trying to contain her squeal. When I emerged from under the table, cold toast clutched in my hand, my mother's face remained passive, as if unattached to the body below it, the body being touched and explored as I ate my Sunday morning breakfast.

In that moment I missed Susan. She would have laughed at this sad man, this man who thought he'd discovered something new. "Look at him, Harriet," she'd whisper, "thinking he's the one." We both knew it was a game, a game my mother always won. I knew what the doctor didn't know — that he wouldn't be back, that this was his first and final breakfast. But that didn't stop it from hurting, watching her glance over at him with that half smile, seemingly blind to my presence.

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My mother never spoke of them, the men. Never hinted she liked a certain trait in one or enjoyed one more than the other. I'm not sure if she knew what she was looking for. She spoke only of the plays, the movies, the dinners. I remembered when some businessman with deep red cheeks and a tattered sock tie had taken her to see *The Great Gatsby*. She'd come home that night without the ruddy-faced man and pushed all of our living room furniture up against the walls. Grabbing me from my bed she'd dragged me to her makeshift dance floor and taught me to do the Charleston. Heels tapping, legs kicking, she'd spun me around until I thought I might barf. Susan, home for winter break from college in Miami, clapped her hands from across the kitchen as our mother belted out, "I'm Gonna Charleston Back to Charleston." She wasn't half-bad, but I covered my ears in mock agitation anyways, anything to make her laugh.

Aunt Sadie never spoke of the men that so frequented our lives. She'd come to drop off cookies for me and seen the ends of burnt cigars smashed into the ashtray, a dirty frying pan in the sink. She too knew men. She knew men who'd gawked at her sister as they walked through the supermarket as young girls. She knew men who'd been broken by her sister, knew their desperate looks as my mother squeezed by them on her way out of Temple. Aunt Sadie could only shrug as the men approached her and goaded her for information about her sister. Distressed and deserted men.

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I always dreaded the day my mother would leave me, too. As much as I wanted to picture her in one of the grander, more exotic places that she dreamed of,



somewhere more fitting, I selfishly placed her among the plastic patio furniture littering our back porch. I put her there, alone, a cigarette in her hand. I colored her hair an ash gray, smudged her red lipstick, clawed a run in her pantyhose. I drew her in among the weeds, covered her with a dull and tattered shawl, something she would have never worn. Yet for all my effort I could not contain her, could not make her stay with me. I was twelve and short, dark-haired and brown-eyed like my father, who had left me, too.

She spoke of him to me only once, as we sat side by side on Aunt Sadie's couch, poring over the old photographs Aunt Sadie had kept neatly in boxes. As my mother turned them over in her hands I feigned ignorance, pretended I had not spent so many afternoons turning the same images over, questioning Aunt Sadie about the people and places in each tiny black-and-white frame. My father was holding a tape measure up to a half-finished rocking horse, bent down on one knee, turning back over his left shoulder as my mother snapped her fingers to get his attention. She must have said something to make him smile that way. Perhaps she had made fun of his carpentry skills. "You remind me so much of him, Harriet," she'd said, and I wondered exactly what about me reminded her of him. I just stared with her at the picture of my father. Aunt Sadie chimed in from across the room where she stood in front of the oven, the tile there cracked and worn from so many years of her cooking.

"Yes, Harriet, just like him. I think it's the eyes. Don't you, Helen? Or maybe those dimples." Aunt Sadie smiled knowingly. My mother never answered her, letting the photo fall from her hands, back into the box.

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I have known men, men to write love notes and slip them under our front door. Susan and I loved nothing more than the thrill of intercepting one, attempting to open its seal without tearing the envelope. I have known men to bring gifts, to litter our house with potted plants and bouquets of flowers. My mother smelled each one, taking in deep breaths, unaware of the fact that our living room was beginning to look like a funeral parlor. I have known men to ignore me, men to attempt to entertain me, men to watch my mother's movements from across the room. Together we studied her, these men and I. We watched as she straightened her pencil skirt in her seat in Temple, pulling down the sides and placing her hands gently in her lap. Together we saw her take a long drag from a cigarette, standing to the side of the crowd in our front yard, staring at something we couldn't see. There was no way out of loving her.



My mother had left me long ago. I could smell her, touch her, play with her hair, but she was gone. I could try on her clothes, pile her necklaces around my neck, “dress for the part” that I never knew the lines for. Susan, older and wiser, had discovered my mother’s absence long before I could imagine its possibility, and she left for a world where she could be noticed for herself, free from the shadow of our mother. But like the men, I craved that shadow. We yearned for its heavy cover, its deep musk of cashmere and smoke. I have known men with whom to share the beautiful absence of my mother.













## WEST, MEET EAST

A Travel Essay by Glennis Lofland

“I need a pep talk,” I told my brother over the phone.

I was in my car in the parking lot facing the entrance to JeJu Sauna and Spa, Home of Wellbeing. I had driven thirty minutes northeast of Atlanta to try this place. It’s easy to miss. Tucked off four-lane Pleasant Hill Road, behind a Wendy’s and a KFC, JeJu occupies one half of a concrete strip-mall. Kebab shops and nail salons occupy the other half. Its name is written on the side in both English and Korean. A porte-cochere and wall of glass windows make it seem like some kind of fancy fitness center. But JeJu is not a gym. JeJu is a *jjimjilbang*, a traditional Korean public bathhouse.

I had done enough reading online to know, more or less, what I was getting myself into — the nudity in particular. I had practically memorized JeJu’s website. I knew about the separate-sex locker room with the hot tubs and wet saunas, and the common area with dry saunas where you are required to wear the JeJu uniform given to you at check-in. I knew that shoes are not permitted anywhere and that in the wet areas, nudity is not optional. I had read about the different massages, the body scrub, and something for women called the “hip bath.” I knew that the price of admission gets you a locker and access to the wet area, the dry saunas, the salt-water swimming pool, and your uniform for the co-ed areas. I knew that all other treatments were extra. I had read that if it’s your first time, you should try the Korean body scrub and the so-called “hip bath,” so I had put those on my list of to-dos. I had even spoken with a friend who frequents a Korean bathhouse outside D.C.

