

PLEASE DON'T INTERRUPT ME
WHILE I'M IGNORING YOU

by

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ABSTRACT

A collection of short stories and personal essays, *Please Don't Interrupt Me While I'm Ignoring You* weaves a lamé of humor and private desperation on the page. An actor in one story craves career gratification, while a United Nations coordinator in another finds herself attracted to a nervous NGO. A housewife attempts to convince her husband to commit an infidelity, while an architect finds that his new pet companion isn't helping him to get over his ex-girlfriend. Having a difficult time relating, these characters often find themselves stuck in a miscommunication loop, and their journey to get what they want is subtle. These stories are followed with essays about the author's own experiences while he was stuck in a miscommunication loop. Driven by his obscene fear of conflict, the author chronicles what happens when conflict is inevitable. Travel and self-loathing abound in these narratives depicted with sensitivity and sarcasm—bitterness and love. Together they leave a lasting impression of the impermeability of worldly citizens, and the internalizations they have to combat to get there.

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To my mentors, who never gave up teaching in a society that overlooks its professors.

To my friends, who I've readily sold out to make these stories and essays possible.

To myself, who I've sold out above all others.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STORIES	2
The Lotus Flower	3
Underwater.....	14
Connection	23
Golden Auratum.....	25
Who’s Hungry?.....	34
The Party.....	45
Only.....	47
Warning: Graphic Novel.....	59
ESSAYS.....	75
Ghouls and Goblins.....	76
How to Date Your Boyfriend: The Teenager’s Guide.....	89
Switching Teams.....	96
Big, Black, Woman, Tamra	109
Ai No Corrida	115
Estuary	133
WRITING LIFE ESSAY	142
BOOK LIST	155

Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day that says, "I'll try again tomorrow." – Mary Anne Radmacher

STORIES

The Lotus Flower

I dropped my gym bag when I saw her orange beanie ascending the stairs from the subway. “What took you so long?” I asked, pointing at my wrist.

Her backpack weighed down her stride. Her jacket was twice her size, ending at her knees. She looked like an elementary student covered in pink bubble wrap. The red hearts on the white flannel scarf that she wore all the time came into view. Her short, straightened hair was pulled back into two pigtails, one higher than the other and both not long enough to make it to her shoulders. “Sorry,” she said. “I was trying to finish up my project in the library, and I lost track of time.”

I picked my bag up with the hand that was holding my yoga mat. I pointed towards our favorite café and she nodded. Wet flurries began to find their way down onto my shoulders. “I am on a quest to find my center,” I explained, patting my new yoga mat.

“What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m trying to find it.”

She looked at me sideways. “Isn’t your center in your penis? If I were a guy, my center would probably be in my penis.”

“Not my sexual center. My life center. That’s not so unreasonable, is it? I’m like a doughnut. I want to be complete. Isn’t that the goal of life?”

A brisk crosswind picked up as we waited at the crosswalk. I looked up at the Philadelphia Theatre. Five stories tall with the first two enveloped in glass. It appeared squat in between two skyscrapers. Down to earth. Homey.

“I thought it was to work and spend money on stuff,” she said. “And to have a penis.” The light turned green and we rushed across the street into the café. It was small: one long counter with eclectic stools, three tables with chairs, and a line of four or five people waiting. Everything was coffee-themed, with several pictures of fancy mugs lining the walls, and a large poster of coffee beans in the shape of an owl displayed behind the counter next to a large chalkboard that featured the menu items, starting with the house brew. At the very bottom of the board, one of the employees wrote in curly cerulean handwriting, “Man does not live by coffee alone. Have a Danish.”

“I mean, why are we here? Why are any of us here?” I asked.

“I’m here for some hot chocolate. They put sea salt in it here. Sweet and salty? Win and win.”

The line moved forward.

We listened to the man in front of us yell at someone under his breath on his cellphone. “It’s *your* fucking dog,” he said. “*You* take it out for walks. I neva would have agreed to a dog if I knew it’d be shittin all over the fuckin carpet. No. No. That ain’t my problem. You can’t handle the responsibility, get rid of it. The apartment betta be clean when I get home, or I want the two of yas out.”

She grazed my elbow with hers. “I’m looking for a new roommate, by the way, so if you want to move in, or know anyone who does...” She trailed off. She knew that I

would make the perfect roommate. I make coffee in the mornings, clean without complaint, and my fashion advice always mixes “sexy” with the right amount of “comfy.” She had been coming to me for fashion advice for over three years, even though—in the end—no matter what she wore, she would pair them with her combat boots. We met at the after party of *Waiting for Godot*. I was Lucky. She was interviewing actors for the school paper, and when it was my turn, she opened the interview with: *You’re a natural born actor. You made being up on that stage look so easy, I almost felt like I was in chains myself.* It was harp-strings to my ears. I gave her the low-down on all of the major players in our company, even though she didn’t publish anything about their personal lives in the final cut. She loved the gossip, and turned to me as an expert for anything arts-related. We stayed close ever since.

“Why, what happened to Leah?” I asked.

“She’s graduating from law school, getting out of here.”

“Oh. Moving up and all that.”

“Moving on up. To the East Side. To a deluxe apartment in the sky.”

“What?” I asked.

She nudged me. “Serious here. I need a new roommate, and I need to finish my degree. Get a real job.”

“These days, you’re lucky just to have a fake one.”

The line moved forward.

“Well, that’s true,” she said.

We waited until it was our turn. Hot chocolate for her. Green tea for me. Watching the calories. I was going to audition for *The Orange Bats* in two weeks. It's about a Finnish man who starts selling orange plastic baseball bats out of his home. The community started to buy them like popcorn, more so to support a neighbor, and the Finnish man then has to choose to spend his earnings on bringing over his wife from the homeland or on saving the local ballpark. I was auditioning for the part of his landlord/downstairs neighbor who tells him he needs a business permit, but ultimately caves in and starts to profit off the business too. It was a small part, so I was sure I would land it. The plan was for my résumé to snowball and for me to make it to LA someday. I would make it to the silver screen and work with the real stars, all of which would love me for my aura, my easy going attitude, and my unwavering center. And if I didn't make it to movies, then TV. Or maybe music. Or modeling. I only knew I couldn't be stuck in Philly forever.

After we sat down at one of the tables near the window, she took the lid off her hot chocolate and began to stir. "Do you think we'll ever make something of ourselves?"

"I'm hoping I will, once I find my center."

She stared at me.

"What? Life is a day-to-day ritual. We complete the little chunks we have to—our goals and the requirements we agree to complete—and then we die." I took a steady, deep breath in through my nose.

"So morbid. There's a lot to life," she said, gesturing in a circle with her free hand. Her nails, at one point painted a hot magenta, had started chipping.

“It’s just in the details.” I exhaled through my mouth. I looked around at the images of the extravagant mugs. The one closest to us was white with neon green swirls and blue and yellow striped triangles plastered all over its surface. The one furthest away looked like an exact replica of the Chrysler Building.

“But what if I don’t like the details?”

“Change them.” I closed my eyes and inhaled.

“I don’t want to change my major my senior year. I’m already looking at grad schools, and I’m already looking at newspapers and journals that’re hiring. I’m gelled into my career path already. Oozing, sticky gel already.”

I tried not to wince at the image of her face melting like plastic under a magnified glass. I exhaled.

“Do you think I’m having a quasi-midlife crisis? I think I’m having a quasi-midlife crisis,” she said.

I inhaled. In the gym, I picked up a yoga pamphlet with a blue-green background and a few impressionistic looking lotus flowers underneath the title “Yoga for Beginners.” Inside, it said that inhaling was like taking strength from God, and exhaling was representative of the service I give to the world. Essentially, I am the pathway between God’s strength and the world. My role was pivotal.

“Hey. Hey Buddha. Are you even listening to me? Want to channel some of your Chi over this way? Can you not see the existential crisis I’m going through over here?”

I opened my eyes. I considered her from the navel up: having shed the Pepto-Bismol paneled coat, I concentrated on the large white “T” and its zigzagged stitches

etching itself into her red sweatshirt. Her breasts were no more than two blips on the radar screen, both of which disappeared from fall to spring when she dawned layer after layer to keep her bones from freezing. Nevertheless, they were flanked by her infamous scarf. Her orange beanie still hid most of her forehead, but her almond-colored eyes stayed trained on me.

“It’s not existential. Journalist or not, you’ll still exist.”

“But if I don’t *think* I’m a journalist...” She faltered. “Screw it. My point is that I have no idea what I’ll be doing five or ten years from now. I don’t even know what I’ll be doing next week. And I’m reading all of these articles on the Internet that’re telling me to invest in IRAs and Roths and I just don’t want to live under a bridge for the rest of my life.”

“Think about who you’re talking to here.”

She laughed, a little too hard. “Have you auditioned for that play you wanted to be in?”

“*The Orange Bats*, and not yet. But I will be great when I do.” I looked out the window, but I couldn’t see the Philadelphia Theatre from where I was sitting. Only a homeless person across the street and a few yards from it, sleeping or passed out underneath a layer of newspapers and snow.

“What’re you gonna do if you don’t make the cut?”

“Audition for other things, but come back for the casting calls in the summer.”

“Where will you be in five years?” She tilted her head. “Ten?”

I watched the bum across the street roll over. Sleeping, maybe; passed out, not yet. And then I saw my own reflection in the window. My own off-white hat, with black beads for eyes, fuzzy black ears, and a panda snout dead center. My own under-padded nylon coat. My eyes were just two dark circles in a paling face. I couldn't see myself at twenty-seven, or at thirty-two.

I turned back to my green tea. "I will be famous. And if I'm not, then—" I shrugged. "I don't know. Life goes on."

"How can you be so nonchalant about this? You can't survive on tea alone." She grabbed her hot chocolate, stirred it, and then took a long, dramatic gulp before posing with it and smiling.

I stuck my tongue out at her, and she laughed.

"Really though, what are you going to do?"

"I have to decide now?" I asked.

"We all have to decide now. I wonder if they'll go over that in your yoga class. 'The lotus must open its petals.'"

"No, it's more like 'the lotus petal must learn to put his leg behind his head. And then hold it there for two and a half hours while he concentrates on his breathing.' I've never sweat so much while standing still. Hey, doesn't Leah do yoga?"

"Yeah."

"How did she find the time between studying for the bar exam and her boyfriend and everything else?"

"I don't think she ever sleeps. Maybe that's the secret."

“You can’t just *not* sleep; that’s not sane.”

“Between insanity and picking lunch out of a trashcan, I’m choosing insanity. If I’m going to be wearing my panties on my head for the rest of my life, I’d like for them to at least be clean.”

“Hello Kitty ones?” I tugged at my hat.

“Black lace.”

“How tasteful.”

“I know. I’m betting Adrian would love that.”

“The fact that they’re black lace, or that they’d be on your head?”

A glass shattered behind the counter. A few of the other customers turned their heads, curious at the origin of the crash, but the rest ignored it. One of the employees, a guy with a blond ponytail and a dirty olive-colored apron shrugged and bellowed “Opa!” The woman behind the cash register smiled and handed him a broom.

“Both,” she said. “Oh God, I wonder if Adrian and I will be together in ten years.”

“You didn’t take him into consideration?”

Her eyes grew. She gawked at me. She shook her head.

“Well, that’s not a good sign.”

“Look. I can’t think about him and me too, okay? I have priorities.”

“You should be able to if you like him.”

“I do like him. I just don’t know if he’ll trail behind me to Miami, or Atlanta, or wherever I end up going for my Master’s.”

“Why not?” I shivered at the thought of the temperature outside.

“He’s going to school here. And his family’s here. He’s not going to leave here just to follow me around for my career.”

“He said he’d be a stay-at-home husband.” I gulped my tea. “What more could you ask for? Your apartment’s a typhoon in a thrift shop. If you had a live-in maid, she’d petition you for a union. And the union would want their own union. They’d have branches all over the place. They’d open a headquarters overseas, just to deal with cleaning each room.”

She snorted hot chocolate.

“And, I mean, if you like him, maybe you’d consider adding him to your life plan. Or else you’re just leading him on.”

“I like him. I just don’t have any way of knowing whether or not I’ll like him a decade from now.”

“What did I say about details? Life? Day-to-day rituals, remember?”

“I want to just hit the fast-forward button. Me in my thirties. Two kids, an amazing career, a husband who cooks. Maybe we’ll go on vacation somewhere. Drink Mai Tais on the beach. And the kids’ll say, ‘Mommy, Mommy, come build a sand castle with us,’ and I’d say, ‘not while Mommy’s drinking her giggle juice. Go ask your father.’”

“I think I’m nominating you for the best mother of the decade award.” I looked out the window again, but the homeless mass of newspapers had deflated. I hoped that maybe someone had let the bum inside for a little while, or maybe that they found refuge

in one of the subway entrances, at least until it stopped snowing. I couldn't tell if they were male or female, white or black. They were dirty, and homeless. Nothing more.

“And I'll accept the award with my nondrinking hand, like any good lady of breeding might.”

I shook my head and smiled.

“So, what's the next step for you?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, career-wise, relationship-wise, life-wise. What're you doing?”

“I'm waiting.”

“How can you just wait?”

“Patience is a virtue.”

“Do virtues still exist anymore? I always thought there was more than one, but patience is the only one still hanging around. Maybe it's because it waited too long and it missed its expiration date.” She tapped each of her long fingers on her cup in rapid succession. Each time she did it, it looked like a blossom, blooming and perishing, reincarnating, again and again.

“What's your next step, then?” I asked.

“Taking the GRE, applying to grad schools, apartment-hunting wherever I get accepted, if I get accepted, becoming the best journalist in the field, and still going to class this afternoon.”

“All in a day's work?”

“I’m starting up a webcomic. I’m going to be the main character. I’m going to name her ‘Super Student,’ and she’s going to finish her homework days in advance, and she’s going to save the world from imminent peril, and she’s going to be a whiz at reheating pizzas, and she’ll make some mean spam and macaroni and cheese.”

“Ew,” I mumbled. “And who’s going to save her from herself?”

“She’ll be completely self-reliant. But her weakness will be tabloid news. Every superhero’s got to have a weakness. She won’t be able to resist the juicy tidbits of celebrity break-ups and scandals. They’ll threaten her homework and sleep schedule. But, somehow, she’ll persevere.”

“Not on that diet, she won’t.”

“Food is just a means to an end.” She shrugged. “Except for chocolate, which may be the Great Vehicle.”

“The what?” I asked.

“Never mind,” she said. “You stick to your cleansing teas and your vegetables.” I watched her cup tilt in the air as she drained the last of her hot chocolate, and heard the soft, hollow bang when she put the cup back down. I looked down, at the small opening in the lid of my still very full green tea, and waited.

Underwater

I knew that my husband wasn't cheating on me, but I told him that he could. Not that he should sneak around, pretend to work late hours and come home smelling like cheap perfume or with some woman's panties in his jacket pocket—that would be betrayal. But I told him that if he wanted to take a break from our marriage, he should let me know, and we could separate for a little while, so he could try being with some other women. Have a frame of reference to work around. Be sure upon pain of experience that he and I were meant to be.

It's because we were high school sweethearts. I would hardly call us that, but that is the phrase. He had tried to lob runny mashed potatoes onto his friend's plate, missed by three people, and hit me in the shoulder instead. I hated him for weeks. It took a three-paged note with *I'm Sorry's* written in the margins and an embarrassing candy-gram delivered in Study Hall for me to forgive him.

According to this news show I was watching, I would be more likely to cheat on him than the other way around. Because, I'm a stay-at-home mom. In couples where one person has a job and the other doesn't, the one without a job is more likely to cheat, given that they have all this extra time on their hands to do things like take up pottery classes, loaf around, watch home improvement shows, or stand in front of their windows flashing

the neighbors across the street to suggest a little afternoon delight. Metropolitan areas also see more infidelities, given that there are simply more people around to have affairs with. The odds go up. Andrew and I, we're in prime infidelity real estate, and I'm the one who's technically at risk. But, I have our two-year-old to contend with, an obvious full time job of its own. She won't give me enough time to even put eyeliner on, let alone court and bed a stranger between the hours of 9 and 5.

No. I haven't the opportunity, or truly the desire, but Andrew—well, Andrew is a man caught up in the trap of being a man; of course he's sweet and faithful to me, I think. He still gets me flowers on special occasions, and we still talk aimlessly to each other over dinner about wants and dreams and who'll win the Stanley Cup next year if our favorite teams could only get their acts together. I call him an old man when he repeats his stories, and he calls me a wild banshee when I haven't gotten around to brushing my hair in the mornings. We fight, but we apologize to each other within a couple of days. Sweet and faithful, yes. But of course he's ravenous and sex crazed, too. I can hardly get Hannah to bed before I feel him groping me, telling me that I'm the hottest mama on the block. Sometimes I nibble on his neck and demand to be taken to bed, and sometimes I'm so tired all I can say is "tomorrow, sweetie, I promise." Andrew tries to be civil about it, but all that pent up energy is bound to come out at some point in some way. Why not prepare for it and guide it as best I can?

Once I told my sister that I was offering my husband a temporary out from the marriage. It wasn't the best idea. She already thought I was born falling apart at the seams.

“Susan Iris Lee!” her voice had echoed from the receiver of my phone. She was the only person in the world who referred to me by my full name, with my new surname, proving that even after I grew up, got married, and had a child, I could still get into trouble and be reprimanded for it. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I heard her typing away furiously at her desk at work, on her lunch hour.

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” I said. “I just don’t want any surprises is all. You know how the divorce rate is these days.”

“Yeah, because some women like you are sitting at home, thinking of ways to sabotage their vows. Don’t be such a loser.”

She hadn’t called me a loser since the seventh grade. I pretended not to care, but I couldn’t think of anything to say to bury it with a new topic. I listened to her fingers pounding the keys on her keyboard, then, stroking them as though it had occurred to her that she’d been pressing on them too hard, as though they were making it difficult to hear the sounds that weren’t coming out of my mouth. I looked at Hannah, playing in her playpen. She was banging two wooden blocks together, enamored by the sound. I wondered how long it would take before my little girl would be saying something similar. I considered telling my sister that I had to go, that I was running late for something, that I thought I heard the doorbell buzzing. Then, her voice was wafting through the receiver again, softer this time.

“Suze, have you been feeling kind of down?”

“No, not really.”

“How about feeling a sense of hopelessness? Low self-esteem, maybe?”

“No.” I could barely end the word. It turned into a question, with the “o” resonating somewhere in the back of my throat while I tried to figure out where she was going with all of this. I listened to Hannah’s blocks crashing against each other in a steady, ticking rhythm. “Not any more than usual. Why?”

“Just, you know. Curiosity. How about emptiness? Feelings of frustration? Anh...Anhedonia?”

“What? What’s anhedonia?”

“No clue. But it’s listed here as symptom, so you might be having that.”

“Rachel?” I said. “Christ.”

“Spells of anger toward others. See? Another symptom. You might be having PPD right here, right now,” she said, like it was a form of eczema that comes and goes when you least expect it. “You might have to consider medication.”

Never mind that most postpartum depression sufferers feel the effects only up to three months after giving birth and then return to a relative normalcy. Besides a great deal of pain before, during, and after, I was perfectly fine giving birth to my daughter. And Hannah’s well past the infant stage, sending out neverending *Why?*’s to anyone who’ll speak to her. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Behind the safety of my eyelids, I could hear Rachel’s fingers pushing down on her keyboard again. She didn’t understand. I wasn’t looking for my husband to cheat on me; I didn’t want him to. And I didn’t mean for this to be some kind of tricky test where I urged him to chase after the stick I throw, down past the edge of the yard, into the car-

laden street, where an electric fence would send a shock through his collar before he even pawed the sidewalk. It was all a matter of circumstance.