“Oh, you’re going to love it,” she said. “It’s so relaxing. By the way, you will feel so comfortable with your body afterwards.”



I needed a pep talk.

My brother, an artist who frequents New Mexico and Arizona and tells stories of the ex-hippies who make the area hot springs their own personal baths, was the one to do it.

“Oh, goodness,” he said. “You’ll do fine. Just, *ahem*, be prepared.”

“Lots of naked people.”

“Yes. But it’s only weird for the first thirty seconds.”

This, too, I had read online. A couple of bloggers in Los Angeles and a writer for the *New York Times* had said the exact same thing: it’s weird for about thirty seconds, then you don’t even notice the nakedness.

“Glennis, you will see all shapes.”

It sounded obvious, but I would not realize the power of that statement until later. It seemed the only people going in or out of JeJu were Asians. The parking lot was packed.

“I’m going to stick out like a sore thumb!”

“Mmm, I don’t know,” said my brother. “You might be surprised.”

I waited until I saw a black couple walk out and a white guy walk in before taking a deep breath.

“Ok, I’m going in.”

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How did a Korean bathhouse wind up in the suburbs of Atlanta? San Francisco, sure. New York City, Los Angeles — even Chicago. But the South is not known for its world culture. What culture the South has is seen as its own: its hardy cuisines, from comfort to soul food, from country to Creole, all served up with that eponymous hospitality. At least that’s the stereotype. But like many large American cities, downtown Atlanta and its neighborhoods are sprinkled with multicultural establishments — your Chinese buffets, the sushi restaurants and Mexican cantinas. Atlanta even boasts one of the best Ethiopian restaurants in the country.

And if you take a drive out to the suburbs, to the large swaths of four-lane roadways that surround Atlanta, you’ll find international culture with a capital C. Ask any Atlantan for the best Korean or Chinese restaurant, and they will direct you toward Buford Highway. Partly the unofficial Chinatown of Atlanta, Buford Highway is a stretch of Chinese restaurants, Korean bakeries, phở shops, Ethiopian restaurants, Mexican taquerias, sushi bars, and Cuban sandwich shops — block after block of international fare. Beginning in Midtown Atlanta, the highway stretches



nearly fifteen miles through the northeast suburbs and has one of the highest concentrations of foreign-born residents in the country. Yes, this is the Atlanta I'm talking about.

Still, Buford Highway exists in most Atlantans' minds as a curiosity—a place to go on weekends for Korean pedicures and really good Chinese food. But, Buford Highway is *home* to many people. Slowly, over time, leasing spaces next to the Kroger and the TGI Fridays, these Atlantans have built up an international community with the flavors, symbols, shops, and services of their native lands. The suburbs of Atlanta can feel like a strange, parallel universe, where all the trappings of American suburban sprawl—Wendy's, IHOP, Olive Garden and Chili's—exist alongside store signs written in Chinese calligraphy or the graceful swirls of Arabic. The pretentious would call the establishments “authentic,” but the term implies a cultural rigidity impossible in an area where Ethiopian, Mexican, Nigerian, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, Arab, Korean, Cuban, Chinese, Somali, Peruvian, Japanese, and Indian cultures clash and commingle every single day. This is the melting pot in the truest sense of the term.

But a bathhouse? Unlike a traditional Swedish or American spa, with soothing music, private massages, skin treatments and healthy food, a bathhouse is exactly and only that: a place people go to bathe. In public. It sounds like a terribly uncomfortable public display—an act so intimate—not to mention an epic waste of water. For years, environmentalists have claimed how wasteful baths are, that showers use but a fraction of the water it takes to have a bath. Some hotel chains and new apartment complexes have even nixed bathtubs in place of showers. The math is clear: if a standard tub holds thirty-five gallons of water, and if a standard shower uses about four gallons of water per minute, then obviously... wait a minute. You would have to take a eight-minute shower in order to use less water than a bath. Who does that?

Still, many Americans cringe at even the thought of bathing—floating in a warm and stagnant pool of their own filth. Showers are cleaner, they claim. Even those who enjoy bathing for relaxation tend to shower before lighting candles, filling the bathtub with bubbles and propping a glass of vino on the side of the tub. Westerners have mostly been averse to bathing; the Romans and their famous bathhouses were an anomaly in the history of the Western world. Christianity frowned upon the public nudity in bathhouses, and in the Middle Ages, people began bathing at home, if at all. Up to the eighteenth century, manuals actually



advised people to wash only parts visible to the public: hands, feet, ears, face, and neck. Public bathhouses made a comeback in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, when cleanliness began to be connected with good health. Then water began being pumped into individual homes in the twentieth century, and people started bathing at home. Today, the idea of going to a public bathhouse is alarming—it certainly never crossed my mind until I heard about JeJu. Take a bath with other people? It was absurd.

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I got out of my car and scurried up to the entrance. A line at the check-in counter allowed me to look around and get my bearings. Though the check-in counter attendants were both white Americans, it was clear this place was Korean first. It was like stepping into a foreign country. Most of the writing was in Korean characters, the English translations slightly off. Whenever a sign referred to more than one sauna, for instance, it said “sauna’s.”

An elevator to the second floor led to other rooms and the fitness center. The men’s locker room was down a hallway to the right, the women’s to the left. At the counter, I relinquished my ID for a locker key and a firmly-pressed tan cotton uniform. This was it. There was only one way forward. I felt like a child at the top of the biggest waterslide in the park. There was no turning back now.