We married when I was nineteen, and he was twenty—a sophomore in college. Neither of us ever had any sort of serious, steady relationship outside of each other. I wasn't the first girl that he fooled around with, but I am the first girl that he went steady with while doing so. He's relatively successful at work, and I take care of the house and actually—occasionally—have dinner on the table when he comes home. We're living the American dream. Only, you know, it's the one that folded into itself when people realized that they had rights and civil liberties. Our bubble will pop. I just want to pop it in a way that won't splatter our remains in every single direction. I want to pop it in a way whose outcome is predictable and easy to put back together, more or less. We are the shoe that dropped, lying sideways on the floor, that's waiting—listening closely—for its counterpart to slip off and join us just under the bed, where we've fallen over, out of sight.

It started easy enough. “Honey, how would you feel about getting a divorce?” I asked him one Saturday afternoon.

It was awkward timing. He was in the middle of a drink of water, and he swallowed more than his throat could handle, causing his cheeks to puff out dramatically while he considered my question. I waited for him to coax his body to finish its digestive task. I felt my own throat starting to refuse air in the silence.

He gave me his “are you serious?” look—one of his eyebrows rises for a split second while his eyes search my face for a hint of a motive. Then, his eyes narrow

considerably, and he turns a quarter of an inch away from me; the shift is small, but noticeable, and it usually means he's about to dismiss whatever it is I've said. "Did you find another man?" he joked. "That guy on the second floor maybe?"

Eddie, the guy on the second floor, was twice my age. And only interested in other guys, as far as I knew.

"Yes, I went downstairs and seduced him with my feminine wiles," I rolled my eyes. "We're planning on running away together after I've finished brainwashing him and I've convinced him that I would make a better lover than that guy in those silk shirts I think he's seeing. I've got all the goods he's ever wanted." I attempted a shimmy to punctuate my point. My boobs had gotten bigger after I gave birth to Hannah, but then deflated back to their former A-cup de-glory. I always wished they would be a couple sizes bigger.

"After? So you're still working on it, huh? I guess your feminine wiles aren't all they're cracked up to be, now are they?" he laughed.

I made sure Hannah was out of whispering range before I called the love of my life—the man I agreed to be bound to in sickness and in health—an asshole.

"You started it," he chuckled.

"Really, though. A separation. What do you think? I mean, you know how they always say that if you love something, you should let it go, and if it comes back, it's meant to be, right?"

"Sounds like the type of advice they give about homing pigeons."

"I'm being serious here."

“So am I.”

I sighed, and shook my head.

“All right, all right. If you want to, we can,” he said, finishing off his glass of water and placing the cup in the sink. He grabbed his briefcase from the dining room chair, put it on the table, opened it, and pulled out a few documents that he now began to skim.

“Wait. Really?” I hadn’t moved. My feet were stuck to the kitchen rug. I could feel its uneven, woven texture pressing into the soles of my feet.

“Sure,” his shoulders shifted. It was a half a shrug. A quarter shrug.

“Aren’t you going to fight me on this?”

“If it’s what you want.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do whatever makes you happy.” He glanced over at me. I was doing this to make sure that *he* was happy. But, I have learned, whenever my husband uses the word “happy,” he typically isn’t. It didn’t surprise me that he was using it now.

I went to the sink, and washed the glass of water he drank out of, to give myself something to do. The water from the faucet was cold at first, but it kept whispering in my ears to let it go.

I heard my husband say, “You know I love you, right?” I nodded, but you never know how deep a person’s love is until you reach its bottom. I wanted to dive. I wanted to set up shop in Andrew’s Mariana Trench, with my own headlight attached to my

forehead and wave at all of the other creepy fish that live and thrive in that unspoken deep.

“So then, I don’t want a divorce.” He added, then, almost under his breath, “Find yourself another man who’ll give you a divorce. Divorce him instead.”

I considered calling him a loser, but I bit my tongue.

#

So, knowing that he wouldn’t actually start divorce proceedings with me, I wanted to offer the next best thing. I wanted to let him know that the window was open, for a once in a lifetime opportunity, as long as it was discussed and arranged beforehand. I wanted him to know that I would be in it for the long haul, but that the long haul requires breaks along the way to stretch your legs. Not around some other woman’s, preferably, but if that’s what it took, then I’d rather get it out of the way now, while I still had a say in the matter; while we’re still young and I could still forgive.

Then it was my husband’s turn to think that I was crazy. He told me that I’ve been thinking too much, he said over breakfast the next morning. He told me that he’s not interested in other women. He told me that he won’t go out and sleep around, and that a productive marriage isn’t the first sign of an unproductive one. He told me that I might need to think about things *a little more*. He told me that I’d overcooked the oatmeal yet again; maybe I should stay clear of the microwave for a little while, he told me—maybe I should try to schedule in a little more rest. I don’t have to make him breakfast all the time, he told me. “I’ll love you, even when you’re sixty-five, and pleasantly plump,” he said, poking me in the ribs.

Women are expected to be immune to middle age. We are young, and attractive because of our youth. We are young, and then we are sort of young, and then we are questionably young, attempting still to be seen in the public eye. Then we are no more, until we hit seniority, where—if we have survived—we are once again beautiful, in the way that only the elderly can be beautiful, provided we still have managed to be seen and not heard babbling on about dentures and back pains and our arthritis aches. Gracefulness is a silent virtue. A woman's virtue.

Telling me that he'd love me when we were in our sixties was sweet, but it was exactly what he should have said, circa 1946. "That is not our reality," I told him. "Today is our reality."

"So, what do you want me to say?" he probed, looking for the correct answer, as if life's questions are best handled in multiple choice. True/false. He was taking notes for the next exam.

"I don't want you to say anything. I want you to prove it."

He laughed, the way he usually does, and said, "Sure, but it'll take some time. We'll talk about it again in forty years or so."

Maybe, if I could go to sleep for forty years, it wouldn't be a problem. Maybe then I could be happy. His kind of happy. "This is a one-time offer," I warned. "Are you sure you don't want to think about it a little more?"

He cocked his head to the side, and then said, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Thanks."

"Hmm. Score one for my underappreciated feminine wiles then?"

And before I knew it, his hand was up my shirt.

Connection

“Dr. Akmed. Are you ready?”

“I’m never ready,” he sighed before he readjusted his tie. He took one last look in the mirror backstage before he nodded at the committee facilitator. It was his second time addressing the United Nations for the Child Protection Organization; the first time concluded with rapid fire sneezes from Dr. Akmed, and when the delegate from Israel offered his handkerchief, the majority of the committee ended up giggling. Giggling. An entire room full of middle aged and elderly men and women who found Dr. Akmed’s high power sneezes more amusing than developing an international pact against underage prostitution.

“You know, Ria Findenze used to drink a glass of wine before addressing the committee. She said it helped her focus,” the committee facilitator said. Her smile relayed perfect orthodontistry and stopped at the corners of her mouth where her long, fang-like incisors threatened to turn her lips a deeper shade of red.

“No, thank you, Ms. Sumay.”

“Please, call me Afrah,” she smiled again. “Well, George, it’s your time. Go for it,” she said as the committee began its welcoming applause. Dr. Akmed sighed one more time before walking the long curtained corridor towards the podium. Each footstep echoed in his mind, reverberating off of the polished oak stage. He heard his suit sleeves

as they brushed up against his sides. His breathing began to cease as he approached the center of the stage, into the spotlight. He grasped the podium. He looked around the room with his head raised, sizing up the delegates and their respective translators. He removed his reading glasses from his breast pocket and slipped them on. He leaned in towards the microphone to begin his speech, and sneezed.

Golden Auratum

Yuri looked out the window of her family's apartment. She could tell it wasn't warm enough to go without her gloves and a scarf. She jumped in and out of the shower and put on her stockings and business suit. She grabbed her coat and was just about to put on her shoes by the door when her mother pulled her into the kitchen.

"Where are you going so fast? You're always moving so fast," she said from the hallway. She was wearing her favorite blue and white pinstriped apron over her favorite long-sleeved yellow cotton blouse. "Come here for a minute."

Yuri followed her mother to the table in the kitchen, where a steaming bowl of breakfast sat waiting for her.

"Sit," her mother said. "Sit."

Stockings in hand, Yuri sat down at the table and began to roll them up her legs. When she finished, she gently pushed the bowl away from her. "I have to go," she said.

"Not before you eat something. You never eat breakfast. It's very unhealthy. Just a little bit," her mother said, pushing it back towards her.

Yuri looked down at the bowl. Pickled carrots over rice, with a little bit of pickled ginger on the side. The way she liked it. The smell was comforting. But she wasn't hungry. She just wanted to get to work. "Mom, I can't. I'll be late," she lied. A small white lie that could come true if she waited too long, she told herself.

“Take the express. The less time you spend on the train, the better anyway,” she said, eyeing her. “You have to be careful of the dirty old men on those trains.” She pushed the bowl even closer. “It’s good to be thin, but better to be healthy. And I made this just for you.”

It was in the Machida bowl. That wasn’t the name of the bowl, but where Yuri had bought it. One Saturday, when she was in high school, she had taken the local line all the way out to Hachioji, and then rode it back. She wasn’t sure why. For a sense of adventure. Or maybe it was just something to do on a weekend when all of her friends were away or studying and she needed a break. Or perhaps to watch the Japanese countryside appear and disappear in front of her as she felt herself lurch forward. All she knew was that she felt important on that train, moving forward. When she reached Hachioji, she loitered in the station, eyeing the multicolored transit maps and strolling up and down the stairs with her hand on the railing, knowing that underneath her fingers rested a metal bar that she wouldn’t have felt if she hadn’t made the pilgrimage. A metal bar that hundreds of other people must have used to aide their travels. By touching that bar, she On the way back, she stopped at the Machida station and strolled around the shops on the thoroughfare. Inside of a department store, she found a light blue glazed bowl with a band of small white Chrysanthemums painted around its circumference. It was the glaze that drew her to it; the cracks underneath, the smoothness of the surface. She bought it as a gift for the household—something to say to her mother that she was thinking of the family. But when she got home, her father was more intrigued that she

had spent train fare on nothing. “It makes no sense,” he said, “that you would do this instead of study or clean.”

“I just wanted to get out of the house,” she said, “and spend some time outside, in ‘the great outdoors,’ as the Americans say.”

“Which you did in the mall,” he said, pointing at the bulky shopping bag that hid behind her knees. “Next time, you want to spend some time outside, go to the park down the street with a textbook, okay?”

Six years later, the bowl she’d bought as a souvenir of the countryside was being thrust under her nose.

She knew that her mother would complain to her father if she didn’t eat at least a little. She sighed, brushed at what she thought was a spot on her black and grey business skirt and picked up her chopsticks.

Her mother nodded when she saw her reach for the bowl. “And shoulders back,” she said, patting her on the knee. “No one likes a girl with bad posture.”

#

Yuri loved the feel of the wind when the train doors burst open. Or maybe it was the feel of the heaters underneath the seats whispering warm air onto her calves once the doors closed. She wasn’t sure. Maybe it was both. Both made her feel alive.

She pulled her grey scarf around her a little tighter when she stepped off the train and into the station, and put her black gloves back on when she hit the street. Her heels clicked down the pavement, hands in her suit jacket. She didn’t have to look up to know where she was or where she was going. About five minutes until she reached the store.

She pulled out her cellphone. Seven minutes until eight. She broke out into a jog just to be sure. She jogged the four and a half minutes to work in her pumps.

Inside, the warm air felt a little smothering. Keiko was at the counter already, cleaning the glass with a spray bottle and a clean cloth. “Morning,” Yuri called, pulling her winter coat off and folding it to go underneath the register.

“So, guess who banged the guy down in the bakery?” Keiko squealed.

She hesitated. “You?”

“No, I’ve got enough on my plate with Yoshiro and Red Tie. I tried that new Kanzou’s *Gloss* last night, thinking that Yoshiro would smell it and think, ‘hmm, she smells nice, let me ask her out,’ but no. He said nothing. So I slept with Red Tie again. I’m sure his wife’s going to find out. Kanzou’s strong—I could still smell it the next morning; I felt like I was waking up in a field of poppies and cinnamon. But it’s probably better this way, because when Red Tie starts to sweat, it smells awful. But no, guess again.” Keiko was bouncing up and down in her suit, which was on the small side for her large frame. Her ponytail swayed from side to side.

Yuri pushed her coat underneath the register and thought for a minute. Really, she thought about thinking for a minute. She hoped she looked like she was thinking.

“Give up? Give up? Promise not to tell.” She tugged at Yuri’s sleeve. “Akane. Akane, can you believe it? She’s such a whore. He’s been here two whole days and yesterday I said to her, ‘Have you seen the new guy in the bakery?’ and Akane said, ‘I already gave him my number. We’re going out tonight.’” Keiko went back to cleaning the counter. “Can you believe that? No chase at all! Her legs are like chopsticks. Just

open and closed, open and closed, all the time to anybody.” She laughed. “Maybe we should just rent her out instead of trying to sell perfume to stingy housewives. We’ll handle the books, she’ll fondle the clients.”

Yuri unlocked the safe and started counting her till. “A brothel between women’s clothing and housewares?” The words slipped out of her mouth while she focused on keeping track of the number of bills in her hand. “I guess it would make this place a lot more interesting. Interesting is good, right?”

“I don’t know what you would do with interesting, Yuri,” Keiko said, placing the rag in the dirty bin and pulling out the two small jars of coffee beans. “Maybe you should start small and work your way up to being a madam.” She chuckled. She pulled a small, blood-orange colored box out next. Her charm bracelet jingled as she released a glass cylinder-shaped bottle from inside the box. Yuri watched the rose-colored perfume slosh around inside. “Come here and smell this,” Keiko said.

Yuri grabbed a testing stick.

Keiko opened her hand and Yuri planted the testing stick on her palm. Keiko held it out at arm’s length and sprayed it with the new Kanzou line, Gloss. She held the stick out over the counter and fanned it. Yuri could tell that Keiko was holding her breath. She shifted her weight back and forth on her heels, and smiled at the stick. She giggled at Yuri. “You’ll never guess the heart note. Drove me crazy.” She held the stick ceremoniously out for Yuri to smell.

Yuri took the stick from Keiko and inhaled its sprayed tip. She closed her eyes and tried to guess at the immediate aromas filling bombarding her senses. The top note:

Oriental and floral. The spiciness smelt sultry; she imagined a woman who would make her children lunchboxes with expensive fish cuts and creative shapes, who would spend the day cleaning and shopping and making dinner, but who would then put her children to sleep at night and go out and drink wine at parties with her husband. She could see her expensive blouses and delicate low cut necklaces. She could hear the conversations around her at those parties, some in English, some in French, and others in Japanese. She could hear her telling jokes to other women, and the other women loving them. Jokes about traveling abroad. She was alluring.

Yuri became aware of how close she was holding the testing stick to her nose. She lowered the stick for a moment.

“Definitely the cinnamon,” she offered.

Keiko frowned. “That’s the base note, and that’s only because I told you. Guess again.”

Yuri smelled it again. Besides the spicy Oriental top note, she focused on the floral one. Poppies, she knew, didn’t actually have a scent. But she couldn’t place the flower, not over the cinnamon, and a top note of cloves and a lingering scent of vanilla. Keiko watched her.

“Hmm,” she said. “I don’t know. I give up.”

Keiko bounced up and down.

“Do you really give up? Really?”

“Yes, tell me.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Keiko held up the bottle to her full lips. Yuri then realized that it was shaped like lipstick. “Base notes of cinnamon and vanilla, a clover top note, and you’re the heart note. It’s you.”

“What do you mean *it’s me?*” She smelled the stick again.

Keiko laughed. “It’s you. Don’t you smell the lily?”

Of course, Yuri thought. No wonder I didn’t catch it. A floral heart note that would blend into an Oriental base. Lilies would be perfect for that. I should have known.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get that,” Keiko said.

Yuri placed the tester in trash and opened one of the coffee bean jars, inhaling the strong beans to clear her nasal palate. Just like that, the smell was gone. “I thought you said it smelled like poppies,” she teased.

“Oh, that was a gift from Red Tie. A bouquet. Twelve beautiful flowers.”

“But they don’t have a—”

“They’re just so pretty. I love when men buy me flowers. You should experience that feeling. Anyway, that’s the perfume I was wearing last night. It’s great, isn’t it?”

#

Yuri took the local train home. It’s not that she was avoiding going home. She just liked to feel as though she was covering a greater amount of distance. Like she was accomplishing something. She decided that this was something worthwhile.

When she got home, her mother had already cooked dinner. She could smell it from the hallway. “I’m home,” she called, taking off her heels at the door.

“Welcome back,” her voice wafted from the kitchen. “I made curry.”

After changing into pajama pants and an oversized t-shirt, she joined her mom in the kitchen. “Do you need any help?” she asked, hovering over the pots on the stove.

“No, no. I already finished. I was hoping your father would be home by now, but he c-mailed me earlier saying that he would be late. He c-mails more than you do. Please, eat.”

Yuri went to the cupboard and pulled out two matching plates and began to fill one with rice when her mother stopped her. “Don’t do mine yet. I’ll wait for your father.”

“Mom, he might not come home until late.”

“I know.”

Her father would stay out two or three nights out of the week. She wondered where he went on these nights, and if he went out with coworkers or alone. But, perhaps there was a certain pleasure in not knowing.

Yuri put the second plate back and then ladled the brown curry over the side of the rice on her plate. She pulled a spoon out of the utensil drawer and sat down at the kitchen table with a thick, smooth magazine whose cover featured a girl who had longer, curlier, thicker hair than her own. She flipped through its pages, glancing at the photos, letting her eyes fall on the spring fashion trends while she ate.

“How was work?” her mother asked. Yuri looked up, and saw her mother rearranging the refrigerator.

“It was good. Another day.”

“Did you sell a lot?”

“A regular amount. I spent most of the day listening to Keiko.”

“Oh? Any good stories?”

“No, not really.”

Her mother clinked bottles of condiments and beer as she shuffled things around.

“How was your day?”

“Ah, it was fine. I cleaned.”

“The food’s delicious, Mom.”

“Thank you.”

Yuri stopped flipping through the magazine when she spotted an ad for Yashida, a popular lower-end cologne that she sold at work. The ad pictured a young man, waist deep and alone in the ocean at a beautiful beach. He was smiling. The ad seemed to have caught him in the midst of a jump. The entire image was refreshing, perfect for the ocean scent of the cologne. *An honest cologne ad, Yuri thought. He must’ve been brave to stand out there in the waters alone.*

“Mom,” Yuri said, “what do you think about going on vacation? To Thailand, or Hawaii or something?”

“Hmm? Vacation? No. Better to save for retirement. No one’s young forever,” she said, pulling out a bottle of soy sauce.

“Oh,” Yuri said. “I think I’d like to go somewhere someday.”

Her mother pulled out a small, clear storage container full of three or four boiled eggs. “Well,” she said. “It’s a good way to build some character, traveling. But it’s expensive. Better to read about it instead.”

Who's Hungry?

“Ma, he’s gonna say something tonight,” Verona says while she’s putting garlic bread in the oven. “He’s been wanting to for a while.”

“Horse pucky,” I say ‘cause there’s no reason he shouldnta told me earlier.

“Ma, don’t talk like that,” she says to me.

“After being married thirty-three years to your father,” I says, “I’ll talk however the hell I want,” and then I do a Hail Mary just to be safe.

“I’m just saying, be prepared. I think he’s gonna come out with it. Be supportive, Ma.”

Be supportive, she says. I get married. I compromise. I give birth to two healthy children. I settle in for a lifetime of making breakfast, lunch, and dinner; mopping, cleaning, vacuuming; soccer games where the kids are afraid of the ball; school plays where someone wets their pants in the second act. What’s that called if it ain’t called supportive? “It’s still a sin,” I says.

“Yeah, yeah. Try not to rub it in his face, will ya?”

“If Benny’s going out and...doing those things with other men, then that’s a sin,” I says.

“You and sin, Ma. You live your life cowering in fear of sin. Sin runs your life.”

“Yeah, you know a thing or two about that, dontcha?” I says to her and she gives me a mean look like I’m the one sleeping around.

Maybe I push too far, but that’s the price I havta pay. Hate me, repent, and spend eternity in Heaven, or love me, never ask His forgiveness, and end up in the fiery pits of Hell. Which is better? At least the baby’d end up in Limbo, which I think is something like a perpetual daycare for children. I’m sure St. Gerard would watch over him. Maybe take all the kids on walks to the zoo and let them watch the Barney on the television. Purple dinosaurs aren’t real, so Adrian—that’s my husband—he says they ain’t gonna make it to Limbo ‘cause God is real and Barney ain’t and there’s no use in confusing the kids, but I think He would let them have a little fun now and then. Let them watch a little of the Barney.

I’ve been going to church now for over fort—well, for a long time; I’m feeling old as a dinosaur myself these days. I make Adrian come with me when his back’s not hurting him, but, don’t you worry, I already gave him the number of a good chiropractor—he just won’t see the doctor. Afraid of spending the money. And the kids were raised Catholic too; baptism, communion, mass, Good Friday, Ash Wednesday, all of it. None of it sunk in. Twenty-something years of taking them to church, through rain, snow, Sunday traffic, and still I got a pregnant daughter who won’t get married and a son who’s turned out queer. Stubborn, just like their father, the pair of them. But I did the best I could. We even ate fish on Fridays. Well, most of us. Benny wouldn’t touch it. Was that a sign or what?

Once a month they come out from the city and have dinner with Adrian and me. Would they visit if I didn't put food in front of their noses? I don't know. But that's not the point; the point is that Verona thinks our little Benny will finally tell us he's queer, which is a sin, obviously, but that don't mean we love him any less.

Adrian and I knew about this for years. You walk in on your boy making towers out of Popsicle sticks and there ain't a gluey mess everywhere. Tell me you wouldn't know then. And we tried to push him towards being normal—I locked away my jewelry and make-up, Adrian took him soccer camp, and I don't know why he didn't try Little League; baseball's much more manlier than soccer—no one shouts or spills beer on you at a soccer game, and that's a fact. But the kid just got quiet. He stayed in his room, he got good grades...we thought, maybe something worked. Besides, we had Verona to deal with, sneaking out, starting fights, acting like the town alley cat. You needed six eyes to raise that one.

Rhoda down the block, her husband was one of those queers. But she didn't know. He just kept sneaking out on her, sayin', "I'm gonna go hang out with the boys. I'm gonna go hang out with the boys." Yeah, they'd go out and he wouldn't come back until four or five in the morning. One morning he didn't come back at all. Left her a Dear John letter I hear from one of the girls down at the corner store. Can you imagine? "Dear Rhoda, I'm leaving you for Peter the plumber; he came and cleaned my pipes and I'm one satisfied customer!" "Dear Rhoda, Ernie the electrician and I are gonna start a life together; he plugged it in and all of a sudden I'm seeing clearly now!"

All right, all right. That's wrong. May He forgive me. I'm just having a bit of fun—I'm sure He wouldn't mind.

But now all Vernie says to me is "Be supportive, Ma, be supportive!" like I'm supposed to put up one of those chanting signs that says "My son's here, he's gay, get used to it," on the front lawn so the neighbors can see or something. Maybe I'm supposed to have it plastered to the wall. Shoot streamers out of our butts or something. I don't know.

She tells me that he's been seeing this guy for over two years. Can you believe this? Over two years, he hasn't brought the guy home to meet the family. He hasn't introduced us. I've been waiting for him to say something time and time again. And my Adrian, God bless him, he's not so good with secrets, he just wants Benny to man up and say something. After he found out about this new guy, every time Benny came down to the house, it was "Are you seeing *anyone*? Have you found a special *person*?" And then I'd have to drag him into the kitchen and remind him that Benny would tell us when he's good and ready. Until then, we eat in peace, and I still have hope that it's just a phase he'll grow outta one day.

But Verona's sure that he's gonna say something this time. "He said he'd tell everybody tonight, so promise me you won't say nothing stupid," she says. I don't know what she's talking about. "Come on, Ma. You've got a mouth like a sailor who just got syphilis," she says to me. I don't know where the hell she learned that kind of talk; it wasn't from my side of the family. It wasn't the way I raised her. But I promise. I says to her, "First of all, watch your mouth. Grandson or not, I'll still smack you inta last week.

And second of all, when have I ever not made my little Benny feel welcome in my own home?”

And where’s Adrian during all of this? In the other room watching those Jets lose another game. My Adrian, he don’t say much, but at least he don’t complain about my cooking!

So, we finished the chicken, the pasta, and the garlic bread together, just like old times, only now I’m giving my daughter heartburn advice for the pregnancy. It’s tough being a single mother, but we don’t believe in abortion. She knows this. And to be honest, I’m kind of glad she didn’t marry the putz that knocked her up; she’s better off without him. When the kid’s old enough, she can drop him off here and finish college. Make something of her life.

Then the doorbell rings, and there’s my Benny standing in the doorway. His father’s dark hair, my brown eyes—such a handsome boy, man. Such a handsome man. They grow so fast. Studying to be one of those technology guys—computer information something or other. I remember when he was just a little boy, and...well. Anyway, times do change.

After the hugs and kisses and hellos and Adrian getting up off his chair to come see his children and to come eat, we all settle down in the dining room, and I pulled out the nice silverware with the little palm tree engravings and the red cloth napkins cause I’m expecting this to be a big to-do. We sit down and pray, and right after we get around to the “Amen,” Vernie jumps right in with baby talk.

“Hey Ma,” she says, “what did they do with the placenta after me and Benny were born?” Placenta talk. We’re eating my Grandma Rizzoli’s chicken parm over penne pasta and she wants to talk about placentas. Adrian almost chokes. And I don’t know what to say, so I just kind of stare at her for a second like, *Really? Are you serious?* But she doesn’t laugh; she ain’t joking. She really wants to know. So I says, “I don’t know. The hospital kept it. What was I gonna do with it? Put it in a jar?”

Then Benny takes the Lord’s name in vain, so I have to give him the same look I was giving Vernie.

“Actually, I was reading,” she says. “In Nepal, they think the placenta’s the baby’s best friend.”

Adrian starts to laugh ‘cause he probably thinks she’s trying to pull a fast one on us.

“I’m serious Pop. They think they’re playmates or something. In China, they eat them sometimes. And in Hawaii, they bury the placenta under a little tree, so it can grow as the baby grows.”

“Now, what do you know about Hawaii?” I says to her. But by then Adrian’s laughing too hard, and Benny’s pushing his plate away from him. I’m waiting for Adrian to calm down, just to make sure he ain’t dying.

“I’m thinking about doing the same thing,” Vernie says. “I’m gonna bury the placenta under a tree and watch the tree grow with the baby.”

“You live in a walk-up,” I says. “You can’t go burying it in that fake fig you’ve got in your hallway.”

“She wants to bury it in the backyard,” Benny says.

The backyard. My backyard. I don’t want to look out my window every morning and think, “Well, that’s the spot my daughter buried her afterbirth, like some animal.”

No. And I tell her so.

I says, “Absolutely not. You buy your own damn house and you bury it there, but don’t tell me where or else I’m not gonna come visit you.”

And she says, “But Ma,” like we’re Asians instead of Catholics. No. This baby is going to pop out like all the good Catholic babies before him, and we’re gonna baptize him and get him two godparents who’ll show up to a birthday or two, for cryin’ out loud.

But then Adrian takes this time to try another one of his jabs at Benny. “So, you knocked any girls up yet?” he says to him, as if he doesn’t already know the answer. And Benny’s just shaking his head, the poor boy. “We’re going through one,” he says, pointing at Vernie. “Might as well do another.”

And knowing that this was gonna be the night Benny told us, I have to do something to get Adrian to shut up, so I stomp on his foot under the table, but I think the kids see me shift in my seat and knew what I’m up to. I’ve gotten every last foot in this family for something they’ve said or done over dinner, especially back when the in-laws used to visit, before they moved down to Boca. “May they rest in Boca,” I used to pray every night before they moved. Only goes to show that He answers prayers.

So, I change the subject and start talking about this new cooking show they’ve got on the television featuring this Suzanne Sommers look alike with a giant rack that makes all her dishes look ten times smaller than her sweater, but it’s not enough to get the kids

going, so I leave it at that and we just eat in quiet for a while. Vernie goes for seconds, “for the baby,” she says, and Benny just sits there, still nibbling on his chicken breast, so I can tell something’s wrong.

“Look at this—there’s no meat on your bones,” I says. “Eat more.” But Vernie starts shushing me, like I can’t ask my son if he’s hungry. Like I says, he’s good looking, tall like his father, but he’s way too skinny. No girl’s gonna go out with him if he ain’t eating right. Well, maybe no guy neither. I don’t know how that works, so I keep my mouth shut.

I swear, you could hear someone hit a fly shot all the way over at the Yankee Stadium it’s so quiet in my house.

Adrian started picking his teeth, and I think about stomping on his foot again for picking ‘em at the table in front of the kids.

Vernie’s munching away at her second plate.

My Benny, he just looks down on his lap. Finally, he says, “Ma, Pop, there’s something I want to tell you.”

Now this is the hardest part. A part of being a family is looking the other way for each other’s dirty secrets. Vernie doesn’t know I caught her sneaking out to a party in high school. Adrian knows I’ve caught him looking at dirty mags. I mean, I practically have to go out and buy them for him or else he’ll get sucked into ordering twelve subscriptions instead of the three he keeps “hidden” in the back of his sock drawer. Like I says, he’s no good with secrets. But I pretend not to know anyway. I try to give them all a bit of privacy, cause sometimes ya have to fall flat on your face to get the point, and it

kills me a little bit to watch them fall, but how else will they learn? Just like when Vernie caught me smoking in the bathroom after Adrian slipped a disk two weeks ago. I quit when the kids went into middle school. Bad for the body. And I used to get antsy for a cigarette in the middle of Mass—I had it bad. But Benny, well. We don't see or hear nothin' from him.

So, I give him my full attention. I says, "Okay, we're listening," and I grab Adrian's hand and I lace our fingers together and rest the jumble of them on the table, so we look like a team.

Benny takes this huge sigh, and he's shaking. He's definitely too thin for his own good.

"Ma, Pa," he begins. "There's something that I've been meaning to tell you," he says, and I'm trying to look innocent, cause God help me if he's figured out I knew already. He'd never trust us again.

"You're not converting to Judaism, are you boy?" Adrian asks, so I have to squeeze his hand real tight to get him to shut up.

"No. What I'm trying to say is...what I'm having a hard time saying is—"

"Spit it out why dontcha?" Adrian says, and I'm thinking about committing first-degree murder right there with my nice set of cutlery.

"I'm...I'm moving to Portland for a job offer," he says so fast, I almost say it's a sin before I realize what he's talking about.

"Portland? Portland, Oregon?" I says.

And he nods real calm like it's moving out to the cape instead all the way over on the other coast. What do they got in Portland? Trees and flannel? Rain? I'm looking at Vernie, but she's as shocked as I am. She just keeps looking at me and mouthing, "Be supportive, be supportive Ma."

"What?" I says to Benny.

"I got a job offer out in Portland," Benny says again, like I don't hear him the first time.

"You're not thinking about going are you?" Vernie says, but Benny just nods again, and Vernie starts touching her belly like she does when she's nervous.

I let go of Adrian's hand.

"Can't you find a job closer to home?" Adrian asks. "I'll ask your Uncle Gerry to see if he can't get you a job working under him."

"Pop, Uncle Gerry's an accountant. I diagnose computer errors."

"Yeah, you think he doesn't get computer errors? He's doing taxes on the computer all the time."

"What about the baby?" Vernie says, rubbing her belly. "What's this really about?"

And that's what I was wondering. Is this really about his being one of the gays? Does he have a boyfriend out there somewhere that he's not telling the family about? *Why wouldn't he bring the guy home?* I'm thinkin'. He better be good enough for my Benny, that's all I know. I don't care if I have to go across the country to make sure of that. That's family.

So I says, “Is this because you sleep with otha men?”

And if it weren’t for the fact that we were eating in the dining room with the good chairs, I’m telling ya, Vernie woulda popped the kid out right there she was so shocked. And the whole table got real quiet, waitin’ for my Benny to answer, but he just sits there quiet. “Cause itsa sin if you are,” I says. “But we can fix that ya know. There are classes you can take at church.” But, then, Vernie starts cuttin’ me off.

“You don’t have to answer that,” she says as she slams one of her bony elbows on the table, like she’s his lawyer and he’s on trial. “We’re at the dinner table, Ma. Have some respect,” she tells me. And I’m thinkin’ *It’s my dinner table*, but you know me—I just want to keep the peace.

So I throw my hands up in the air. “I’m sorry,” I says. “You told me to be supportive. I was being supportive.” And then I just want a glass of wine or a drag from a cigarette just to calm my nerves. Benny’s still quiet, and I can’t take it anymore. I’m just about to excuse myself to clear the table and make due on that cigarette when Adrian grabs my hand again. I can feel his big lump of a foot over mine. This was something I really couldn’t get my head around. Why would he up and leave the family? Doesn’t he know we love him?

The Party

Where were you last night?

I waited, and waited. Out on the veranda I stood, listening to Sherry yammering on about red wine and couch fabrics and baking soda. She loved my alpaca poncho; the cinnamon zigzag over the creamed white knots really brought out my eyes she said. How do I clean it, she wanted to know. People never change, do they?

Where were you?

Todd was there. There and not there. Not *wanting* to be there. He stood out on the lawn, mostly, eyeing his truck and shaking the ice in his drink and the keys in his pockets along to some song he was humming. He kept stopping. He couldn't keep the beat, you know. He never could. But it was great to watch him try.

I wanted you to be there.

Ruth couldn't believe I was out so early. Then she said that she didn't expect to see me out so late. She told me that I looked lovely; that my new haircut was divine, and had you a chance to see it? You did. And I told her exactly what you said. "Looks like your head got stuck in a paper shredder, Lind," you said. It was funny.

No one laughed.

Peter was the only one who didn't seem to know. He wanted to know where you were last week. I told him about your heart attack, and how the memorial service is to be

next Saturday. He said he'd miss your watermelons. You always had a knack for growing heavy watermelons. I licked my fingers clean after every bite, he smiled.

And I smiled too.

Only

As Scott eased his car into the driveway, he could hear his Weimaraner inside, barking at him. “I’m coming Val, I’m coming,” he called. He shifted into first, pressing down his parking break, jogged up the four steps of his porch, grabbed the mail from its container, and unlocked the door, releasing a chocolate grey dog with chocolate grey eyes and a hot pink tongue that started licking Scott’s hands before he could even close the door behind him. “Yes, yes, okay. It’s good to see you too,” Scott said. He took one of his fingerless gloves off and pushed his dog back down and petted her upper back. He grabbed the leash from the key hook and took her out for a quick walk around the block before settling down inside.

Scott turned the kettle on to make himself a cup of tea and opened up a can of dog food for Valerie, almost tripping over her as he turned away from the counter to pick up her bowl. “Oops, sorry Val,” he mumbled. The dog moved back a little, and then followed Scott to her bowl on the kitchen floor, making small clicking noises on the linoleum as she haunted Scott’s heels. “You’re a danger, you know that?” he teased as he filled her bowl. He had gotten her from the pound two months ago, and he wasn’t sure if he was used to her yet, or if she was used to him.

It's funny how pet adoption works, Scott thought. It's like taking out an ad for a roommate but worse; you could ask them if they were more or less likely to stay up late at night, or if they had a specific chore they were anal about, but none of the dogs seemed prone to answering. He and Laura had talked about getting a dog after she moved in to his two bedroom out in Waltham, but then they never spoke of it again. They talked instead of his inability to wash his bowls after he has oatmeal in the mornings, and how long it took him to fix his hot water heater. They talked about the matted carpet of plaid boxers, buttoned down shirts, black socks and khaki pants he kept hidden on his side of the bed. The multi-colored Christmas lights that he strung along the dining room for mood lighting. His messy haircut. How he refused to leave the house on his twenty-eighth birthday, canceling their dinner date and choosing instead to sleep on the leather sofa. Most of the dogs stared at Scott from behind their metal cages. A few were especially friendly, but others couldn't be bothered to move at all, lying in the corners and waiting. Valerie had eyed Scott when he walked past her lot. Intrigued, Scott got closer to the metal wiring and kneeled, sticking his fingers through the links. Valerie came closer, and then, instead of barking, or licking Scott's hand in earnest approval, she stuck her round, wet nose against the back of Scott's hand. *Most likely to stay up late,* Scott thought, *with no chore preferences.* He took her home that day.

“Okay, are you ready?” he called to her as she finished eating. She barked at him, wagging her tail, curious about what would happen next. “It's time for class! Yes, it's time for class, isn't it? Aren't you excited?” He went back to the key hook to get her leash, and found her in between his legs, banging her tail against either side of him,

staring at the leash in Scott's hands. He latched it onto her collar and led her out to the car and drove down to Boston Paw College, the local obedience school where she had been enrolled for the last two weeks, with Valerie riding shotgun, alternating between smelling the dashboard, watching Scott, and looking up at the overcast, blackening sky through the passenger window.

Scott stood around near the back until class started, watching the two soccer moms try to maneuver their Labrador and Poodle into the "starting" sit position, on a line of red duct tape laid out on one side of the room. *They always show up in spandex. They probably come from pilates, or spinning, or from banging their neighbor's teenager.* He eyed the dark haired one's ass while she bent over to pet her Poodle. When they saw him, he waved and went to check in on a clipboard hanging from a nail on the other side of the room. "Scott Mitchell," he wrote in scratchy uncertain letters underneath "Katrina Levitts" and "Vilhelmina Gibson," both written in the same, loopy cursive. The elderly couple with their Scottish Terrier puppy—at eleven months, the youngest in their class—arrived and began barking at Valerie, who had nipped at it last week for not leaving her alone. Scott had kept apologizing over and over to the couple until the elderly woman, embarrassed, said, "It's all right dear; that's what we're all here for. That's the point of this class." Then she had turned to her husband. "Isn't that right, Franklin?" She made him sign them in while she went to say hello to the women.

At five past eight, Mikolai Przybilski, or "the professor" as he liked to be called, arrived in his usual attire of slacks, shirt, tie, and sweater vest. He liked to begin each session by reminding the five students and their four pets that he was a judge at the

Klusujaca Sfora dog show back home in Poland, but that he had come to America for better business opportunities, and that he hoped their dogs would leave his class with a better business sense too. Each week that he said this, everyone chuckled good-naturedly, and Scott imagined his Weimaraner sitting at his desk at the architectural firm, trying to sell a mock-up office floorplan to his boss. “And see?” a woman’s voice would illustrate for her as she placed a paw on the center of a blueprint, “We’ve increased employee morale by placing the managers at the center of the floor, where they will be more accessible to their employees, which also gives their subordinates the added psychological advantage of having the corner and window offices.” A pearl necklace or a flamboyant wide brimmed Sunday hat would add an air of outrageous dignity to her demeanor. “Very *Au courant*, *à la* San Francisco Federal Building, but without the ventilation problems. What do you think? No? Well, we also have a fully certified LEED mockup built with renewable materials. And as an added feature, a garden rooftop equipped with several solar panels on the north and south sides, as well as three wind turbines facing the east to take advantage of the coastal breeze. These turbines will then help power the employee breakrooms on the second and fifth floor. And just wait until I tell you about the double vacuum revolving doors at the front and how they’ll help to power the lights in the lobby...”