I opened the door to a wave of female chatter and blow-driers. It was chaos. A cluster of women grabbing their shoes from the rows of shoe lockers didn’t even look up as I stepped over them. I took my shoes off and stuffed them in my bag, not wanting to break any rules. I rounded the corner. It was like a typical gym locker-room, a dingy orange one with a yellow-speckled laminate floor, with people in various stages of dress, save for the groups of nude women walking in and out of the glass door to the left of the blow-drying station. I assumed that was the “wet area.” A formidable-looking Korean woman stood guard by the stack of white hand towels—a laminated sign said only one towel per person. She was punching something into a computer screen for a couple of teenage girls, possibly signing them up for the hip bath in the room next door. I passed the hip bath room on my way to my locker and was startled to see four or five women sitting against a wall, wearing purple hair nets and pink capes like the kind hairdressers use. The capes formed a tent all the way to the floor, holding the steam that rose from beneath their seats. The women’s heads bobbed and swayed as they chatted with each other.



At my locker, I glanced around and decided I was not quite ready for total nudity just yet. So I changed into my uniform, grabbed a towel, and wandered out of the women's locker room and into the common area. The room opened into a cavernous space. Everyone was wearing the exact same thing: tan shorts and a V-neck short-sleeved shirt, like a thicker version of medical scrubs. These do not flatter anyone. A cafeteria serving traditional Korean dishes made up one corner, the tables low to the ground with floor cushions for seats. A glass wall to the right separated the salt-water swimming pool from the rest of the space. Long wooden beams ran down the middle of the room where people lounged, chatted, sipped smoothies, and napped. It was loud, voices echoing up through the two-story space. You will find no Enya here. Along the back were three squat, stone roundhouses, which look like enormous pizza ovens with small wooden doors. Four other saunas and a cold room ran along the far wall to the left, and a hallway led to the massage rooms. Another Korean attendant manned a computer at the end of the hallway, signing people up for massages and facials. Everything was first-come, first-serve, based on your locker number. A voice announced over the loudspeaker the next number on the list.

"Number 151, please report to the massage room."

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In Eastern cultures, bathing is an integral part of the week. Public bathhouses date back to the eleventh century in China and as far back as the seventh century in Japan. Before the first *senjo* was established in Tokyo in 1591, the Japanese bathed openly in springs and rivers. Initially, bathhouses were mixed-gender. What may or may not have happened in the saunas' shroud of steam helped them develop a bad reputation. Then bathhouses separated genders. The first public bathhouse built in Korea was intended for Japanese colonists in the 1920s, but the tradition caught on fast. Today, Korean bathhouses are open twenty-four hours a day and serve as all-in-one relaxation complexes where you can eat, sleep, watch TV, read, take a bath and sauna for \$25. Massage, reflexology, acupressure, and Korean Demadi (Korean Shampoo) each cost extra. In a traditional *jjimjilbang*, you have a series of dry saunas with different healing characteristics and a gender-segregated wet area with hot tubs and wet saunas.

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I wandered around looking at the saunas. A plaque by each door explained the room's design and benefits: *The Gold & Silver Room is lined and covered with gold and silver; it is said, among many other things, to have positive effects on the nerve stability, poison counteraction and neurosis.* There was also a Jade Room, a Charcoal Room, a Baked Clay Sauna, a Rock Salt Room and a Jewel Room. Each room was intricately decorated with its eponymous material, each of which boasted a unique health benefit. I decided on the Gold and Silver Room first, one of the squat pizza ovens in the middle of the room.

There were only two other people inside the dim space, each lying sprawled on the bamboo matts that line the floor. I followed suit and lay down on a matt, propping my towel underneath my head. The door swooshed closed, and all noise from the outside slipped away. I glanced at the other two sauna-goers. One was a white woman, the other a Korean woman who turned onto her side. I tried closing my eyes and focusing on my breathing like they tell you to do in yoga, counting the breaths.

I'm not very good at yoga—I get distracted easily. I started making a grocery list and noticed how parched my mouth was. *How long do you have to stay in each sauna,* I thought. *Would it be weird if I got up right after I came in? How long have I been in here?* I opened my eyes. The other two women were still inside. *It would be weird if I left before one of them did; they got here before I did.* I looked around the sauna. It was striped with silver and gold from the walls to the ceiling. I followed the stripes up to the center, felt the heat around my skin and through the floor. The heat was an enveloping heat, a dry but not oppressive heat. It makes you sweat, but slowly. One of the women got up and left. I waited for a couple of breaths before following.

I made my way to each of the saunas. They were packed, except for Gold and Silver Room. In the Rock Salt Room (*surrounded by pure crystal rock salt, you will relieve stress and tension*), groups of people chatted softly, some seated against the wall, reading, others napping or meditating. I tried making room for a couple who came into the already-packed space and discovered the mats are to protect visitors from the incredible heat pumping through the floor.

In the Jewel Room, semi-precious stones created an intricate mosaic in the round oven-shaped sauna. In the Charcoal Room, (*this room reduces and removes body toxins, increases blood circulation, and stimulates sweat glands, releasing the built-up of toxins*), the walls were thick pieces of charcoal, sliced as if from



the original burnt branches. I jumped into the Rock Ice Room (*it will lower your body's temperature contracting your skin pores and leaving your skin healthy and resilient*) before deciding there was nothing else I could do to put off going into the "wet area."

Back at my locker, I took a deep breath. I glanced at the door to the wet area but couldn't see much past the steam and the dark shapes of bodies. *What do you do when you go in?* I wondered. I didn't know the protocol, other than you have to shower before entering the tubs. But where were the showers? I couldn't see past the door. I noticed two other women near me getting ready to go in, so I stripped quickly and followed them. It was probably the best way to take the plunge — I didn't give myself any time to feel uncomfortable. I was more concerned with the protocols of stripping than showering, so by the time I lowered myself into the hot bath in the middle of the room, there was nothing unusual or uncomfortable at all. But my brother was right — you will get an eyeful. Old and young (and I mean old, as in seventy-years old, and young, as in eleven), black, white, Asian, Latino, tall, short, large and small, all the skinniness and all the cellulite.

The wet area strikes a certain kind of camaraderie amongst strangers. I chatted with the other women in the hot pool about everything from our jobs to Beyoncé. One girl, a dancer for Center Stage, came at least once a week.

"Week nights are the best. I've never seen so many people here, but I guess that's what happens on the weekends. On weeknights, there will be like four people in here."

She asked if I had signed up for the body scrub yet. I hadn't.

"Girl, go get on that list! I've been waiting for almost two hours."

By list, she meant a small whiteboard where you write your locker number. Occasionally that formidable woman keeping watch over the towels would come over and yell out numbers for the next set of body scrubs. Like everything else at the *jjimjilbang*, the Korean body scrub was a public procedure, performed by a lingerie-wearing, middle-aged Korean woman in an open room next to the tub area. There were twelve cushioned platforms that looked like gynecologist exam tables. For this particular treatment, they are disinfected between procedures. The body scrub is exactly what it says: the middle-aged Korean woman attacks your body, turning you over, on the side, lifting arms and flab so that every single inch is scrubbed thoroughly with just soap and her scrub mitts. For thirty minutes. You can choose to have your tender skin lathered with oil afterwards for an extra \$30.



“It looks uncomfortable, but your skin is so incredibly smooth after. It’s totally worth it,” said the dancer.

I put my number on the list, but from the looks of it, I would be there for another three hours before it got even close to my turn. Instead, I tried the other things in the wet area. There’s an unspoken rule to keep the eyes up, but it’s hard to be guarded without a stitch of clothing. There are three tubs in the wet area, each a different temperature ranging from very hot to knock-the-wind-right-out-of-you cold. A row of showers lines the front wall by the door, and in the back are two wet saunas, a separate area for seated, hand-held showering, and a platform with heat lamps — yes, like the kind used to warm the prime rib at a buffet. A Korean grandmother sat at one of the hand-held shower stations, her wrinkled face a look of no-nonsense, scrubbing herself from head to foot.

The thing is, this is totally and completely normal for Korean and many other Eastern cultures. The public bathhouse is not something strange; it is not a novelty; it is not something you do with your friends just to say that you’ve done it. It’s not a bucket-list item, or a weekend vacation like American and Swiss-style Spas, where patrons move from one private, expensive treatment to the next in plush robes, listening to Enya. No, *jjimjilbang* is a weekly ritual as important to many Koreans as Mass is to Catholics. It’s the time for relaxation, for meditation. It’s the time to catch up with friends in both the co-ed and the separate-gender areas. As JeJu’s name says, bathing is more than getting clean; the *jjimjilbang* is also about your physical and mental well-being. Though the healing powers of the dry saunas’s materials may be more akin to those of homeopathy than those of scientific medicine, it is the philosophy of the bathing ritual that is most important: through bathing, through relaxation, through meditation and through social interaction, your mental and physical well-being comes back into balance. It is a philosophy lost among Western cultures, where washing and restoring wellbeing are separate activities — one done daily in the shower, the other done at the occasional yoga class, the yearly vacation, or the odd hike in the woods. Perhaps this is why so many of JeJu’s frequent visitors are Westerners, Americans who have spent time in Korea, or who, like me, stumbled upon the novelty of Korean bathing by chance and became hooked on the philosophy. Visitors like me, who have to go back for that body scrub.













## FALLING INTO FATE

A Memoir by Cameron Johnson

I was so young when it happened — now it seems like it could've been a dream. All I remember is a blur of brown, blue, brown, blue, brown, blue, tires.

Almost every other weekend, my sisters and I drove up to northern Arizona with our dad. His parents lived in a modest, cookie-cutter house in Prescott Valley, a town of sprawling fields encased by mountain ranges. Prescott is in the part of Arizona that actually gets snow and has its own national forest. My dad used to drive my sisters and me through the forest for the view — I don't remember ever actually getting *out* of the vehicle. The town itself was bleak, though I've heard it's built itself into a livable place in recent years with the addition of a shopping mall and corporate high-rises. When I was younger, the most exciting restaurant in Prescott was the HomeTown Buffet, a hole my dad still refers to as “the best.” Winters were fun. There's plenty of sledding and it's free of the skiers who take over Flagstaff. Other than that, I would never want to *live* in Prescott, but it's fine for a weekend visit.

My dad has always been a nature person, though he's as far from a tree-hugger as Rush Limbaugh. He's the kind of nature person who likes to go on hikes, fish all day, hunt, and skinny dip. But he has no idea what eco-friendly means. Growing up, he tried desperately to make me a participant in the outdoors, too. But I never did so willingly, even before the accident.

By the age of six, I had stopped caring about nature. I was more concerned with choreographing perfect gymnastic routines and dance numbers. I didn't like many animals, except dogs and dolphins, and the thought of being “one with nature” sounded like the opposite of fun. I had been camping a handful of times and always hated it. However, my dad is a simple guy and doesn't ask for much; so on the



second day of my *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* movie marathon at my grandparents' house, my mom forced me to go on a hike with him the next day.

It was just my dad and me that Saturday morning. My sisters and mom were to go shopping. I should've come out of the closet earlier; maybe I would've been invited to go shopping, too. But my dad and I hopped in the Suburban and headed to the forest. The drive wasn't very long and dad allowed me the honor of the passenger seat, next to his stash of Red Vines licorice. The sun was just starting to rise and it slowly illuminated crystal-clear blue skies. The air was crisp and refreshing. We drove through the forest, following a dirt road, and eventually came into a clearing. My father paused for a moment and rolled down the windows, deeply inhaling the fresh pines that surrounded us. We resumed driving and made our way to a ledge — a steepish mountain to the left and a spectacular view of the Prescott Valley skyline to the right.