“And let’s have your puppies all sit,” the professor continued, waiting on Scott. All of them had managed to sit except for Valerie, who was staring up at him, waiting for a command.

“Sit,” he coaxed, and she sat. Alert. Prepared.

“Good. Now over the past several weeks, we’ve covered sit, heel, lie down, stand up, and roll over. Today we will practice stand up and roll over again, and then we will cover a new command—stay. Everyone turn now to face your dogs.” Obediently, everyone complied. “Down on your knees,” he added. “Franklin, I will have you wait on the side so that your wife will try.” Franklin, from underneath his tan ascot hat that slanted directly down to his peppery eyebrows, smiled a wide denture grin, clearly relishing being excluded from kneeling on the floor.

“Now, the cue we used is that we tapped our shoulders, and the dog learned that this movement means ‘stand up.’ I hope you have all been practicing at home. Now, everyone tap your shoulders, say ‘stand up,’ and then gently lift the dog’s front paws and place them on your body. Ready? Go.

“Good. Now again. Ready? Go.

“Good. Now again.”

Most of the night was spent in this fashion, repeating steps and praising puppies with treats.

The Poodle learned quickly, becoming cause for great praise from both its owner and the professor. Valerie too tended to do well, not squirming or nuzzling anyone in the crotch like the Lab. The Scottish Terrier, though, was hit or miss, loving to roll over, but ignoring last week’s heel and lie down.

“Good. Now reward your puppies.”

Without hesitation, the women pulled out treats from their purses and handed them over to their pets. Scott took a small plastic bag full of dog biscuits out of his pocket

and offered one to Valerie, who smelled it, rolled it into her mouth with a flick of her tongue, and then licked Scott's fingers clean.

"Now we will try stay," the professor said. "This will be just like sit, only you will walk away from your dogs and stand over here," the professor pointed. "Your dog will learn that stay also means sit, and you can omit the sit command. Katrina," he called. "You first."

The woman told her Lab to sit, to stay, and she slowly backed away from it. The dog wagged its tail and barked, excited at this new request, but otherwise remained still for a few seconds before getting up and coming towards her as she neared the blue tape marker the professor had pointed to. "Not bad," the professor said, sending them to the back of the line. "Next," he called, and the woman with the poodle told her dog to sit, stay, and made it across the room with only a bark from her dog. "Very good, very good. Next."

Scott looked down at Valerie and told her to sit. He watched her hindquarters hit the floor. She looked up at him, waiting for the next command. "Now stay," he said, as he began to walk away. Three strides in, he turned to see that Valerie hadn't left his side.

"That's not quite right," the professor said. "Try again."

Scott went back to the red tape and repeated the commands. *Sit. Stay.* Valerie sat. She watched him. When he took a step, she got up to take a step too.

"Well, that is okay. You will try this command at home, Scott," the professor said.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” Scott said, looking down at Valerie, who was wagging her tail and watching the other dogs.

“Next.”

The elderly woman regarded her Terrier. “Oakland, sit. Sit. I said sit.” With all eyes on him, the dog seemed to consider wetting itself in excitement. “My husband’s better trained than you are Oakland—sit!” she pointed to the floor. The dog sat.

“Yeah, but I don’t get nearly as many treats,” Franklin grumbled in the corner.

“Now stay! Oakland, stay!” the woman shouted. Her earrings dangled. Her wrinkles looked deeper. Her glasses were the same burnt red as the two lines she designated to be her lips. Her voice was shrill. *I bet they got the dog so the neighbors could listen to something else yapping*, Scott thought. He looked over at Franklin, stooped over in his seat. *Unlucky bastard. Looks like a drinker though. Maybe that’s how he gets through the day. Or maybe he gambles. Maybe he goes home with thirty dollars less of every paycheck. Who could blame him? Or maybe she has it direct deposited straight into hers.* The dog, seeing the triumph in her eyes, got up, spun in circles, and then barked at her, ready for more. “No, no, no, no, no!” she cried.

“It’s all right, it’s all right. Please try this at home, and with less shouting. Our time is finished,” he raised his arms and awaited an applause. Between the four owners, they managed a mottled ovation, punctuated by the occasional bark.

As Scott turned to get Val’s leash and go, he heard one of the soccer moms call out his name from behind him. “Scott,” she said, turning away from her Lab. “You’re so

lucky Val won't leave your side. This one tried to bolt into the street yesterday," she eyed her energetic puppy. "I thought she was gonna dislocate my arm."

"I think it's the cutest thing," the other said.

Scott smiled. "It's something to work on."

"Does she do that to your girlfriend?" the first asked.

"Oh, no."

"Aww, she's probably claimed you as her own, hasn't she?" the second joked.

"Probably bites any girl who'll come near him," the first added.

"No, I mean, I don't have a girlfriend at the moment. My girlfriend and I split up a year ago, just before I ended up getting Valerie."

"Oh," they said in unison.

"Well, I bet Val there is an excellent snuggle-buddy. Whenever my husband goes on business trips, it's just me and Prances here," the second one scratched the head of her Poodle. *Prances. Prances the poodle. Does Prances with wolves?* Scott watched her wedding band brush over the puppy's ear.

"Yeah, this little monster's the only one I've got to talk to when my kids go off to school. It's almost like they never left with this mutt around, always causing a fuss," she teased. "Hey," she pulled on the Lab's leash when it started barking at the Prances the Poodle.

"Just be careful about it, is what I say," the old man chimed in. His wife scoffed.

"You live alone don't you?" Scott nodded. "That's probably why it's having abandonment issues. It doesn't have anyone else to focus on, except for you."

At home, Scott practiced a few of the commands Valerie already knew. She sat. She fetched. She even spoke occasionally, a command that Scott was teaching her on his own. But when it came to stay, she kept failing, not even coaxed by lots of *goods* and *attagirls* as he backed away from her. When he was just out of arm's reach, she would get up to follow him, or whine and then run towards him whenever he thought he was making substantial progress. Finally, eyeing the analog clock on the stove, Scott called it a night.

“Maybe tomorrow, Val,” he sighed.

She looked up at him from his feet. Maybe, the old man was right, Scott thought. Maybe, because he was the only person for her to interact with on a regular, daily basis, she wouldn't leave him alone. Maybe he should have gotten another dog, so that she would at least have someone to play with. Maybe Scott was holding her hostage: she was only living in a prettier pound. Maybe he shouldn't have gotten a dog in the first place, if it was going to be a “couples only” affair.

Scott changed into his pajamas, brushed his teeth, and pushed Valerie out of the center of the bed. “Goodnight,” he said when she jumped back onto the bed and curled up next to him. Even with her warm body lying next to his, he still had a hard time falling asleep. He always had since Laura left.

The environmentally friendly alarm went off at six in the morning, first with a few whines and nuzzles with her nose, and finally with a pronounced bark or two. Rolling out of bed, he grabbed the leash and a jacket, and let her out of the house. He watched her shiver in the cold morning air and trot down to the corner of Scott's front

yard, where she performed her business. Scott picked up her *returns* using the inside of a plastic bag and then walked her around the block before she rushed towards the door, more than ready to be out of the cold. Back inside, Scott made himself some breakfast, shooing her away from the stove with a foot. She stayed behind him until he finished cooking pancakes and eggs and opened another can of dog food, placing the latter in her bowl on the kitchen floor. When he finished eating, he jumped in the shower, and started getting ready for work.

Valerie stalked his heels the entire time, her food left untouched.

“Okay, I have to go now,” he told her, putting on his shoes by the door.

Her tail wagged faster.

“No, you’re not coming with me. You’re staying here. Be a good girl.” He stroked her neck. “Behave.” He reached for the door. “Now, sit,” he called, and as she did, he bolted out the front door before she could follow. Turning his keyring in his hands to find the housekey, he heard her inside, scratching at the door and whining.

When he came home on his lunch hour to walk her, he found her not by the door waiting for him, but under the kitchen table chewing on a tie his mother gave him for Christmas. Not too far from her was a puddle of what could only guess from the smell was her urine. *Great.* He thought. *You couldn't have waited twenty more minutes.*

He grabbed a paper towel and the leash off the key hook and pulled her away from his tie. “No,” he said, pointing to the puddle. He tossed the paper towel over it and walked away, Valerie in tow.

Outside, the air still held the same frigid hints of winter. He zipped his coat up a little higher and plunged his hands back into his pockets. He had almost made it—two blocks south, one east—when he saw her. Across the street, standing in black fuzzy boots with a black fuzzy coat by the park, was Laura. For a brief moment he froze. He weighed his options. Would it draw more attention to him if he turned around and walked back home—a confused tourist? Maybe he could just keep walking down the street, eyes trained on Valerie? Should he go over and say hi?

She turned. She spotted him. *Shit*. She was waving at him. What now?

She was crossing the street. “Scottie, hey! How are you?” she asked. Her voice seemed to have gone up an octave since they last spoke. It seemed sugary. She crept in for a hug.

Scott became very aware of the fact that he forgot to shave that morning. He felt the hair on his cheek hum with electricity when Laura brushed her soft face against his.

“Hey! Laura! How are you?”

“Good, *how are you?*”

He had forgotten that she said she found it irritating when people answer a question with a question. Already, he felt like he was zero-two. He had to do something.

“And who’s this?” she asked in that piercing voice he had only seen her reserve for babies. She waved at Valerie, who began sniffing at Laura’s knees.

“This is Valerie,” Scott said.

“Oh, she’s precious.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s good to see that you’re getting your life turned around, Scott.”

Scott felt his brow fall. “What do you mean?”

“The dog. It’s good to see that you’re getting responsible,” she nodded.

“Oh. Right.”

“Well, I’m meeting a friend. But it was nice see you again. We’ll have to do coffee sometime soon? Catch up?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Take care,” she said, waving again at Valerie before walking away, down the street. Scott stood there, as stunned as he was when he first saw her there. Valerie, who must have finally caught her scent, began pulling on her leash toward Laura, wagging her tail. Scott, unable to move, anchored his dog to the street corner, watching his ex-girlfriend put entire city blocks between them without looking back.

Warning: Graphic Novel

Julia opened the door to Bonji's and went straight for her regular table. She didn't even bother saying hello to Mr. Bonji. She had too much on her mind. She dropped her bag by the side of her bag and she watched the windows.

Bonji's was the tea lounge between 13th and 14th street, and it made itself known 24 hours a day through the oversized neon sign in its window. "Internet access, game consoles, boba teas," it read in green underneath the blaring red letters of the name of the lounge. Mr. Bonji was proud of the place, and insisted on telling Julia so whenever she would come in to do her work. He liked to discuss his budget and the quarters' profits. "This encourages tipping," he liked to say.

Julia Morgan was not Mr. Bonji's only regular, but she was without a doubt his most productive. She had graduated from college six months ago and was pursuing the not so prestigious career of graphic novelist. Drawing was more of Julia's hobby than it had been anything else while she was attending high school and college. She had developed a philosophy about it—as her colored pencils became smaller and smaller, they helped to give birth to the swirls and whirls of her artwork and give her characters the voices they so desired. In this way she liked to pretend she was God, or in at least "the Creator" of her characters and the situations that they always found themselves in.

At first she was excited when an editor contacted her about publishing her first novel. After the print of her third novel, she began to resent it. Her editor, Peter Parker, started to pressure her with quicker deadlines, and she began to feel like a slave to her own work. The curse of sequential novels was that she had to finish them in time, and in order.

Her friends supported her work, and complimented her on her drawings and her novels. Her editor thought differently: his job was to weed through what Julia and her friends thought were the “best” of her work and color these pages in with reality. Some of the pages were repetitious, and others only seemed good because her friends had wanted to be supportive and told her that they were good. Good friends, but poor taste. “It happens whenever creativity is involved,” Peter had said, “and it pays my paycheck.” For him, however, Julia’s work was more often than not up to par before he even got his hands on it. He just had to make a few tweaks here or there.

Julia watched several men walk by, but none of them had his broad back or his blue-ish, green-ish eyes. Or his smile. She crossed her legs and started drumming her fingers on the edge of the table. On a usual day, Julia spent anywhere from three to seven hours sitting in Bonji’s. She was already accustomed to drawing in public places, and she figured that now that she was an actual novelist, it would be like free advertisement for her work if people came up to her and started talking about her drawing. She was used to it. The only down side was that it usually interrupted her, and not all of her interruptions were about her work. She knew that she did not fit the generic Asian manga lover stereotype. She could not spout off any Japanese, or name any favorite anime despite a growing collection of Japanese comic books in her apartment. To thrust herself into the

alternative crowd she started wearing arm warmers, colorful or suggestive stockings, and elaborate spiraling earrings that sounded like wind chimes when she shook her head. It was a give and take that she was yet to master: dress wildly enough to be noticed, but conservatively enough for her art to be the focal point. She missed the mark on several occasions.

Today it was a plaid skirt, far too much eyeliner, and she had pulled her blonde hair back into a messy ponytail. Peter had called and asked to meet her at Bonji's. She knew what Peter called to talk about. It shook her to the core.

#

The day before Julia and Peter were in his office going over the plot of her fourth novel. Julia used the term "office" loosely. Windowless, airless, crammed with papers and post-its and graphic narrative manuscripts and novels. Peter's desk looked like an antique by accident rather than choice. The deadline was in three days, and Peter was still unhappy about the ending.

"You write romantic comedies, Julia. This ending is neither romantic nor comedic. It's a slap in the face to all of your readers."

"Life's not always happy, happy, joy joy, Peter. Some things are complicated. There needs to be some complication in this edition. It's starting to read like playground drivel."

"This just isn't going to work, Julia," Peter said, rising from his chair and running his hands through his hair in frustration. "Mary loves Takeshi, but if Takeshi gets run over by a bus—run over by a bus? Really Julia? Really?—then there will be no more love

interest, Mary will go into mourning, and it will be the end of a four book saga.” Peter walked back and forth behind his chair, a nervous pacer, coming within inches of bumping into a wall or a bookshelf.

“Takeshi dove out in front of the bus to grab the locket that he gave Mary on their third date.” Julia rose from her chair opposite Peter’s. “It’s a testament to how much he loves her!” She placed her palms on his desk. It was not the first time she had said this that night.

“It’s a locket, about *this* big.” He demonstrated with his thumb and index finger. “You don’t think the bus would have enough clearing to run over it free and clear without so much as a second glance? The bus conveniently crashes into Takeshi dead on, which would mean that the locket—if left alone as it damn well should be—would come nowhere near a rubber tire.”

Julia did not feel her face brighten with anger, but she became aware of her scowl. “It’s the idea that the locket represents. It’s in the shape of a heart, signifying Takeshi’s love, and it has a picture of the two of them together. Don’t you get it? Takeshi gave his heart to Mary, and Mary lost it. When Takeshi tried to revive it by saving it from an incoming collision with the cross-town line, his brains got splattered across the bus’ radiator grill. Mary killed the love she had with Takeshi, which in turn killed him.”

“No one reads that far into things,” Peter was almost shouting, and his footsteps were quickening and their path covering more ground around his office. Julia cleared a small area on his desk, pushing aside pages of her novel, a box of colored pencils, a day calendar, and sat on it, watching him march from corner to corner. “You’ve got to come

up with a different solution. Takeshi gets hit by a bus and ends up in the hospital, fine, but if you want to insult the mass majority of your readers,” he let out a short laugh, “your funeral’s your funeral.”

“Fine, mister hot shot. What do you think I should do?”

“I don’t want to put words in the author’s mouth.”

“Excuse me? Isn’t that your job? To put freaking words in my mouth?”

“No. No, this is your storyline. Do what you want. See if I care.”

“Hey, don’t get all defensive because you told me that my ending was crap and I asked you to come up with a better one. That should be a common rule in society—don’t criticize unless you’ve got a better solution.”

“That’s rich. Then I never would have said anything and your characters would have gone into print disappointing your readers and that would have been the end of that.”

Julia sat silent for a moment, watching Peter walk the perimeter of his office in sporadic lines. “All right, that’s it. Sit down, will ya? You’re making me dizzy.” She pointed to Peter’s guest chair, the one she had been sitting in, and a foot away from where her dangling legs could barely touch the carpeting.

#

Julia saw Mr. Bonji waving at her from the corner of her eyes. She should go say hello. Maybe order something. She got up and went over the counter.

She listened to Mr. Bonji talk about stock shares after she ordered mango smoothie and before he placed it on the service counter, all the while pretending to be

interested. She liked the way his sharp moustache would suddenly become animated. She put four dollars into the tip jar. What was good for his business was good for her business. He allowed her to occupy a table and convert it into her workshop even on days when she didn't feel like ordering anything. Mr. Bonji said that he was grateful to have her there. She usually drew in costumers. And it was nice to see a familiar face. Back in Singapore, Mr. Bonji said, no one visited him with any regularity—it was all tourists.

She went back to her spot by the window and took out her travel-sized sketchbook. She liked to keep work and her personal life as separate as two different panels in her comics. The problem was, drawing used to be her personal life. Her work was comprised completely from a personal life affair. If she allowed work to interject into her personal life the way her personal life had her work, she was afraid that the end result would be not having any life at all.

#

“The issue is in Takeshi dying, am I right?” Julia asked that night.

“Yes. The plot twist is appreciated, but you can't go around killing off your main characters.”

“Well, why should I keep him, then?”

“There's no previous sign that Mary doesn't want to accept his love,” Peter offered, “and I think that that would be the best form of action here.”

“But what if Mary doesn't know whether or not she wants Takeshi to love her? What if she just wanted to see what love is all about and then go back to her life pre-Takeshi?”

“That’s not a reasonable plot for a manga.”

“But it happens in real life.”

“Not everything that happens in real life should be written about, Julia.”

“But stories reflect real life, Peter. It’s not hard to believe that Mary might be confused about her feelings.”

Peter’s hand reached out and touched her knee. She didn’t brush it away. He reached up and kissed her. It was unsteady, but with as much passion as though he was still arguing with her. Julia was shocked at first, unable to react. But then her hands found his face, and she ran her fingers through his hair as she started to kiss Peter back.

They scattered drawings and clothing everywhere. Her skirt came off with ease, and his pants were not far behind. Peter pushed a box of color pencils out of the way, which fell to the floor and let several colors roll around on top of the sketches that Peter and Julia had spent the last two hours fighting about.

#

Peter entered the tea lounge about ten minutes later. His parents must have thought it was cute to name him Peter considering that his last name was Parker. He told her that those who understood the reference to Spider-Man always asked him why he chose editing as opposed to photography. After the fifth grade, he had said, he no longer found Spider-Man jokes amusing.

He raised a couple of fingers in acknowledgment to Julia and went to the counter to order a drink for himself—one of Bonji’s few customers that actually order coffee, or any variation of it—and waited there for it before he came to join her at her table.

Whenever Julia saw him outside of the office, he had a leather bound briefcase that he used to carry a few novels that he was editing or a couple of sketches that he was looking over. Today, the briefcase was missing. He exhaled as he sat down.

“Julia,” he said by way of greeting.