My dad decided that this was *the spot* we should hike, to see how high we could get — to take a photo of the valley. We hopped out of the car and into the brisk morning air. My dad gathered our backpack, water, and compass. I grabbed my Swiss Army knife. We started up the slope, and that's when my memory becomes surreal. In remembering, I clearly see my father walking ahead of me, making sure to follow a strict path. I, on the other hand, have never liked to play by the rules. No matter how many times my father told me to "get back on the path," I refused. I wanted to create my *own* path, a secret path — a path that would be untraceable. I chose a small stream, about a foot and a half wide, heading down the mountain.

"Cam, you need to get on *this* path. You can't walk there," he said.

"Dad, it's *fine*!"

"You're going to lose your balance and tumble all the way down."

"That sounds cool!"

"No, it absolutely does not. Please get out of the stream."

Then came the blur of brown, blue, brown, blue, brown, blue, tires. Dirt, tree bark, sky, dirt, tree bark, sky. If I think hard enough, I can still hear my dad screaming, "Oh, oh Cam!" as he tried to grab me before I fell. I landed in a seated position at the exact spot where we began our hike, with the Suburban's rear tire directly in front of me. It was the only time I've ever truly been in shock — the kind of shock where you freeze and your brain leaves your body. I remember the fall in two ways: in first person and from afar, as if I were watching myself from above.

It's difficult to describe an out-of-body experience. I've read that in moments of



tremendous trauma, your brain turns itself off. In these moments, it's been reported that people have watched themselves safely from above — without physically enduring the incident. They return to their physical body only once the traumatic experience is over. While I can recall the physical experience of falling in first person, there is no pain associated with it. It were as if I had cinematic vision. My eyes were cameras, rapidly alternating between first person and third person points of view.

I could've been at the bottom of that mountain for ten hours or ten minutes. It seemed like my father took a while to reach me but it's unclear how long. He frantically checked my body for wounds. To our surprise, there wasn't a single cut. All my bones were in place. I could stand and walk. As far as we knew, I walked away from the devastating tumble, at least a few hundred feet, scratch-free. I didn't even lose my Swiss Army knife.

Then, weeks later, my left shoulder began to swell. It looked like I had stuffed a softball just below the skin. Kids in class called me Popeye, because it looked like I had one gigantic left bicep. I developed flu-like symptoms, fevers ranging from 102°F to 106°F, and my left ankle developed nodules similar to the one in my shoulder. At first, it was, "just the flu." Then doctors believed I had contracted Lyme disease from playing outside in Prescott. I was treated, unsuccessfully, for both ailments. However, neither diagnosis accounted for the cysts that had developed in my shoulder and ankle. After months and months of constant searching, in and out of hospitals, a doctor at the University of Arizona Medical Center, Dr. Yokum, contacted my parents and diagnosed me with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis. My own immune system was rebelling against me.

After years of medicated steroids, surgeries, infusions, and physical therapists, my JRA is finally in remission. The only reminders of my painful childhood are limited mobility in my joints, some scars, and the alarm of the airport metal detector, which my hip replacement still sets off. Despite extensive research on myself and others with JRA, doctors have never been able to explain *why* children contract the rare disease — aside from a few hereditary cases. No one in my family has ever had JRA, until me. If you ask my father about the cause of my disease, he will get very serious and recount the time I fell down a mountain in Prescott. He believes that, because I was only six, and because the fall was so bad, my body was shocked into turning on itself. He recalls my tiny body flailing through the air, tumbling, literally head-over-heels, over rocks and past trees to the bottom of the slope. He admits I could've died from the fall had I been thrown into a tree or into the car



at the bottom. The fact that I walked away from the fall without cuts or bruises is more than suspicious to my dad. He believes the outcome was a blessing, but the fall itself was a curse.

I'm still not sure what I believe. Is it possible to shake up your insides enough to make them turn against themselves? Maybe.

Ever since the fall, I spend very little time in nature. From age seven to seventeen, I couldn't have gone exploring in the wild, even if I wanted to. I was too sick. Now that I'm mobile and free to roam where I please, I still don't go exploring outside of the city very much. While I don't know if I wholeheartedly believe my father's theory about the tumble, I have few reasons to doubt it. In a way, it's the only explanation that makes sense to me. Any time I'm in the forest, on one of my rare hikes — when my city-boy nature chafes against nature and itself — I can't help but remember that trip to Prescott Valley. I still get an eerie feeling when I'm surrounded by trees, as if something terrible is going to happen. Everything becomes surreal and I get panicky. I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't been so stubborn and obeyed my father's wishes to walk along a proper trail. Would I have become a nature man — like Dad? Or was there something in me that was always going to shake loose?













## BORROWED GARDENS<sup>†</sup>

An Essay by Anne Royan

### McLeodganj, Upper Dharamsala, India

The small square card in my hand reads: *Why have you come here? (If you please, do discuss. And then, also explain.)*

*Here.* As in, today? As in, right now? To an English conversation class? To this particular conversation class, in this particular building?

Every afternoon after climbing the stone staircase and unlacing my boots and lining them in the neat row with all of the other pairs along the wall, I enter the unheated cement room, draw a card from the wooden bowl on a table by the door, find a partner, and sit down on the floor to converse for an hour. In English.

Or *Here.* As in, this country? This slope of the Himalayas? As in, this hillside village? This refugee camp?

I look across at my partner, Tenzin Lhamo, a student I recognize from the advanced English class I am teaching. She sits with her legs crossed on a flat, faded floral cushion, her knees only a few inches from mine. The curtain of her black hair falls down her back to sweep the floor. A dusting of snowflakes is still melting on her shoulders. I can see her breath as she exhales into the room.

We settle in with a smile, a slight bow of heads, and I read out loud the card that I have drawn. Asking the question: *Why have you come here? (If you please, do discuss. And then, also explain.)*

Tenzin Lhamo nods and borrows a moment to think, carefully collecting the words to build her story.

<sup>†</sup> This essay was nominated for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Intro Journals Project.



*It was six years ago, when I was aged twelve, when I left the plains of my childhood and walked out of Tibet. It is not permitted to leave freely, so leaving becomes a matter of escape, which adds great difficulty and great danger.*

*My oldest brother, who lived in a monastery for ten years, returned to our home one day. He had come to say goodbye. The conditions in his monastery had become very dangerous. Chinese guards began to raid often. They came looking for pictures of the Dalai Lama, which are illegal. They forced the monks to spit on the pictures or tear them in half or light them on fire. If you are found with one of these pictures in your possession, there are brutal punishments and even prison sentences. Very harsh consequences. The monks had been gathering in small groups to make plans to escape. Group by group they were disappearing in the night. My brother had decided to go as well, to India, to live in the village where His Holiness the Dalai Lama lived in exile. To come here.*

*All that night our house was filled with heavy and hurried whispers; I heard my parents and my brother in anxious discussion. By morning, it was decided that he would take me along, to someplace safe, somewhere away from Tibet. My parents could not make the trip because there were children who were still too young and grandparents who were much too old. The journey is long and difficult and very dangerous.*

*We left our home just after midnight when it was too dark to see anything, even shadows. We feared running out of food and freezing. We feared being caught. We knew the border guards were armed; we had heard the stories about bullets shot at nuns and at children. We moved during the night and hid in caves during the day. We had a compass and a hand-drawn map of the route through the mountain pass. My brother bought them from a man in Lhasa. We carried no luggage so that we would not look suspicious, and we wore many layers of our warmest clothes. I carried a small photograph of the Dalai Lama folded and sewn into a panel of cloth in my pocket.*

*In the nights, as we walked, I tried to think of pleasant memories to take my mind away from the things right in front of me, right beneath me, like my feet that were swollen with frostbite. With each step, we sank up past our knees into snowdrifts. My feet bruised and hardened and swelled until my father's boots that I was wearing were too tight. My feet were painful to walk on, but there was no other option. Sit down and freeze or keep moving. I tugged the laces tighter to discourage the swelling. In order to stop thinking about my physical body, I sent my mind off to*



*other places. To thoughts of my mother and the sound of her voice whispering in my ear, the safe feeling of holding her hand. To the warm, strong animal smell from the barn beneath our sleeping loft and to my small sisters, the warmth of their bodies against mine on the mat we shared as a bed, the way their skin smelled as they slept, the steady rhythm of their breathing. I wore these memories, pulled in close around my shoulders like a blanket, all through the night. Then in the first light of the new day, I shooed my mind away from the mist of despair that kept rising, away from the thought that I will, most likely, never see any of them again.*

*For nineteen nights, across those mountain rocks and beneath the stars, we climbed and collapsed and crawled toward freedom. We prayed and we kept moving. Just praying and moving.*

*I escaped Tibet and entered Nepal and then India with constant, silent prayers and small, steady forward movements.*

I am perfectly still, listening to her story. Her face is calm and her voice steady as she recounts the journey away from her family and her country. I search for the heavy weight of sorrow in the spaces between her words, but it seems that I am the one who is left wading through notes of despair.

She looks up. Our eyes meet. Hers are raven-colored and calm; mine are a pale green sea, blinking away thick gathering storm clouds of emotion. She smiles softly.

Tenzin Lhamo reaches her slim fingers across the small space between us to take the note card from mine. She turns it over, clears her throat and asks me, in the usual reciprocity of the exercise: *Why have you come here? (If you please, do discuss. And then, also explain.)*

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In 1959 the leader of Tibet, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, fled his homeland, under persecution from China, to settle in India. Over the next five decades, more than fifteen thousand Tibetan refugees have followed in his wake. An exodus, an evacuation into a neighboring land. You can no longer open an atlas and find a country named Tibet. A word defining a distinct culture, a word that outlined a nation now removed — the lines of its borders have been erased. It has been absorbed, shrouded beneath something larger. As though a great shadow rolled over it and never left. Today, it is called China.

How does one go in search of something that no longer exists on a map? Is it possible that Tibet is now only a mirage, a perception? A place whose era has passed? I did not believe that it could be gone. Displaced maybe, but



not extinguished. But it would be more difficult to find. If someone were so inclined to try.

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The village of McLeodganj was initially established as a hill station by the British in the late nineteenth century and named after Donald McLeod, a British lieutenant governor of Punjab, who in 1848 had begun using the location as a retreat from the plains heat. Since 1959, tens of thousands of Tibetans have fled Chinese rule in their occupied homeland, escaping over treacherous routes and high-mountain passes to become refugees living in settlements near their beloved leader. What began in 1959 as a temporary refugee camp for the Dalai Lama and his people, has grown over the last fifty-six years to become the physical center of the spirit of Tibet. It is known as “Little Tibet” or “Little Lhasa.”

Roots have been put down and walls have been built up. A generation of children has been born and has grown to raise their own children here, in safety, yet in exile, on a neighbor’s soil. Tenzin Tsundue, a Tibetan poet, political activist, and a refugee in India wrote of the situation:

*Though in a borrowed garden you grow, grow well my sister. Send your roots through the bricks, stones, tiles, and sand. Spread your branches wide and rise above the hedges high. Though in a borrowed garden you grow, grow well.*

The village of McLeodganj is the soil of India planted with the roots of Tibet, tangled and knotted yet flourishing. The village is the culmination of the work of many Tibetan hands planting and protecting the seeds of their cultural traditions, raking the mulch of their sorrow, and tending to the safety of their families. Their faith flourishes in this hopeful, borrowed garden.

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I am not technically trained to teach anyone anything. But in India, in the winter, the offseason, any native English speaker will do for a teacher. Even if you aren’t a native speaker, actually. A firm grasp of the language will do. Throughout the village there is an electric buzzing between teachers and learners. *Will you teach me?*

I walked into an old and falling-apart building one day, seeking a schedule for a yoga class and a photojournalism seminar that I had seen advertised on a poster. As I opened my mouth to explain that I planned to stay in town for a few months,



two heads emerged from an office, and I left with both intermediate and advanced English classes at LHA, a community center for Tibetan Refugees.