“Peter,” she mimicked him. She furrowed her brow and extended her hand to him to give him a handshake. Peter took it anyway, and raised her hand up and down once before letting go. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. It’s just—”

“The cloudy weather outside? I know. It looks like it’s going to rain, but the rain might be good for the city, you know? Just a little bit?”

Peter took his eyes off his drink and peered at her. “I suppose,” he said, “but that’s not really—”

“What you were talking about? I know. I figured. You usually don’t bring up the weather in typical conversation. But you know, there’s a first time for everything.”

“Julia.”

“People change. We’re very versatile creatures. We can get better just as quickly as we may have gotten worse. As a whole. Theoretically speaking.”

“Julia.”

“Because the thing is, the whole world is about change. That’s why you should never really fear death. Humans fear change. Death is change. That’s all. We die a little every day.”

“That’s really morbid.”

“I know. It’s horrible when things are morbid, isn’t it? Sometimes it’s just sad when things die. Like hopes or dreams. Or careers. That’s why we should slap one giant DNR sticker on that whole situation and just move on.”

“Do not resuscitate?”

“Yeah, DNR! DNR!”

“Julia,” Peter reached across the table for her wrist. “Are you feeling okay?”

Julia nodded. What goes up, often comes down. And sometimes shatters upon impact when it’s gone high enough. She tried to numb herself to the whole situation. She wanted to be more like those Tibetan monks that have an out of body experience for a little while. Where do those monks go whenever their spirits float away? Do they get in trouble with their spiritual leaders if they visit around the world—Mumbai, Santiago, Amsterdam, Dayton, Ohio—before their souls transcend into the heavens?

Peter let go of her wrist. “The sex was awesome.”

Julia’s mouth dropped. Peter had sent her soul plummeting straight back into her body.

“And, I don’t think that we should blame ourselves for that.”

Julia was starting to feel uncomfortable.

“But the fact of the matter is, it would be somewhat inappropriate for us to continue working together, knowing that what happened last night could maybe happen again.”

Julia looked up to see if Bonji was eavesdropping. He was staring at the shelf of tea behind the counter, acting as though some were out of place. “What makes you think

it'll happen again?" she whispered. "Some places are forbidden and people don't know that unless they see it for themselves."

"And some people visit the Forbidden Palace on a daily basis—point is, as a client, you and I have to keep a professional relationship."

"Right."

"Because I am your editor."

"Right."

"Which is why you should switch publishing houses."

"What?"

"We could not maintain a professional distance, which means you and I are no longer professionals. I'm the only editor who covers manga work, which means that you need to take your business elsewhere."

"I've published my last three books with Appleseed Publishing. I chose you guys specifically because of the small firm setting and that's the kind of quality that I think should be continued, don't you?"

"Sure. At another small firm. Elsewhere."

"No. Appleseed is what my readers are expecting, and I am not going to break my contract that you—yes, you, Peter—have been so diligent on chaining me down to. If you don't think that we can be professionals, and through no fault of my own I might add, then maybe it's you who should quit working here and find another firm."

"I'm not going to quit my job—what am I going to say to my boss?"

"That you're human? That you make mistakes?"

“I’ve been with the company for three years, and you for only two. I believe the saying goes, last one hired, first one fired?”

Again, Julia’s mouth dropped.

“Wait, that’s not what I meant.” Peter’s fingers found his forehead.

“Really? Because it sounded pretty clear what you meant.”

“No. I didn’t want to end things this way. Look, something has to be done. we can’t go back to the way things were.”

“Of course not. We’ll just pretend like it never happened, ok?”

“That’s going back to the way things were.”

“Water under the bridge.”

“Water corrodes bridges over time.”

“Peter. That’s not the point.”

“No, Julia, that is the point. This is the kind of thing that could eat away at a person. Look, it’s sad, but this has got to be the end of our professional career together. Things change, remember? Aren’t you the kind of person who would embrace this sort of change?”

“Yes, but I’m not breaking my contract. Either you learn to live with it, or you should find a different publishing house,” Julia said while she gathered her things.

Peter watched her get up and walk out of the tea lounge, giving her the last word.

Julia was a firm believer in karma. She often thought that, if personified, karma would be an inner city drag queen with press-on nails and biceps to kill. The kind of boy/girl you wanted to be on the good side of, because if provoked, karma had the

tendency to get vicious. She thought of what karma would have to say as she walked home. Everything seemed so uncertain. Was this the end of her career? Would she finally have to evoke her back-up career and start trolling around the city looking for a position as a marketing assistant? For as stressful as her graphic novel had become, it gave her the chance to do something that she enjoyed; a job that she felt was self-gratifying. Would karma say “well, it’s about time you join the rest of us?” or more realistically, “join the real world, girlfriend?”

The next day she decided to bring it up with Mr. Bonji. She waited until he was finished helping a customer before ordering a cup of tea herself. “How’re you doing today?” she asked.

“No, how are *you* doing today?” Mr. Bonji looked around the café before stepping in closer.

“All right I guess. I suppose you heard what happened yesterday.”

Mr. Bonji nodded.

“I’m not quite sure what to do.” Julia sighed. “I mean, Peter had made it a ‘kill or be killed’ option. If it has to come down to this, then self-preservation would have to be key, wouldn’t it?”

“Absolutely. If a competitor has risen, you have to challenge them.”

“Like one of those little cartoon fighting monsters?”

“No, like if another tea lounge opened up across the street. A clear sign for business battle; if such is the case, you’re going to have to eliminate him.”

“Eliminate him? If I let him cut off my career with Appleseed, I would be very upset with myself, yes. But if I cost him his, I would be even more upset with myself.”

“Ah, so the soup thickens.” Mr. Bonji smiled. “Which is the lesser of the evils? Be ambitious and cut-throat about your work, or be the polite and courteous girl I know you were raised to be?”

“How do you know I was raised to be polite?”

“Because you always tip more than ten percent. Good for my business. And you, you must follow your gut. This is good for your business.”

#

Peter left a message on her voicemail saying that he sent the new copy of her graphic narrative down to printing to be finalized. He also suggested that she come by his office to pick up her first payment installment. Maybe Peter was right; she really couldn't imagine herself going to his office to work on future novels together anymore.

Julia may not have meant to, but she put off going to Peter's office until just a little before most of the other editors went home. She tiptoed down the hall, as best as she could in her cloggy boots. She reached Peter's door, which was slightly ajar, and held it steady as she knocked on it.

“Come in,” he called.

Julia felt like a kid being sent to detention. And yet, she didn't do anything particularly wrong. Maybe it was Peter who should feel like he was the one in trouble. Maybe he should be the one to squirm the way that she was squirming right now.

She pushed the door open and walked in. “Peter, I’m here for the check,” she demanded.

“Oh hey Julia, have a seat,” Peter offered without looking up from what he was reading. Julia faltered for a moment in her fight or flight response, but then walked over and sat down in the chair Peter suggested.

Peter looked up from what he was reading. “It’s good to see you.”

Julia thought about all of the things she could say right now. None of them seemed appropriate for a polite business meeting.

“I thought about it some more, and I was wrong to approach you the way that I did the other day,” he said. “I really shouldn’t have,” he paused, “dropped that on you without considering other alternatives as well. That’s not to say that I was wrong, or that my bringing the issue to the forefront was wrong; simply the way that I did it was wrong.”

“I certainly agree to that,” Julia chuckled. “But, I was thinking about it too, and I really do think that you have a point. You don’t...you know, where you...you know.”

Peter’s brow dipped.

“Shit where you eat?” she offered.

“Oh. Well, that’s another way to put it I suppose.” Peter pulled open a drawer and took out an envelope with Julia’s name on it. “I hope that the way that I came across won’t affect...how you feel about me?”

“I don’t think that people can control their feelings. They can only mask them in ways that are acceptable for living in a social society. That’s a part of what makes humans so adaptable.”

“I see.”

“Because, people are by nature social beings, you know? But at the same time, people have incredibly unsocial feelings about themselves and others. It’s a dichotomy that we all have to live with.”

“Julia?”

“Especially in this day and age. We’ve made advancements, sure, but with each advancement comes the realization that not only were we living imperfectly up until that moment, but also that there is so much more room for the advancements that we are yet to achieve.”

“Julia.”

“It can be depressing at times, when you look at how far left we have to go. It’s kind of…”

Peter held out her payment for her to grab.

“...Is this your way of telling me to go?”

“It’s my way of telling you to shut up,” Peter smiled. “The fact of the matter is, you and I crossed a bridge that we cannot uncross. We’ve awoken lying beasts, etcetera. Something still needs to be done about that.”

Julia was back in detention again.

“After some careful deliberation, it came to this. Do I keep my job here, or do I give it up for a potential relationship with a client? I love my job. It’s how I spend forty hours of my week; if I didn’t love it, I would have quit working months ago.”

Julia nodded. She should have known. She would have picked the same choice if she was in his position. She stood up. “I understand. Let’s spare the formalities, all right?”

Peter smiled. “I’m glad you feel that way,” he watched her walk through the doorway. “Because I put in my two weeks’ notice yesterday,” he called after her.

Julia’s head popped into view from outside of the door. “You did what?”

“I put in my two weeks’ notice.”

“You did, really?”

Peter nodded.

Julia couldn’t believe it. Peter did that for her? Does that mean that they’re dating? Had she just gained an unemployed boyfriend? This was cause for a celebration, right? Julia smiled. She supposed that the least she could do was buy him dinner.

ESSAYS

Ghouls and Goblins

A red polo shirt, a beige cap, and dark khaki pants—I even borrowed my ex-boyfriend's golf club. I *was* Tiger Woods that night. It was the easiest Halloween costume I had come up with since the third grade. That's when my mom got involved with church again, bringing home VHS tapes about the real meanings behind Halloween and how important it was that I didn't torture black cats, worship the blood of Satan, or ask strangers for any spare pieces of candy that may or may not have been poisoned or filled with little sewing needles that I would later choke on as I inhaled Tootsie Rolls and miniature Snickers bars. The videos featured witches in torn dresses chasing little boys and girls to sacrifice them to their dark lord, lone pentagrams drawn in red on hardwood floors, and teenagers with teased hair setting up a Ouija board. Years later, my latest costume had the added versatility of being reused in my wardrobe throughout the year, which was useful considering how much I was getting paid as a pizza delivery boy in my second year of college. Both creative and practical.

I had earned a reputation for being both creative and practical in high school as the student council historian, taking slanted shots of basketball players and over-the-shoulder photography of students selling homecoming tickets. I had blended into the background.

My friend Clint, however, was determined to go a more outlandish route. He was going to be Fred from Scooby-Doo. He cut and bleached his licorice-black hair, and ordered bell-bottoms and an orange ascot off of the Internet. He had been planning this for weeks.

“I’m afraid Juhee and Dan are gonna back out,” he’d said over the phone in early October.

“Back out of what?” I asked.

“Our Scooby-Doo gang. Juhee’s gonna to be Velma, because she’s got short hair like her, Bonnie’s gonna to be Daphne, Michael Flatt’s gonna be Scooby-Doo—because he’s got the most experience acting like a dog to begin with—and Dan’s gonna be Shaggy because he’s rail thin. I don’t know who you could be Iowa.”

“Well, I’ve always been a bit fond of Scrappy,” I admitted. “It’d be perfect. I’m short anyway.”

“Uh, no. One dog in the group is enough. Besides, he’s buying the actual dog suit, with the head and everything. He’s really committed to this. He’s not flaky like Dan or Juhee.”

“I hate to break it to you, but that kind of concludes the whole Scooby-Doo cast.”

“You could be a villain?” he laughed. It was a nervous, serious laugh.

“No thanks.”

“What? Come on. Who do you want to be then?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if I want to *do* Halloween—I think I’d rather just stay in and watch whatever horror flicks they’re going to show with a great big bag

of Jolly Rancher lollipops instead of ice cream. And those caramel-covered apple lollipops too.” I loved those lollipops. One year, I came home with five or six of them and treasured them above the Milky Ways, the Butterfingers, the M&M’s. They were Airhead status level. Tradable only to several Warheads. But the next year, there was just prayer and Tootsie Rolls at the Sunday school. And the year after, only prayer.

The line went silent as Clint considered this. “Iowa, that’s boring. *And* depressing. Besides, I need someone to take pictures of Scooby and the Gang, and whoever’s taking the pictures can’t be in the gang or else you’ll notice someone missing in every shot. I need new pictures of me looking fabulous and skinny.”

“Seriously? It’s called a self-timer.”

He laughed again. Nervous. Serious. “Please?”

The truth is I really didn’t have anything planned. I could picture hanging out at home for the night watching scary movies, but I could also picture people knocking on my door from dusk till dawn.

Sarasota was an hour’s drive from north Tampa. “Ugh, fine. But you’ll owe me one,” I told him.

#

Clint and I had known each other for over three years, having met our sophomore year of college. Our cattiness and mutual self-deprecation is what made us such good friends—we were kicked puppies who kept running back to each other. We yelled at each other knowing that our words were hollow and our need for human connection great. Our self-esteems were at phenomenal depths. He would spend the entire day on a diet, eating

nothing heavier than low-fat popcorn and diet soda, then at night inhale chips, microwavable personal pizzas, pretzels smothered in cheese and anything else he could get his hands on, while I ate what I wanted during the day—hoagies and salads topped with salami, pepperoni, ham, bacon, provolone, mozzarella, green olives, black olives, and an Italian dressing so thick it nearly clotted tumbling out of the bottle. As punishment I jogged up and down the streets of northern Tampa at night until the linings in my running shoes wore down. Clint and I were both overweight in high school and continued to suffer from the body image issues well into our twenties, even after both of us had lost most of the weight. Our miseries had commiserated.

When we'd first met I introduced myself and Clint asked me to repeat my name. After the third time, he waved his hand and said, "I'm never gonna to learn that. Where are you from?" That's a complicated question to any military child, so I told him where I was living last before I moved down South. He told me that's what he'd call me from there on out, Iowa. I liked the nickname, it was exotic to me. I didn't tell him that I had only spent six months at the University of Iowa before switching majors, states, and cutting off all connections with my parents.

Clint grew up in Sarasota. He had known his friends for nearly a decade, a feat I couldn't wrap my mind around. To me, three years was an awful long time to get to know someone. It was the maximum time I was allotted before I moved again. I wondered what it was like, to watch someone grow over such a long period of time and still remain close to them. After a decade, I imagined, a former friend would either not recognize you, or do just about anything for you.

#

I arrived in Sarasota at 7:00 p.m., just after dark and drove into Clint's suburban neighborhood, peeling gently around the streets crowded with parked cars and miniature Batman and fairy princesses, whose bedtimes I guessed were soon. I pulled up to Clint's grandparents' house and rang the doorbell. A real life version of Frederick Herman Jones, Jr. opened the door.

"Hey," Clint said. "I would hug you, but I can hardly breathe as it is. This man-girdle is killing me."

"Man-girdle?"

"I didn't lose as much weight as I thought, and I'm planning on looking fantastic in those photos. Which reminds me, don't let me eat a thing tonight. I'm afraid I'll eat a single piece of chocolate and the entire thing would burst and then everyone would know my dirty little secret. Did you bring your camera?"

"It's in the car."

"Good. Let's go before I exhale," he said, cramming his feet into a pair of loafers.

On the way to Michael Flatt's house, Clint filled me in on all the details of everyone down in Sarasota. Bonnie had started seeing another one of the Mexican busboys at Chili's, and this time it seemed serious since they'd moved in together. Dan nearly backed out at the last minute but agreed to show up as long as we went out to a club after the photo shoot, which Clint hoped was okay with me. Dan got another D.U.I. recently and had to spend some time in jail for this one.

Michael Flatt, whom I'd never met, was getting on Clint's nerves again. As the third Michael that Clint and his friends knew, they called him by his full name. Michael Flatt was in the Air Force and maybe due to deploy to Iraq sometime soon. He was also the only straight guy Clint knew. Clint told me how Michael Flatt was cheating on his girlfriend again and how a mutual friend of theirs walked in on Michael Flatt taking a piss and saw his schlong, which she proclaimed was *huge*. "Just so you know," Clint said.

I told him I'd keep that in mind, although I really had no idea what I was supposed to do with the information. Clint was the most prudish person I knew. He got it from obsessively watching Disney princess films as a kid, learning that there's only ever one prince who's right for each princess, and that each princess would have to wait her turn for him to come riding in and save her. Michael Flatt, on the other hand, I was told had "roving eyes," which was not something Clint readily approved of. But I wondered if Michael Flatt was just a more social version of us, craving acceptance not merely from a single person but from crowds, doing his best to charm and please until something permanent stuck, until he found his most livable fairy tale.

#

We picked Bonnie up from a rundown house on a main thoroughfare. Clint didn't get out of the car; he called her from his cellphone and after five minutes she came tumbling down the wooden porch steps on lavender stockinged feet with a flat purple shoe in each hand, her red wig looking more like plastic party streamers than hair. She jumped into the backseat of my car. "Go, go, go, go, go," she cooed.

“Hey Bonnie,” I said as I pulled into traffic. “Long time no see. How’ve you been?”

“Well, I’ve been better,” she said, resting her arm on the back of Clint’s headrest as she put each shoe on. “Hernando and I just had a big fight.”

“It better not be about you staying out late tonight,” Clint warned, looking over his shoulder.

“He’s just worried. It’s a dangerous night to be out and about after dark.”

“Well, we’ll protect you,” Clint said.

I gave him a sideways glance as long as I could before worrying whether or not I’d slam into the car in front of us.

“We’re Scooby and the Gang; we charge into the darkness and unmask ghouls and goblins to save the day, as occasionally accompanied by Tiger Woods.”

“I missed those episodes,” I said.

#

When we got to Michael Flatt’s house, Juhee and Dan were already there, smoking against the trunk of Juhee’s car. I could have expected Shaggy to take up cigarettes in his post-mystery solving days, but watching Juhee inhale and blow a steady stream of smoke delicately out of the side of her mouth somehow surprised me. I didn’t know she smoked. This was Velma gone bad. Corrupted Velma, who snuck off on her own and smoked Camels behind haunted barns while she waited for someone else to say “jinkies” for a change. Both of them waved when they saw us pull up, and Juhee quickly stamped out the end of her cigarette on the base of her stiletto heel, another aspect of

Velma I was not expecting, but certainly something I saw coming from Juhee. Even though she was born and raised in South Korea, I always pictured Juhee being more at home in inner-city south Jersey, where women could still get away with leopard print tights and fuchsia four-inch heels on their way to the corner stores and the post office.

She batted at the air around her as we got out of the car. She gave each of us a hug and Dan followed suit with a looser embrace, patting us on the back with his smoking hand, his cigarette disappearing behind each of us for a moment. Then I heard Bonnie say, “Michael Flatt! Get over here you rascal!”

In the doorway stood a handsome man in a full-body Scooby-Doo suit equipped with a dog-eared hood and a zipper down the front, that at that moment remained down around his navel and revealed two silvery military grade dog tags, which glittered near the center of his chest. He had short brown hair and a politician’s chiseled face. He was carrying three opened beers in his paws.

“Hey girl!” he called as he came toward us. He gave Juhee and Dan a beer before reaching for Bonnie, then gave Clint a kiss on each cheek. “And this must be Iowa,” he smiled. I held out my hand, and after he shook it he used it to pull me into him and gave me a hug. His chest smelled like sandalwood and hops. My forehead barely cleared his clavicle.

#

The photo shoot started out in the street, with me taking several pictures of them looking stoic or scared, or stoically scared. I’m a whizz with a camera, but Clint was quick to direct which way they were supposed to turn, and who was supposed to stand

where, then finally moving everyone to a more wooded area behind Michael Flatt's house to give a better mystery-hunting background effect. Everyone was a good sport until he commanded Michael Flatt to jump into Dan's arms and something ran across Juhee's fingers as she foraged through the grass, pretending to have lost her glasses. After that, Dan suggested that we get a move on while the night was still young. Clint was the only one who had to be persuaded.