Hence, each day, I sit in front of a classroom packed full of patient monks and nuns, refugee children and exiled Tibetans teenagers, and pass out words like sweets. Not knowing exactly how to explain the diagrams of grammar structure or the rules of past participles, I teach what I am comfortable with, and I am comfortable because it does not have strict rules to follow: poetry. New nouns and verbs, no real constrictions or constructions. There are no rules or standards because I am a volunteer, and there is no money for materials because they are refugees.

\*

The size of the class is fluid. Current students leave for trips to outlying villages and new students arrive weekly. Unlacing my boots before entering the classroom in socks, I notice the pile of shoes, usually neatly aligned in the hallway, is now a small mountain of laces and soles. Walking through the door, I blink as voices hush and forty pairs of gentle eyes look up at me in unison. The Tibetan Children's Village, a boarding school for refugee children run by the Dalai Lama's sister, a few kilometers away, has commenced its winter recess, which lasts from mid-December through January. In the previous class, there were ten students at this meeting time. I am holding ten new vocabulary pages in my hands. I tiptoe through a path made by bodies shifting, slightly sideways, to the front of the small room where they propped a pile of cushions for me to sit upon. Okay. We will just have to share, work in groups. I realize that I am going to have to rethink this classroom format. At the end of class, they bow and repeat themselves over and over with *thank-yous*. The gratitude they bestow is genuine and falls softly through the air like snow. They are truly thankful for a teacher who is making this all up as we go.

\*

Rising early to a crisp, cold, sunlit morning, I dress quickly, breathe in the fresh air and hurry down the lanes of the village, making my way to the temple. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is back in town and is giving teachings all week. It is exhilarating and humbling to be a guest in the audience, to be in the presence of this great leader, in his own milieu, in the company of his people who glisten and sway in waves before him. To witness this is to begin to understand the connection between them after all that they have been through together.



They say that westerners cannot sit on the floor. We are not used to long hours in one position, and so we shuffle our weight and stretch our legs, shifting positions, stretching our backs, wiggling around on our cushions like children. The Tibetan's sit still, motionless, content to stay as long as He will; the passage of time is suspended, dissipated. They are simply here and now. Babies are propped in the laps of women, old men sit holding hands, wrapped in traditional dress, rolling mala beads, swaying gently as if from the breeze, uttering prayers in unison. Entire families, extended and created anew. Those who have left their blood relatives behind in their homeland reconnect with someone seated nearby. It is a family of refugees gathered in front of their patriarch. Everyone is welcome, and there is always more room; we just sit closer and pile in tighter.

A very old Tibetan man sits down next to me. There is plenty of space, but he sits close out of habit; more people will fill in soon, and this is their way. The Tibetans are always huddled close like puppies. He spends a few minutes situating his collection of flat cushions before perching, legs crossed, on top of them. He notices that I am sitting on the concrete and shifts his weight to remove a cushion. Nudging my elbow gently, he offers it, and I smile and shake my head. "Oh no, I don't need one."

He nods his head, yes, yes, yes, take.

His eyes suggest that this is not up for discussion; he has an extra and I do not have one. It is very simple. I bow in thanks, and slide the cushion beneath me.

"*Tujeche*." Thank you. Even through three layers of clothing, the chill of the cement had begun to climb up the ladder of my spine.

Chanting begins, a low buzzing hum from all around. Not just above and below, before and behind, but in waves moving outward from somewhere within. Reverberating through the air and the energy all around. The old man hums mildly, forming each word with purpose, with intention. "*Om mane padme om*." A phrase for each bead strung along his mala, a prayer turned over with each bead that slides between his chapped fingertips. One hundred and eight beads, one hundred and eight turns each round.

\*

It is a rainy afternoon, and I am in a mound of cushions, legs crossed and reading at a cafe. The waiter, Jam-jam, wears a soft smile and western-style clothes. He has become a friend over the many afternoons I have spent sunken between these cushions. He brings over a pot of tea and slides a folded piece of paper from his pocket to tuck beneath the saucer. I pour a cup and unfold the note in my



lap. It reads, in parentheses across the top: (If you please, definition — as well as sentences for correction and validation). He lists phrases in the neat, tidy print of a steady, determined hand. I correct the phrases and write out definitions. I fold the paper to its original size and tuck it back beneath the pot. He will collect it when he retrieves the tray, then review the information; he will slip me another note tomorrow afternoon.

He works full-time in the restaurant and does not have the luxury to attend classes, so he studies on his own in his rented room in the evenings, befriending travelers as they come in for lunch or for tea, gaining a new phrase or two from each new patron. His education is like this: each cup of tea served is a chance to practice his words, sentences, and phrases. A plate of noodles for a noun. A bowl of soup for a verb. A pot of tea for a definition. Slices of cake for a story. He pieces together the language in his head like he is taping together found pieces of a photograph.

The words and phrases come toppling out on napkins, notebook paper, on the back of receipts. I pour through pages in my cross-language dictionary, reading a page on medical terms, a page on culinary terms. We are trading the words, like cards in Tibetan, in English: *sore throat, epidemic, fracture, swell, cough. Where does it pain? Please repeat it? Do you understand me? What is the meaning of this? Thanks for the stay. I had a good time. Good-bye, see you again. Please, give me some whisky. Milk, butter, eggs, hot, cold, fried, boiled. Ruins, monastery, temple, palace, politics, history. Do you love me? Does it hurt? I have an ointment. Hold it under your tongue. Hold your tongue. Please, speak slowly. Please do love me. I insist. I will wait. Tell me a story. Remember. Swallow gently.*

\*

When you are nomadic, you wear your wealth on your body, in beads strung around your neck and braided into your hair, in rows of bangles that climb up your forearms. You count your possessions by the dark, thick bodies of the yaks and goats that you move steadily across the land like slow-moving rivers. When you flee your country in the dead of night, much is the same, except for the yaks, which stay behind. You carry your few possessions with you. You carry whatever you own, whatever you need to start anew, to remind you of that place you left behind. The Tibetans carry their strength in their faith; so much of their culture is folded within the fine sheets of their religion. There is no demarcation between religion and culture for Tibetans; they are one and the same, tightly bound, beautifully woven, into a long, thick braid.