We hopped in Dan's car, and the girls told us they would follow after they each had another cigarette. "I could use a good stiff drink, if only to ease the pains in my sides," Clint whispered to me in the backseat as we both put our seatbelts on. He gingerly ran his fingertips down the side of his abdomen and practiced inhaling and exhaling in a careful and controlled manner. After Dan had pulled out of Michael Flatt's neighborhood, Clint's cellphone chimed. It was a text from Bonnie. Juhee and Bonnie were bowing out for the night. Bonnie had to be home by a respectable hour and she added that Juhee's feet hurt.

"They can't break up the team—that defeats the whole point of coordinating costumes," Clint said. He punched the keys of his cellphone in a quick reply and slammed it shut.

"Those dirty bitches," Dan said, turning up his stereo until the techno music hummed and the speakers shook the entire backseat, drowning out anything else Clint might have to say.

#

Dan sped down the Tamiami Trail, the only other major road that shadows the coast besides the interstate. He then pulled into a parking lot teeming with people: a man dressed as a Native American in a feathered headdress and what appeared to be tan gym shorts; a thin blonde woman dolled up as Wonder Woman; a man in his forties dressed as Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*; another dressed as Marilyn Monroe, who posed for pictures by pretending to push his dress down on that windless night. Dan had taken us to his favorite gay bar.

“Now these are some costumes,” I blurted, trying not to stare as Dan looked for a parking spot. “I’m going to feel underdressed.”

“There’ll be people not in costume too,” Clint offered.

“You look like Tiger Woods to me,” Michael Flatt said from the front seat.

“Thank you.” And because I didn’t know what else to say in the silence, “You look like Scooby-Doo to me.”

We got out of the car and waited in line. I stood huddled behind the three of them, and with Clint being the shortest of the three at 6’2”, my own 5’6” frame truly was lost behind them.

The three of them were actual towers of childhood iconography, and at the mere sight of them everyone outside of the club went wild. “Zoinks!” someone called out, and Dan did his best impression of being terrified. The doorman—a young man in his underwear with white wings attached to his back—began to sing the cartoon’s theme tune. The Tin Man, Dorothy’s companion, tapped the back of Michael Flatt’s shoulder

and complimented him on going all out for Halloween. He kept eyeing Michael Flatt even after he turned around. Clint readjusted his ascot and shifted from side to side.

Inside, we danced for a little while before Clint announced that he needed to sit down, walking off the dance floor and picking a high top that faced the floor, but miles away from the bar and the restroom. The entire club was black with bright golden spotlights and a multi-colored disco-balled light at the center of the dance floor shooting rays of sporadic light all around us. The place was large, larger than it had appeared from outside, and although it was full of people, there was still ample room to maneuver around. Couples gyrated on the floor to a faster remix of one of the songs Dan had played on our ride there. A drunken cross-dresser pulled a plastic contour of breasts from beneath his dress and swung them around over his head. I wondered if this was the Halloween my mother felt she needed to protect me from. Was I supposed to see sin in this man's heavy foundation, pressed-on eyelashes, or in his ability to stand in high heels while being completely toasted? I wondered if the sight of his drunken smile was supposed to make me run, or if this was the abomination I was supposed to belong to. Michael Flatt and Dan continued to dance, returning with drink after drink together, and then, drink after drink alone as Dan found a group of admirers and Michael Flatt a female dance partner. Eventually instead of going to the bar and then returning to come sit with us, they stayed closer to the bar more and more, until finally they were traveling to us for a breather instead of going to the bar for one.

Clint nursed the vodka cranberry Michael Flatt had slipped into his hands as he watched the dance floor from his stool. He never cared much for dancing in the first place, but that night he only managed two songs before he sat down.

A very cute Peter Pan in green tights danced around a guy dressed in a bowtie, cufflinks, and not much else. I swayed in my seat, wanting to dance, but not wanting to leave Clint alone in a club on Halloween night. That wasn't what a good friend would do. Being left alone at a dance conjured up all of those social school functions I had been roped into going to because my mom thought I was too antisocial. Sometimes I also had to attend because of my job as student council historian/unofficial newspaper photographer. Holding a camera actually made life all the easier, an eye pressed against the viewfinder and the camera hiding a third of my face. Those were nights spent waiting, watching other people have fun while all I wanted was to fast forward through my youth—the one time people were supposed to envy me for and suck the life out of me for in a pagan ritual, according to one of those VHS tapes. Instead, I tried to get Clint's mind off of the girdle he claimed was giving him bruises, so I complimented him on his successful execution of his Fred costume.

Compliments go a long way with us, and I could see the haze over Clint's face fade a little when I added that he looked much thinner than he had the last time I'd seen him. When I left his side to go to the restroom, I patted his hand. On my way back I stopped at the bar and fished Shaggy's car keys out of his front pocket while he was talking to Scooby, gently reminding everyone that I had work in the morning. Outside,

the angel in white underwear rushed up to Michael Flatt and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You look adorable in that costume,” he said.

“Thank you, baby. Have a good night and behave yourself a little bit.” He smiled his politician’s smile.

“And, Fred, Shaggy, you two look dead-on.”

Clint’s cheeks flushed, perhaps from the angel, the vodka, or the cooler night air.

I looked at them and smiled, observing the scene before me, a phantom camera held up to my eye.

How to Date Your Boyfriend: The Teenager's Guide

First things first: break up with your boyfriend. The reasoning behind your explanation to him is unimportant, however the more obscure and abstract, the better. Then, sneak onto your ex-boyfriend's Facebook account and attempt to change his password. When Facebook sends notification to your ex-boyfriend's email account, feign innocence. Find a new boyfriend. Show off your new boyfriend. Ignore your new boyfriend. Snoop around—find out when your ex-boyfriend gets a new girlfriend. Stalk this new girlfriend. Confer with your best friend that this new girlfriend is unattractive. Write an apology email to your ex-boyfriend for fighting with him. Ask him to come back.

Eat less. You are too depressed to eat. Throw away or delete everything your ex-boyfriend has sent you: specifically letters, pictures, voicemail messages, and previous emails. Keep the clothes and jewelry. Confer with your best friend that his new girlfriend is unattractive. Tell your older siblings about this new girlfriend. Call your ex-boyfriend. Call several times, because odds are his caller I.D. is on the fritz, and repetitive calling will clear things up. Demand that your best friend calls your ex-boyfriend and have him/her suggest that your ex-boyfriend come back to you. Allow your older siblings to write a nasty email to his new girlfriend demanding your ex-boyfriend back. You are powerless to stop them.

Confer with your best friend that his new girlfriend is unattractive. Write an email to your ex-boyfriend asking him where he has been and why he hasn't contacted you yet. Become flagrantly shocked when his new girlfriend responds to your older siblings' email—what does she *mean* by “it ain't happenin'?” Ask your best friend for advice. Ignore this advice and ask again later. Cry. Ignore your new boyfriend. Point out logical flaws in your ex-boyfriend's actions since he's started dating again. Paste your relationship situation online in help forums and ask for advice. Ignore this advice—those Internet dweebs don't know what it's like to be in love. Demand that your best friend spend the night. You need to be cuddled.

Map out your ex-boyfriend's activities. Tables, graphs, and anything else you can use to illustrate his movements to unsuspecting friends and family. Confer with your best friend that his new girlfriend is unattractive. Make your parents buy you mint chocolate chip ice cream by the quart. Write passages in your online journal about how lost you feel in the world and how cruel life can be. Ask your older siblings for advice, and relate to your best friend these new pearls of wisdom. Claim insanity when your best friend points out that they gave you similar advice first. Question your self-worth. Criticize his new girlfriend's sense of style, hopes and aspirations, or choice in pet. Call your ex-boyfriend. Wonder why he won't pick up. Use your imagination—he could be doing a host of horrible things right now. Follow this up by sending him an email explaining that he won't pick up his phone. Send a topless photo of yourself to your new boyfriend to keep him satiated. Do not explain why you're sending the photo, or respond to his reply. Walk your family's Dachshund as slow as possible.

Pray that your ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend will break up. Make suggestions to your Higher Being that you will become more religious if they grant your prayers. Develop a nickname comprised of your ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend's first or last names. Use this new nickname to describe anything unsavory, unfavorable, or unappetizing. Curse your Higher Being for forsaking you in your time of need. Confer with your best friend that his new girlfriend is unattractive. React violently when your best friend suggests that his new girlfriend is actually kind of cute. Use your best friend's favorite shirt to wash your car. For best results, wait until they are wearing desired shirt before proceeding.

Become an expert in your ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend's love life. Consider becoming a lesbian. Watch lesbian porn. Give up becoming a lesbian because watching lesbian porn gives you gas. Inform your best friend that his new girlfriend is unattractive. Pretend to move on by agreeing not to dwell on your ex-boyfriend. However, do not fail to mention ex-boyfriend during conversation, especially if the topic includes but is not limited to: children, diarrhea, eating, sleeping, breathing, nausea, life, death, condoms, Roman mythology, or 1040EZ tax forms. Ask your best friend if you should email your ex-boyfriend. Email your ex-boyfriend. Make wishes on stars and eyelashes—claim that it worked in Disney movies.

Slowly start to move on. Give the clothes your ex-boyfriend gave you to your best friend for destruction. Keep the jewelry. Seek professional psychological attention. Attend a few trial sessions, and then disbelieve the psychologist's diagnosis. There's no reason to believe a person who willingly surrounds themselves with nutcases all day.

Demand more ice cream from your parents. Tell your new boyfriend it is that time of the month. Refuse to see him. Forget to wash your hair. Develop a new uniform of sweatpants and winter coats, regardless of season. Vow vengeance against humanity over paper cartons of orange chicken with a side of noodles or a steaming bowl of undercooked oatmeal, dependent on the time of day. Picture yourself as an old woman swathed in black and wrinkles and unwanted facial hair. When you think no one else is home, belt Sinead O'Connor despite the dog's protests. Pick up your phone. Your ex-boyfriend is actually calling you.

Drop everything that you're doing, and sound as nonchalant as possible when you answer the phone. Secretly ask your Higher Being why He (or She) is doing this to you—you already know through your extensive sleuth work that your ex-boyfriend is still seeing his new girlfriend. Remain composed for the first ninety seconds of the phone call. Fall apart. Yell at your ex-boyfriend when he says that he isn't happy with his new girlfriend and that he wants you back. Identify with his new girlfriend and explain to him how she might feel. Call him a cheater. Tell him how much you miss him. Call your best friend as soon as you hang up and ask for advice. Try not to cry when your best friend calls you *the other woman*.

Call your ex-boyfriend back again, and explain to him that you don't want to become a home wrecker, on principle. Be sure to confuse your ex-boyfriend and make your intentions as vague as possible. Suggest that you just be friends. Then admit to your ex-boyfriend later that you can't be just friends. Continue to talk to your ex-boyfriend behind his new girlfriend's back. Question your self-worth. Wait for your ex-boyfriend to

break up with his new girlfriend. Text your new boyfriend; you forgot to break up with him. Confer with your best friend that his new girlfriend is unattractive. Apologize to your best friend for distrusting their advice. Promise that it won't happen again. Ask them for new advice.

Discard new advice. Wait for your ex-boyfriend to break up with his new girlfriend; he says he's going to do it soon. Ask your ex-boyfriend if he thinks his new girlfriend is more attractive than you. Scold your boyfriend for suggesting that his new girlfriend is unattractive. Ask personal details about your ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend's bedroom activities. Believe every word. Tell your ex-boyfriend not to break up with her just yet—you know that it's an inopportune moment for her, but you can't relay this to your ex-boyfriend, who knows less about his girlfriend than you do. Wait for your ex-boyfriend to break up with his new girlfriend. It might happen at any moment, and therefore you must check your phone and email address as often as possible. Ask your best friend not to tell anyone that you and your ex-boyfriend are speaking. If your parents knew, they would kill you. Forfeit your weekend rights to your older siblings. They wouldn't mind keeping their mouths shut if you did their chores. Write about relationships where people stay together even though they don't really love each other in your online journal. You are disgusted by these relationships.

Reveal more intimate feelings of affection towards your ex-boyfriend. Demand to know why your ex-boyfriend is planning on spending the night at his new girlfriend's house in order to break up with her. Develop this into a bar brawl-like argument. When your ex-boyfriend agrees not to spend the night at her place in complete fear and

compliance, insist that he spends the night, but only if he wants to. Leave this argument so that it is unclear whether or not you want him to spend the night at her place, and unclear as to whether or not he will or won't spend the night at her place. Claim that you don't want to know. Call your best friend. Explain what happened. Explain that your actions are logical and sound.

Wait by the phone for your ex-boyfriend to call you the night he breaks up with his new girlfriend. Tell your parents that you are considering getting back together with your ex-boyfriend. Do so in the bedroom or living room—whichever place has the least potentially deadly weapons. Claim that love without pain is not really romance, or that if fate were easy life would not be as exciting. Reject their offer for more clinical assistance. Ask him out on a first date, because you want to start from scratch. Draw up rules and regulations that you would like him to follow this time around. Explain to him that he has to earn his trust back.

Develop a panic attack when his ex-girlfriend tries to contact him. You cannot understand why she is being so clingy. Insist that he breaks up with her again—he clearly did not do so correctly the first time. Demand to have physical evidence of this second break up so that you may study his technique. Online is the preferable way to do this so that you may be emailed the transcript and dissect each line individually. Consider emailing his ex-girlfriend to punctuate the end of their relationship. After careful and thoughtful internal debate (lasting no longer than one hour and fifteen minutes) email his ex-girlfriend. The email should be short, courteous, and impersonal, such as: "I'm sorry

for your loss; you have my condolences.” Offer relationship advice in the form of a broad statement, particularly by metaphor usage. Be as cliché as possible.

Promise to be a better girlfriend. Continue to stalk his now ex-girlfriend in case she decides to pose a threat. Bring up her current affairs in light conversation, in order to test his tracking of her. Become upset when you realize that he no longer has any interest discussing his ex-girlfriend’s life or lifestyle. Update your best friend on her whereabouts, family events, college preferences, and anything else you can get your hands on. Everyone will be delighted to hear about her and how horrible she is now looking compared to you.

Switching Teams

I had decided to go to a psychologist because my mother was temporarily moving in with me. I was a grad student, and all throughout undergrad I was able to float by with minimal family visitations.

I drove to downtown Orlando, to a place called “the Center,” where they offered three counseling sessions for \$20 each, and emphasized free HIV/AIDS testing. “7 days a week, results in 20-40 minutes,” the sign on the door said. Inside, between a potted purple orchid and an array of vanilla-scented candles, was a large bowl of condoms and packaged lube. Everything felt foreign, but inviting.

#

Kylie, Britney, and I sat in the back of the naval base bus as it made its rounds along the Autoport, the Fleet recreational center, and the Docks. We had gotten on the wrong bus at the library, going counter-clockwise along the deflated circular route instead of clockwise. We were in no rush. It was a mental health day.

We had been friends for over two years, which was a long time on a Navy base because a sailor’s orders usually only last for three years in any given location. We met the first day of high school orientation, as freshman, when Britney leaned over to me and said, “did they just say we’re going to be taking eight classes a day? Does that include

lunch and the bus ride home?” After we were let out, I saw Kylie’s koala-faced watch with its little hands intently pointing out the time, and told her that I thought it looked awesome instead of saying hello. “Thank you,” she said in a high-pitched voice whose accent immediately gave her away as Australian. “That’s really nice of you to say that.” We had been friends ever since.

Sitting on that bus, none of us could muster the courage to look at each other. I eyed the soft velvet blue of the bus upholstery, the clean white floors, the canary yellow handles protruding from the roof to hold if anyone preferred to stand, but mostly at the buttons on the sides of the bus with small screens on top that lit up if someone pushed them. “Press to prepare driver to stop at next stop,” it read underneath the buttons, and beneath this, it repeated in Japanese. We rode the bus around the base until we got close to the front gate.

Even passing through the gate we were silent. Britney’s short, permed hair stood out in wild directions and Kylie reached out and smoothed it down. The mechanical *chirp chirp chirp* sounded signifying that the green crossing light was on, and I held a hand out to let the two girls go first as if the crosswalk wasn’t ten feet wide. They stepped out into the foreign metropolis, off base, and I followed.

#

I gave my name to the man at the front desk and he told me that John would be with me in a few moments. *John? Not Mr. Brewster, as I later learned from John’s business card?*

Sure enough, in a few minutes, a man appeared from a short corridor, introduced himself as John, and asked me to follow him back to his office. There were three leather chairs in the room they had given him, and a desk pushed against a wall. Another bowl full of condoms, and in the corner of the ceiling where the air conditioning unit was lurching on in its civic duty, watermarks had stained a hole around where some ceiling insulation used to be. John was friendly, but soft-spoken.

“So, what brings you in today?” he asked.

“Stress, mainly,” I said. “I just want to make sure I’m on the right path. Sort of like a tune up before the car breaks down?” And I told him about school, and how much space I craved between my parents and me, and how guilty this made me feel. I told him about growing up in a divorced household, living here and there, but specifically nowhere. He nodded frequently, and crossed his legs. Then he asked me what I saw when I pictured myself happy at thirty-five.

#

“I just don’t get it,” Britney said, our cue that she was ready to talk about it. We were on our way to the train station, which was a twenty-minute walk including a five-minute cruise through a breezeway mall. Clothing stores, grocery stores, fast food restaurants were squished side by side on both sides of the sidewalk, and people and signs in Japanese were everywhere.

“Let’s go through it again. Maybe there’s something we missed,” Kylie offered. “So, Eugene called you, and said, ‘we need to talk’...so, you agreed to meet him at the bus stop before school...but he said, ‘no, I think it’s best if I come over.’”

I looked up from my feet long enough to see Britney nodding and to dodge an older Japanese woman racing through the crowds with an umbrella and a few shopping bags.

“So you said, ‘all right, how’s after school?’ ...And he said ‘yes,’ and so the both of you went to your place after school...and he sat you down on your couch—”

“Yes. This is the same couch where we first made out. I put my hands down his pants and grabbed *it*, and he put his hands down *my* pants...”

“Wait, was it hard?” I asked. Britney shot me a nasty look. “It’s pertinent!” I cried in defense. “It’s pertinent to the situation. Was, you know...*it*...hard?”

“Yes!” she yelled over the crowd of shoppers and employees trying to gather passerbys into their stores to look at their wares. “Yes it was hard! It was walking into a wooden door hard; it was Ms. Boot’s algebra two mid-term exam hard; if it wasn’t attached to his crotch, I would beat you with it hard!”

I covered beside her.

“Right, soooo,” Kylie continued, “he sat you down on your couch, and he said, ‘Britney, I have a secret I need to tell you...I think I’m gay.’” Kylie considered this for a moment, and then turned to Britney. “Did he say, ‘I think I’m gay,’ or ‘I know I’m gay?’”

“Does it matter?” she asked, voice still strained from yelling at me.

“Well, you know...maybe it’s just a phase.” Kylie cringed and corrected herself.

“I mean, maybe, he’s just trying it out, you know?”

“He’s going for a test ride on someone else’s cock, Kylie?”

“...good point. Ok, let’s change directions. What warning signs were there that this kind of thing would happen?”

“That’s just it! There were none—one week, we’re holding hands and skipping down the hallways—”

“Literally,” I mumbled.

“—And the next week he’s telling me he’s in love with Joel!”