When Tibetans arrive in India, they bring the faith and fear and sadness and resilience and hope that courses through their veins. The Tibetan culture is not lost, but misplaced. Displaced indefinitely.

Nawang, a Buddhist monk in his early sixties who has become a friend, explains over tea that being a refugee means to be desperately homesick in a way that still has room for hope, but to know also that you will probably never go home again, maybe never see your family again. It means to be safe for now, but heartbroken and wistful, longing for a home and family and life that are now only a memory. The struggle is to keep it alive and vivid, the way the sun felt on your face in that place, its scents and its sounds, to hold it close and keep it near. To remember, and to keep that memory alive.

\*

I am always asking them: Why is it that you want to learn English?

They answer in various ways, but the crux of the urgency and impetus always boils down to the same heart: To tell our story. To tell the story of Tibet. The story of the Tibetans.

\*

When you have hope, you can hold on forever. When you still have hope, you still feel alive. For the scattered and displaced Tibetans, hope is embodied in the leadership of the Dalai Lama. They may not stand over the soil of their own land, they may be dispersed and spread out over many countries, but their fears and angers are lulled by one calm, clear voice, and their hopes and dreams are upheld and assured by the promise of one smooth, smiling face. Living Tibet has a strong leader. One who holds the reins, and stills the horses, he is the compass who plots the course and the fuel that keeps the fire burning.

However, there is yet another hurdle in Tibet's path. The Dalai Lama is intricately, intimately linked with one other vital figure, a lesser-known dignitary: the Panchen Lama. According to Tibetan tradition, the recognition and confirmation of each Lama's reincarnation lies in the other Lama's hands. The Dalai Lama confirms a chosen candidate as the true reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, a generation his junior. Then, after the death of a Dalai Lama, it is the Panchen Lama who stands at the helm, who holds the course, and who, within five years time, confirms a new child, in the vessel of a new body, to be the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama.



The lineage of Tibetan leadership remains secure with the identification of each reincarnated Lama.

When the Dalai Lama fled into exile in 1959, the tenth Panchen Lama remained behind, becoming the chief religious and political figure lingering precariously inside Tibet. In 1989, he died unexpectedly, at the age of 51. In May of 1995, the Dalai Lama officially named Gedun Choekyi Nyima to be the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. The boy, with round, rouged cheeks, was six years old. Their heads touched, one forehead pressed against another, a successor was recognized, the missing link restored.

Two months after his confirmation in 1995, the six-year old Panchen Lama and his family disappeared in Tibet, seized by the Chinese government, vanishing in the night. One morning the sun rose and they were simply not there. An absence. A silence. The Panchen Lama became the world's youngest political prisoner. He has not been seen since.

It is an attack at the heart of Tibetan Buddhist leadership, a slice across the vein of lineage. The Chinese officials wait quietly and hope that, over the course of a half century, it is through this slit the lifeblood of Tibet will run out and drip dry.

In 2016, the Dalai Lama is eighty-one years old and has lived in exile from Tibet for fifty-seven years. In 2016, the missing Panchen Lama would turn twenty-seven years old. By 2016, the country of Tibet has been erased from world atlases. But the spirit is still alive, lingering, hiding, tucked into corners and pockets, sown into borrowed gardens. There are fewer prayer lamps lit, but their light still burns.

In the deep basket of questions, of which there are many, an urgent one floats near the top, waiting its turn to ask: Who will find the reincarnation of His Holiness? When the time comes, who will find the next Dalai Lama?

\*

We are playing a game of hangman in class, huddled together against the chill of the concrete room. I tell the students to choose their favorite word in English. Favorite, either because of its meaning, or because of the way it sounds in their ears, how it rolls around on their tongues. Choose anything; share your favorite, I tell them. Each student, in turn, chooses a word and marks out the correct number of spaces to spell it beneath the gallows where our man will materialize to be hung. We are cheering, everyone leaning in to guess, sometimes the hanged man has hair, each strand an incorrect guess, sometimes fingernails and sometimes layers of clothing.



Their favorite words are: essence, tendency, emphasize, advocated, globalization, marvelous. A monk chooses “business woman,” a teenage boy chooses “gorgeous blond.” My turn is last, and marking out the spaces across the black board, I tell them that this phrase is in Tibetan.

They carefully spell out: B-O-H-D\_\_R-A-N-G-Z-E-N.

“Ah,” they smile. “Yes. ‘Free Tibet.’”

\*

Each day, as the afternoon moves over and the shadows stretch into evening, a river of bodies flows into the courtyard of the Dalai Lama’s temple, flooding clockwise round the structure. The Tibetans are arriving to walk the *Kora*, around and again. Some of them will make 108 neat rounds before retiring for the evening. *Kora*, in Tibetan, means “full circle,” and it is both a meditative practice and a pilgrimage. In the stream of people at prayer, there are elderly women with arms interwoven, young monks and aged monks in red robes with saffron sashes, small children holding the hands of their mothers, individuals and people in groups, all putting one foot in front of the other, going around and around, tracing a well-known path — hundreds of feet stamping out steps in the same rhythm, hundreds of fingers raking the spinning prayer wheels that line the walls, thousands upon thousands of steps accumulating in time, rounding this temple for decades, circling for thousands upon thousands of miles.

Still, no one can get home.









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