#

“A nice house with hardwood floors and my own office space with lots of bookshelves,” I rattled off. “A career in academia where I hopefully help students become exceptional writers; a pet—I was looking at those Portuguese Water Dogs, but it doesn’t really matter because I’m going to adopt anyway; a possible boyfriend/spouse...oh, and a Mini Cooper. I just love those cars.”

“Do you have a color picked out yet?” He smiled.

“Noooo, no, no, no,” I laughed, guessing that he was testing my level of neuroticism. I hesitated. “Well, the brown ones are pretty cute.”

#

Just outside of the train station, we stopped at Yoshinoya. Its bright orange sign acted as a beacon guiding us in for some comfort food.

Inside, the restaurant was set up diner-style, with two long counters that connect in a U-shape to allow the server the most efficient service route possible. Yoshinoya was known for its pandering to businessmen away from home, and single men who didn’t feel like cooking dinner. The main menu consisted of a bowl of rice topped with beef, and a

bowl of rice topped with pork. In Japanese, Kylie ordered us three “beefbowls” and three waters. She added in a can of coke for Britney—*if ever there was a time to drink*, she seemed to say, allowing Britney this one pass at a lecture of the perils of carbonated sodas and the osteoporosis it might cause in her later years.

#

Only after I had finished reciting my goal list did I realize I was probably supposed to give the Miss Teen America answer of, “I want to help promote peace in Sub-Saharan Africa,” or something to that effect. As John sat there considering the next direction he wanted to take, I kicked myself for not at least making mention of love, trust, or friendship in my future outlook of the happy and well-adjusted thirty-five year old me. These were evidently not big on my list of priorities. Maybe I’d have to go home and add “Make friends” and “Believe in love” in between the floor plans I was considering for my starter house and the piles of research I’d done on the general traits of various dog breeds.

For me, it was like a first date in reverse. Usually I’m the one asking questions: *Where are you from? Are you religious at all? And how does that make you feel?*

I told him that I was worried I was too blasé about life, and that while I didn’t feel taken advantage of, I certainly thought that being this non-confrontational was something that I definitely needed to overcome. To be more assertive.

#

On the local train north to Yokohama, Kylie and I watched Britney to see if she was on the brink of crying, or if she was holding back tears of rage. I didn’t know what to do if she’d lose it on the train, where stoicism reigned supreme and the Japanese sat in

glacial silence. Even if they had a cold, were sniffing and miserable, the only way anyone would know would be by the masks they wore to not spread their germs to other commuters. If Britney started crying, would we be enabling her if we tried to calm her down? Should we look out the window and pretend not to see the tears rolling down her face, impressed upon lush mountainsides and valley towns? Would that be the acceptable thing to do? The train conductor called out stop after stop: *Shiori-desu. Oppama-desu. Kanazawa-Hakkei; Kanazawa-Hakkei-desu.* People shuffled in and shuffle out. The only sounds between us were the soft dinging of the doors as they opened and closed at each stop, and the gentle whirl of the train as it revved itself toward the next destination.

#

“Well,” John said, putting his clipboard down, “I think you’re doing fine. We’re often led to believe that aggressive, dominant type personalities will succeed in life, but their ‘you do this; I’m not doing this’ method of communicating with people isn’t nearly as effective as nonaggressive type personalities who say things like ‘I want to hear what you have to say, and then I’ll tell you what I have to say, and we’ll see if we can’t reach a compromise.’” He paused. “You remind me of the department chair of Education at the University of Central Florida, where I’m going for my Ph.D. I’ve never heard him yell at anyone, or be aggressive with anyone, but he deals with conflict all day long, and he is a master negotiator.”

I smiled and nodded intently. That was a compliment, or meant to be one, I thought, and as a firm believer that the world was in a dire compliment shortage, I wasn’t planning on refusing any that floated my way.

#

In Yokohama, we got off the train, and talked about other things. About shopping centers, and beggars, and the harbor. Kylie still wanted to talk about it. I could see it in her face every time she looked at Britney, then looked away. Instead, she talked about fresh bakery bread, its deliciousness, and the importance of using sunblock.

I wanted to talk about it too, but I wasn't quite sure what to say. *Sorry your boyfriend switched teams on you—better you found out now than after a few kids, right?*

But it's Britney we were waiting on to broach the subject. After a few miles of walking, she said, "you know, it's not even that he's gay. Maybe we could sit down and talk through that. We could have been friends, you know? And it hurts that he was talking to Joel while we were together," she fought back a sob. "But those kinds of things happen—I'm glad he told me. What I really can't forgive is that he asked me to keep it a secret."

"His being gay?" Kylie asked, eager to return to the elephant trailing us on the street.

"His *shtupping* the class president?" I added, surprised at how quickly Britney was willing to forego that little bit of infidelity.

"Both. Joel's not out. No one knew. I didn't know. He wears a rainbow belt, sure, but I just thought he was really comfortable in his manhood, and I usually have an eye for this kind of thing. Or, I used to."

I rubbed Britney's coat sleeve, aware of her disdain for hugs and physical contact. She sobbed again. Dry. A real sharp intake.

“I can’t take the lies, you know? That’s what kills me. Now I have to lie to everyone. I either out them both, like I should, or I let him turn me into a lying little puppet to everyone I know. And you guys can’t tell anyone either. See?” she gasped. “And now I’m turning you two into liars! You guys seriously can’t tell anyone I told you this—it was in the utmost secrecy.”

“Dude,” Kylie frowned. “He broke up with you. For another man. You owe him no favors.”

“Kylie, seriously. Secrecy.” She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and made Kylie lock pinkies with her in a pinky swear, as people walked around us, out shopping or rushing off to work. “You too, Sherard,” as she grabbed my hand and forced her pinky into mine.

#

I just didn’t have the heart to tell John that negotiation skills were something that I was already familiar with. I unintentionally left it out. In Spain, my mother would use me to translate to the locals because I had learned more Spanish in preschool and in first grade there than she had learned in her entire life. I frequently softened mom’s words and dulled dad’s edges when they asked me how the other one was doing when I arrived in the airport between custody visits. Our high school didn’t have a Debate club or a Speech team—better: it had a Model United Nations club, and, in three years I wasn’t only the chair of a committee, transitioning easily between delegates and international conflicts, but I also became head of the entire conference that year, giving speeches before, during,

and after committee sessions. My official title, Secretary-General, got me more than just a few Kofi Anon jokes.

The whole beauty of being a nonaggressive person, I wanted to tell him, was that through transparency you achieve what you set out to accomplish—the best negotiators left you at a conference table thinking that the outcome was completely your idea, and that they had just helped clarify what it was that you wanted without any sort of hidden agenda. This is an art form somewhat akin to graffiti; you don't see it happening, and when you do, you feel the urge to stop it, as it's defacement of property. But once it's already out there, you accept it, embrace it as part of the city around you—as a part of the local culture that had been there for as long as you could remember, adding a bit of personality to a gray cityscape.

The more adroit you become at merging two different factions, the more neutral you have to be, I wanted to say. Partisan emotions will get you nowhere. So where is the part where your personality comes through? I was afraid that I had become so neutral I had taken on shades of gray; that I'd become so good at hiding what I really thought, that I might have stopped thinking at all.

I wanted to tell him these things—it seemed like a perfect conversation to have with a mental health professional—but I didn't, because I didn't want him to think that I thought he was wrong.

#

“Do you think it was his interest in manga?” Kylie asked as we walked back to the train station in Yokohama. We bought Japanese fashion magazines, and dangly charm

bracelets, and a wallet with an incredibly plump koala bear smiling on its side, all of which Britney deposited into her bag. Kylie was still looking for warning signs; a reason why—something to avoid for future reference.

“No, don’t be silly,” Britney said. Her sobs had officially crossed over into hiccups.

“Isn’t he also into furballs or whatever?”

“You mean, he’s a furry? *hic*.”

“Yeah.”

“No, furies are people who dress up like animals. Not *hic* necessarily much more.”

“Oh.” Kylie thought for a moment, and then looked at me. “You’ve been really quiet about this. What do you think?”

I had no idea what to say. I kept my eyes on my feet. “I knew,” I said, expecting one of them to catch my bluff.

“What do you mean ‘you knew’?” Kylie asked. “Like, all gay people can automatically tell when someone else is gay? That kind of ‘knew’?”

I smiled. “Well, yeah,” I said, enjoying this new secret superpower that I all of a sudden acquired. “But, there’s more to it than that. I also...kind of...slept with him. So.”

Before I could look up to gauge Britney’s reaction, the back of Kylie’s hand collided with my cheek. Hard. When I gained my sense of balance, I looked over to Britney, who had stopped breathing—moving—entirely. “*What did you say?!*” Kylie demanded.

“I was kidding! I was only kidding. Relax. Breathe,” I laughed as I rubbed my cheek.

They did neither.

“I’m serious! It was a joke. I was trying to scare away Britney’s hiccups. Worked, didn’t it?”

Britney exhaled, short and quick.

Kylie clutched her own chest, precisely over where her heart should be.

“Wow, Kylie, you hit hard,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she cried. At a loss, Kylie reached out and rubbed my shoulder.

Then, she punched it. “But, oh my God, don’t you ever do that again.”

Britney, delayed, reached for her own heart, and staggered around the sidewalk before falling over in a mock heart attack. She laid there on the asphalt, her own cheek pressed against a small circle of asphalt where thousands of Japanese people, foreigners, and those in-between must have stepped.

“I was only kidding,” I said. “It was just a joke.”

#

“Well,” John said, “we’re about out of time. Was there anything you wanted to say before you left?”

I shook my head.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yep,” I said.

“Now that I know more about you, next time we can talk about your relationship with your mother.”

Next time? I thought, but nodded.

“Relax, you’re doing fine,” he said again.

And when I got home that afternoon, I wondered if I really were, or if maybe I just acted fine because I didn’t know how to present myself anything else, and not get punched.

Big, Black, Woman, Tamra

It's four in the morning, and you're emailing your friends a copy of a Kim Addonizio poem full of lines like "Some men are a list of ingredients with no recipe," "Some men say your name like a verbal tic," and "Some men will blindfold you during sex, then secretly put on high heels," when you hear a crash in the hotel bathroom. You're torn between whether or not your email is starting to look like personal spam and asking your friend and colleague Tamra if she's *okay in there*. You don't want to make any more noise because the people next door have already made a noise complaint. You had spent the last two hours lying on your respective beds, writing emails to your students, and openly debating on whether or not catching your boyfriend kissing another guy at a bar constitutes cheating. The difference in opinion keeps coming down to time lapse and body language. Both of you are single.

You both have a blasé attitude about life and people: that is what attracted you to each other. In your Master's program, you would sit next to each other at social gatherings and give each other sideways glances when someone would say something dramatic. Your eyes said, *Are they serious?* Hers, *These people are crazy*. Everything else about you are opposites: she is Southern, you are from New England. She is a beast of a woman at six'two, your mother blamed your five'six stature on the cups of coffee

you snuck in middle school after she left for work. She is twenty-seven—the most perverted virgin you know. You are twenty-three, and thoroughly convinced by the fingers and toes required (and borrowed) that you are the biggest slut you know, which you keep firmly under wraps. Her gregarious and bubbly nature drew you to her. “Some men will say, ‘I’d like to see how you look when you come,’ and then hail a cab.” She was a boyfriend who didn’t want to fuck you and leave you.

You had spent the night before performing a reconnaissance bar crawl through Chicago’s Boystown. It’s a Wednesday in February. You arrived in the city at 11:04am, and after a Nepalese lunch, a Cuban dinner, and a nap, you were ready to explore the city, snow flurries or not. Tamra dwarves you as you walk down the sidewalks together, elbows interlocked against the cold. This slows you down. Tamra slows you down. She hobbles, and needs to take breaks. You even eat faster than her. This surprises you, because you are the slowest eater in your family. You wonder if this is because you’re both asthmatic.

Once, you had had sex with a dermatologist. In the midst of the throes, in flagrante homosexual delicto, presently in the act, he pinched your stomach three or four times and then said, “You used to be fat, didn’t you? I can tell. Your skin is has lost a lot of elasticity. Once you lose it, you can’t get it back. See?” He demonstrates on his on stomach, toned, and again on yours. Slightly flabby. You had just gotten over the childish hang-ups of being an overweight teenager: you had just stopped wearing large dark T-shirts and over layering. You had just made an appearance at the beach with your roommate, shirt discarded. You had been eating right and jogging on the weekends. You

thought you had escaped feeling like everyone was silently judging you for your lack of willpower, but there it was, pinching you in the gut, reminding you.

Tamra is nowhere near you on this journey. You have no idea how much she weighed and you knew better than to ask. You both deplore scales as “torture devices.” But she agreed to go to the gym with you three times a week because, like most Americans, you pledged just before midnight on December thirty-first to tone your body. And you both went. You were developing muscle tone. She was losing weight at a crippling, beginner’s rate. She was still taking the elevator between floors instead of the stairs, at the gym. But she was there. And being there, you thought, was half the battle.

The train whirls by your hotel. You feel at home in Chicago, compared to the chicken-laden suburbs of Orlando. The television in your hotel room doesn’t get a single channel. You don’t care. You’re content reading aloud your smutty, literary poetry and receiving noise complaints from a room six hollow inches to your left but still completely unimaginable—a complaint from the cosmos, like *quit wasting gas going to the grocery store for a carton of milk, and if you want to be taken seriously, stop wearing T-shirts with animated pillows on them*. That’s when Tamra comes barreling out of the bathroom in her leopard print negligee with hot pink trimmings. You think about the crash. *Are you doing okay?* you ask from behind your laptop. You want to add that if the people next door were sleeping, they certainly weren’t now.

“I flooded the bathroom. I almost died in there, oh my God, I almost died,” she laughs her anxious laugh. “Come look at this. I really flooded the bathroom. There’s no drain on the floor. None. That is not a handicapped bathroom—that is the bathroom of

death. I had a moment where I thought, ‘I’m really going to die in here.’ I got in the shower, and I was doing fine, and I was sitting down on the seat. And then I was like, ‘I...think I’m moving,’ and sure enough. Lucky I grabbed the handrails before I fell on my ass.”

You get off the bed and cross the room to reconsider the handicapped bathroom Tamra had requested once you checked in. She says it’s because you get a bigger bathroom without paying any extra cost. You will find out later that it was because she no longer could fit in regular bathtubs. When you first arrived, you were impressed at the spaciousness of it—the open closet, the wall cove that acted as a second closet, the small toilet in the corner, the ramp up to the shower where there was no tub and no tile but instead a bench with a raised toilet seat perched on its polyurethane finish. Now, you take in the puddles of water in the middle of the floor, the used hotel towel crumpled and damp in this corner, and the toilet seat in the other—boxers competing for floor space. Tamra is dramatic in your reserved view, but you realize that she wasn’t kidding.

“So when you take a shower, keep the water on low, because I didn’t realize that I was flooding the place until I was finished and I thought, ‘Oh, the floor is a lot shinier than before.’ And there was water everywhere. I cleaned most of it up but there was water even behind the toilet. It wrapped around the toilet. I couldn’t believe it. After I got out, I went to go get my shirt,”—she tugs at her negligee—“and I almost fell. I was like, ‘Sherard is going to have to come pick my naked ass up off this floor.’ And I’ll be in some inappropriate position. In the splits. You’d have to call an ambulance and they’d be like, ‘What happened?’”—she’s whispering now, so as not to offend our responsible

neighbors—“and I’d be like ‘I don’t know. There was me in the shower, and then my ass on the floor. Shower. Ass. Shower. Ass.’ And they’d say, ‘Ma’am, I think you missed a step,’ and I’d be like ‘Yes. Yes I did miss a step because I have no idea what happened. I literally missed a step. I missed a step, and I’m on the floor.’ And you know they’d be white. And they’d be like, ‘What is wrong with these black people?’ And it’s not even a black or white thing: it’s an ‘I’m about to die’ thing.”

You want to laugh at her, at the bathroom, at the people in the train racing by, but you don’t want her hard work in keeping the other guests happy to go to waste. You cover your mouth, and fold your body at the hip as you try not to let all of that energy out. You shake. You want to pat the molding of the doorframe but stop yourself in fear of how hard you’d hit it.

“Why they put the toilet thing in the shower, I don’t know. Do they think handicapped people are going to take a shit in the shower? They must think that we can’t hold it. ‘Oh no, I have to take a shit and I can’t make it to the toilet.’ And, it wouldn’t even make it down the drain either.”

You have to be careful. You’ve had to urinate for the last hour but you’ve been holding it in because Tamra is on her period and after she uses the restroom, the toilet smells like your mother. And, you hate how loud the stream sounds when it dives into the toilet bowl. You don’t mind the sound when you’re home alone, but you hate knowing that Tamra and anyone else who cares to listen could tell when you’ve started and when you’ve finished alleviating yourself. You feel like someone is going to judge you by the length of your piss. Like the people next door might make a complaint.

In the email you sent to your friends, you make “Some men are a list of ingredients with no recipe,” the subject, because to you it’s the most beautiful, opaque line in the entire poem. You think they will open their inboxes, see that tag line, and gain immediate interest because they will be able to relate it to their past relationships the way you do, or that they will see you in the subject too. You think of this when you try to tell to Tamra that her lifestyle is unhealthy. The ingredients are all here in front of you, but there is no recipe to tell her.

Instead, you let the moment slip you by. You promise yourself that you will have her walk up the stairs at the gym. You will start to lie about the distance to the nearest subway, and begin making her leave early so you can walk further distances together while you’re both in a city where you can walk a city block together. These are labors of love to help her slim down. You will feel the burden of carrying Tamra’s weight long after she has lost it. But that is not what will plague you. You will feel like you cheated Tamra out of her trust and naïveté for the sake of her health. You will feel that little loss of elasticity for the rest of your friendship.

Ai No Corrida

I hated angelic iconography. They were all wings. They were all curve hiding white tunics. All smiles, all the time. It was so disgusting. I hated seeing one on my dresser, performing a reconnaissance mission on my life. It didn't belong to me. It belonged to my "roommate"/landlord, who was back in town.

My Grammie, my dad's mother, put her arm around my shoulder once, when I was sixteen, and said, "Sometimes you've got to eat shit and smile in order to survive." She was talking about my volatile relationship with my parents—I was a teenager then who was ready to fly the coop and never look back but financially, escapism was an infeasible impossibility. And the way that she said it felt like a rite of passage. A reminder that there were people out there who would still share their experiences with me. She topped that off with another saying she used to say throughout my childhood: "We're *all* just a few scoops from the bottom of the pot." It was a precautionary tale, but at that moment, I used it to mean that I was at the end of my patience. I couldn't eat any more shit.

#

I hadn't always been one for reservation. Being conservative was a lesson I had to learn the hard way. I used to hover around my Grammie, when she went to pay for groceries. I loved her boisterous spirit. She was never more than five minutes away from

a good round of laughter, and I wanted to be as close to that as possible. “Go on ahead to the car,” she said one day, as I fingered the candies in eye level.

“No, I’ll wait here, just in case the check doesn’t clear,” I said, poking at the curves of the peanuts through the wrapper of a Payday. Later, she pulled me aside and explained to me how embarrassing what I said was to her.

While I was living with her, when my dad and my mom would both be out to sea, I said something even worse. In an argument, as a child, I went straight for the cheap shot. “You’re fat,” I yelled at her from the other side of the kitchen table. “No one likes you because you’re fat.”

It was effective. I watched her body language change as her shoulders began to slump and her jaw slowed. It was David against Goliath. I took this giant down. I was winning this argument. I watched her deteriorate into a chair before I stomped off into my room. My ears were still warm, but the ultimate prize was mine: the precious position of having the last word. Ten minutes later, she called me back out into the kitchen. She said, in very soft, disjointed words, “It really hurt my feelings when you called me fat. I’ve tried for years to lose this weight—you don’t think that I want to be skinny?—but I’m just so tired.” My Goliath was in tears. I wanted to win this round, but I never thought in a million years it would be possible to bring my grandmother to tears. She who worked retail during the day and waited tables at night but who still drove me to school and took me to the beach and spray-painted seashells and pinecones gold and silver in our backyard with me to decorate our bathroom. She was indestructible, and at that moment, I broke her.

For a long time, I couldn't say the word "fat" about anyone or anything. Even now I struggle pronouncing that one fatal syllable.

A few years later, when I was sitting in the Naval hospital waiting for a refill of my asthma medicine, I found myself studying a poster on the wall. It was of a sailor walking away with a bundle over his left shoulder while he looked back over his right, painted in the same fashion as Rosy the Riveter. His thick, parted hair and chiseled face reminded me of Cary Grant. Below the sailor's picture were the words, "If you tell where he's going...he may never get there!" Next to it was another poster, one of a boat tilted at an odd angle, half above water, half below. Underneath this read, "Loose Lips Sink Ships!" I leaned over to my mom and pointed at this poster. "What does that mean?" I asked. "Loose lips sink ships?"

"It means that you shouldn't talk to strangers," she said, avoiding looking up from her notecards. She was studying for another promotion, working her way up from enlisted to officer.

"What does that have to do with ships? Or Loose lips?" I asked, picturing someone grabbing my lips and pulling them away from my face, stretching them like putty.

She flipped over a notecard to see the answer she had scribbled in her slanted capitalized letters. "'Loose lips' means a person who talks too much. And if they tell too many secrets about where they are, where they're from, or where they're going, then terrorists could get a hold of that information and attack the ships that their parents are on." The index card squealed as she made sure it wasn't stuck to another one before

sending it to the back of her stack. “So, the poster means that if you talk too much, a lot of people could die.”

I stared at the image of the boat going down. Then I turned to the sailor for a while. He was smiling. He seemed happy that he was leaving. “Why would anyone talk to terrorists?” I asked.

“You don’t always know they’re terrorists. They could look like regular people, like you or me.”

“Oh.” I kicked my feet out into the air, and let them swing up and down for a while.

The posters looked like propaganda, a word I was proud for knowing, from World War II. I was sure that talking to strangers now would be all right, but just in case, I decided that every person I met should be seen as a terrorist until proven otherwise.

#

Even after I became a teenager, realizing that my art teacher in high school was no more than an art teacher, and that the girl in the bookstore in Philadelphia probably started a conversation with me because she was lonely, or being nice, or saw in me a friend she once knew, I still hesitated in speaking with someone I didn’t know. I stayed close to home, even though my parents and I never saw eye to eye. My dad would try to teach me manly things, like how to fix a toilet and how to shingle a roof and how to go days without brushing my teeth. My mom would question every choice I made that wasn’t masculine. Why did I smell those roses? Why was I interested in gardening at all? Didn’t I know that gardening was for women?

I became an expert at internalizing everything I did or said. I no longer spoke freely, opting instead to pause before each sentence, and even longer afterwards to replay the words aloud in my mind to make sure that I hadn't let anything slip. Saying the wrong thing could have given me away. People could have died.

It was only in her absence that I even began to understand this other part of my life. She had gone out to sea, and my two best friends sat me down in one of the booths at the food court on the naval base. It was our lunch break. We were fourteen. They sat across from me. They were quiet for a long time.

"Just so you know," one had said between bites of her apple, "if you were gay, we'd be okay with that."

"I'm not gay," I said. My mind was reeling. I wondered what I had said or done to bring myself to this point. Did I get too excited about something? Did I say too much?

"We're not saying that you are," the other said behind a mouthful of chicken tenders. "But if you were, we'd be cool with that. You could tell us."

"But I'm not."

"If you were," said the first.

The only time I spoke the rest of that afternoon was to answer a question in U.S. Government class. I went home and questioned everything. *Was I gay? What would it mean to be gay? Would I get in trouble for that? I think I'd get in trouble for that.* I decided not to tell anyone, except for my two friends. I conceded to them the next day after school.

“Do you remember that conversation we had yesterday?” I asked on the way to school. I couldn’t look either of them in the eye. My voice shook. “It’s true. I think I am,” was all I could say. I couldn’t form the word “gay”—I couldn’t verbally chuck that stone against myself yet.

“We know,” one said, as if I was repeating facts from the culture shock class the base recommends families take when they first arrive: Japan is about the size of California, do not pass food from person to person via chopsticks, the national dollar is the Yen.

“Really?” I asked. I glanced up from the sidewalk that I was consulting.

The other shrugged and said, “I thought so.” Then the topic switched to how much homework we have in World Regions class.

#

Several boyfriends would come and go after that. Alvin broke up with me after he realized that I was comfortable having sex but unable to cuddle. I didn’t know that a gay relationship could be sweet. That’s not how the church depicted them. Balázs, from Hungary, broke up with me because I wouldn’t tell him how I was feeling. *You’re sweet, I can tell*, he said, *but I never know what you’re thinking. You don’t let me in*. Brad kept telling me that he would watch me “disappear” for a few minutes in front of him. I thought that I had gotten better at hiding these feelings: the residual guilt, the constant need for repentance, the fear that my life of sin wasn’t worth burning in for in inordinate amount of time in Hell without any sunscreen or a slimming bathing suit for excellent tan lines, but most of them cited my emotional distance and silence in breaking up with me.

My relationships were failures. I was too Christian to be gay, and too gay to be Christian. I avoided introducing my boyfriends to my friends, and certainly to my family because I knew that there would be a short shelf life anyway. Only one would slipped past this rule and met my mother. I was going to college in Tampa and had an orthodontist appointment back in Port St. Lucie, the retirement town my mom bought a house in after she got out of the service. It was a three hour drive across Florida on highway 60, a route partially overrun by suburbs and strip malls closer to Tampa, and more and more engulfed by cows and pastures and passing zones where the two lane highway would open up for a third in the median for a mile or two the closer I got to the east coast. Andrew, my boyfriend, had the day off and asked to go with me. He held my hand for most of the trip, reaching out for it again and again even after I would insist that I needed both hands to turn the wheel. He sat in the waiting room while the orthodontist's assistant would drop tools in my mouth. When she finished inspecting my wires and placing new rubber ties over my brackets—black ones, as always—I insisted on taking him out to lunch. We had just spent three hours in the car, and one of us didn't even have to be there.

The Olive Garden, a block down the street, became the easy choice. I had the soup, thinking that there would be fewer items to get stuck in my braces for the ride home. That's when my mom called. Did I go to my ortho appointment? Yes. Was I in town without calling her? Oops, sorry. Was I hungry? I'm already out to eat. Where was I? Olive Garden.

"I'm five minutes away. I'll join you," she said.

“What?” I asked. What I wanted to say was *No, please don’t*.

“I’ll join you,” she said. “Unless you don’t want to see me.”

Well, in so many words, I wanted to say. Instead, “No, of course. I’m just...not alone. I brought someone with me from Tampa.”

“Oh. Well, if you don’t want me to come.”

“No, no...come if you want.”

“Are you sure?”

Is “no” even an option here? “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a little bit. I love you.”

“...I love you too.”

I hung up with my mom and looked over at my boyfriend. For the first time in my life, I considered dining and dashing.

“What’s a matter?” he asked.

“That was my mom. She’s on her way here.” I looked into his big, honey-colored eyes. I hadn’t prepared for this. What would I say to her? How could she sit at the same table and not realize that he and I were a couple? How could I say the right things to keep her happy but not doom my relationship? I barely mentioned her to him, and him never to her. We had only been dating for two months. This was too fast. I willed myself not to move, hoping that my stillness would cause everything around me to stop moving too. I stopped breathing. Maybe I would black out and wake up in the next life, the rest of this one fast-forwarded to completion. I didn’t want to see how it ended anymore. I already knew from the cues. A tragedy is a tragedy from the very beginning.

“It’ll be okay,” he said. “I’m good with moms.” He smiled that hearty, disarming smile that drew me to him on our first date. He wore his emotions on his sleeve, and his sleeves were always smiling. Still, this was my mother. Pentagon clearance, ten-hour workday, Church every Sunday mother. He didn’t stand a chance. She would guilt the happiness out of his soul, the way Ursula coaxed Ariel’s voice from her very larynx. It was over. “Sweetie? Look at me. Look at me. It’ll be okay, okay?”

I saw her red SUV pull into the parking lot, a big brown and golden Gucci purse getting out of the driver’s seat, followed by my mother. She came into the restaurant, spotted me, and came towards me. I had forgotten that God existed, but in that moment, I prayed. I prayed hard, asking for forgiveness, for a smooth afternoon, and as she drew near, for death.

“Hey mom,” I said, rising from my seat and hugging her.

“I can’t believe you were about to leave town without even calling me,” she said. “Who’s this?”

“This,” I said, “is Andrew. Andrew, this is my mom.”

My boyfriend got up from the table and hugged my mother.

“So, how do you know each other?” she asked as she sat herself and her purse each in a chair. “Do you have the same classes?” She looked at me. Apparently she wanted an immediate answer.

This is my boyfriend. We’ve been dating for a while now, and I like him a lot. He makes me laugh. I’m gay, mom. I’ve been out for four years and I’ve never told you because you’d call me an abomination. You’d tell me to get right with God, who has a

horrible track record lately of not giving me anything I ask for. But I'm gay and I'm happy and Andrew is a part of my life and if you don't like it, then that's your prerogative. My line of sight went from her to him and back again.

“We’re...friends,” he said. “I don’t go to USF, but I go to another university in Tampa—Stetson.” He smiled at me before taking another bite out of his chicken alfredo.

He was, indeed, a hit. She loved him. She told him that next time he was in town, he should get in touch, and he agreed, which added an extra layer of fear onto my already paling stomach. I couldn’t even drive home. After we said goodbye to my mother and watched her drive away, I gave him my keys. He adjusted the driver’s seat, lifted the rearview mirror a little, and drove back to Tampa for me. On the way back, he never once let go of my hand.

#

I never intended on telling my parents that I was gay. My mother had hinted throughout the years how despicable she thought homosexuality was. She was fond of the word “unnatural.” Dad I never told in fear that he would tell mom. For a long time she would tell me how wrong it was, until I went to college and stopped trying to hide it, leaving out on display a collection of gay political magazines and dropping the pretense that I was too busy with school to date, opting for silence instead. Then my parents began to address it, this queer doppelgänger of their son who would float into the room behind me. “You’re doing homosexual things, aren’t you? With other boys?” mom would ask.

I knew better than to answer. Loose lips get hours of theological debate.

“You’ll grow out of this once you finish college,” she would say into my silence. I would try not to laugh. *Yes, it’s just a phase. No, I won’t be growing out of it.*

When we were alone, Dad would ask, “So, are you seeing anyone over in Tampa? There are a lot of attractive college...people out there. C’mon, you could tell me.”

Usually, when I finally worked up the nerve to speak to my parents, it was when I was single, so I wouldn’t have to lie about my life. That’s what I told myself. It wasn’t a lie. Not at the moment.

#

If stereotypes hold true, going for my M.F.A. in creative writing should have been a gigantic Pepto-Bismol colored sign that on the hour every hour shot glitter and assorted cream puff related hor d’oeuvres all over the neighborhood. *Well educated? Working in the arts? Pierced ear? He’s not just gay—he’s a class A certified homo. Check his wallet for his gay card. It’s probably stuck behind his gym pass. Why is it so sticky?*

Even though it was only for two years, in Orlando, they were the toughest years of my life. I went to graduate school full time, and then I helped teach undergraduates, shadowing professor after professor until I was handed my own students to teach. But it was what I lived for, how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I knew this, at twenty-two.

I had, in the meantime, fallen into a dangerous living situation. Mom’s best friend lived five minutes away from campus, and he was moving to Texas for a better job offer but he didn’t want to sell his house in the real estate slump, or in case the job didn’t

pan out the way he planned. Between the two of them, an arrangement had been made. They insisted I stay in his house: I would cover the bills, and keep up the appearance that someone was living there to prevent a break-in. He would charge me two hundred dollars as discounted rent, him having learned from mom that this was the price I was contributing to stay in my grandmother's trailer across town.

“You can't say no,” mom said.

I hesitated.

“It's a great deal.

“It's close to campus.

“You'll be living by yourself.

“And if you don't, think about what kind of message you'll be sending. He's my closest friend and you won't even watch his house while he's gone.”

I had clocked myself from my grandmother's house to the university. Forty-five minutes. Thirty if I took the toll roads. With a six-dollar toll charge, at the end of the day—no discount, as suggested by the toll company for purchasing a toll pass. I agreed to watch his house. I had been paying three times the rent back in Tampa, so with some budgeting finesse I knew that I could manage to pay him rent and still help my grandmother out. I had this covered.

Mom's friend was an ex-Marine, a fact I couldn't wrap my mind around because he was a talker. He spoke at you, commandeering every discussion, every event. He never slowed down, never appeared tired. His house was decorated from ceiling to floor with trinkets from all of the places that he was stationed. After showing me around, he sat

me down and promptly told me everything that he had been doing in the past four years since I saw him last, before launching into childhood stories of he and my mother, and finally—after the sun had begun to set—asked me if I would watch the house.

I told him that I would, as long as I didn't have to dust. Grammie agreed that it would be more efficient for me to stay in his house, if he was offering. I didn't have the nerve to tell her I would be paying, because then she wouldn't ask me for rent at her place. In a good family, we kept secrets like that from each other. Out of love.

For months, this worked out well. He put me up in his guest bedroom and left with me a six-page handwritten instruction booklet, including phone numbers of his extended family if anything went astray. He would call every other month and ask for updates on the house, asking me if I remembered to water all of the plants in the backyard, if I had flushed the master bedroom's toilet in the last two weeks before he would explain again why it was important that I flush it every month, moving next onto whether or not I was remembering to lock all of the doors and then leading me through a verbally guided tour of every house that he had considered purchasing in Texas since he last called, ending each one with "but it wasn't the right one for me."

Whenever I would try to cut him off, he would start anew, like an invasive weed determined to present itself in any way possible. If I tried a harsher approach, raising my voice or standing my ground, he would tell me that I had no respect for my elders. "And I know your mother raised you better than that," he would say. *She didn't raise me at all*, I would think into my lap as he continued where he left off, beat kept, interruption forgotten.

Things began to deteriorate when he ordered house maintenance while he was away and expected me to be home every day to let them in, and to call him every afternoon with an update of how much work they've finished, complete with pictures. I wasn't in a position to sleep for eight hours, let alone play an active part in micromanaging while three men removed and replaced bathroom tiles, repainted the fence, and put in new light fixtures while I worked and went to school. I started avoiding his lengthy phone calls. His response was to call more often. Chronically, until one day, I came home to find a yacht of a car, gleaming white, in the driveway. Just by the size of it, I knew that it was his.

Instead of going inside, I turned the car around and drove. Somewhere between Tampa and Orlando, nearing Lakeland, I called my latest ex-boyfriend, Brad. "Hey, can I crash at your place tonight?" I asked.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Nothing. Long story."

"You remember where I live?"

"Yeah."

It was the longest conversation we had in months.

When I returned to Orlando the next day, his car was gone. He had cleaned the entire house, including the bathroom I was allotted, by shoving everything that did not belong to him into my room. A part of me was grateful to not have to hear him go on in another tirade. I would have sighed the glorious sigh of a waitress when she comes home

and plops herself into the comfiest chair of her house if it wasn't for an alien shape looking up at me from my now overcrowded dresser.

There, on top of a pile of mail I hadn't gotten around to opening, beside my bottle of shampoo, was a wooden angel figurine. It was a gift for him from my Mom, while he was gone. I had left it out on the kitchen counter so that he would see it.

This is what made me snap. This is what made me lose all sense of sensibility.

I sent Mom a lengthy email. "It's the fact that he crammed that wooden angel that you put out as a gift to him on my dresser too," I wrote. "What the fuck is that shit? Not only is that disrespectful and childish—something that a bunch of teenagers in their first semester of living in college together would do—but I would never own anything as gaudy as a fucking angel figurine. I live in a museum of useless trinkets and the one out of the thousands in his house he doesn't recognize is all of a sudden offensive and has to be removed. And if he knew anything about me, he would know that one, religion is the biggest crock of shit that I have ever had to deal with in my entire life, and two, I would rather suck Bill Clinton's cock than put up with a litany of useless knickknacks in my life and in my décor. I am not him. And I am not you. I don't hold the same core values and beliefs." I was vicious. I was vile. I held nothing back.

She replied the very next day. In her comments, she wrote that he and I had to work out our differences. That my lack of communication was a breach of contract in the verbal lease—that I wasn't holding up my end of the agreement. I had time to speak to my friends, she wrote, how was it I didn't have time to speak to him?

“And about being ‘gay,’” she began. “Nature itself would show you that it’s wrong. If males were made to be with males, and females with females, how do you think you and I would’ve been born? You’re a college student—you do the math,” she wrote. “Have you noticed that every living creature on earth has an opposite sex? Are you telling me that nature is wrong?” she wrote. “Please, educate me by telling me about the God you serve. How did he create you? It doesn’t take a rocket science to realize this,” she wrote. “I don’t know at which point you became gay—maybe a man molested you and I didn’t know about it. Psychologists and Physicians would refer to your behavior as ‘Gender Identity Disorder,’” she wrote. “The one true God refers to your behavior as sin. The Bible talks about the perverted fallen angels that enter people’s bodies. You have one of those spirits,” she wrote. “These are the same spirits that enter people who choose to have sex with animals, children, and rapists,” she wrote. “The Bible talks about the anti-Christ that is setting the stage for his coming,” she wrote. “He’s gay,” she wrote. “Gays coming out into the open and getting married is expected to happen because the Bible is being fulfilled,” she wrote.

There it was. My homophobic mother, in black and white. This hideous, irremovable stain in my life story.

Later that day, I sent her an email. It consisted of a request not to come to my graduation and a link to a list of animals in which homosexuality had been documented. My personal favorite was the Griffon Vulture, who became famous when two males started fucking each other at the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo, and then built a nest and raised an egg together. Seven days later, her friend sent me a four page letter noting “failure to

communicate” among six other reasons why he was giving me two week’s notice to vacate.

#

In those two weeks, a few days before Grammie went in for heart surgery, Grammie called me, leaving a message that it was urgent that I speak to her. When I called her back, she asked if I would come visit her before she went into the hospital. “Please,” she said. “I just heard. And, I’m so sorry.”

I’m so sorry, she said, voice strained. The words echoed between my ears on that toll road. So sorry. So sorry. So sorry, she said. She said that she was so sorry. Here she was apologizing to me for my mother two days before she went in for surgery. She might not return, and her lasting words to me would have been “I’m so sorry.”

She answered the door with tears in her eyes. With all of my practice manning up between my parents, few things fazed me. But watching my grandmother cry, and knowing that I was responsible for her tears, struck me at the very core I had strived for years to hollow out. She didn’t say anything. She just held me in her arms.

#

Dad heard about this fight weeks later, after I had moved out and neglected to give anyone my new forwarding address, a testament to how well communication works in my family. First, it was a message through the phone. He had spoken with Mom, and he wanted me to give him a call. He couldn’t make scars heal or the past disappear, he said, but he wanted to offer some insight if I would take it.

A few days later, he sent a message over the Internet. He had thought my mother and I had gotten into a fight over something trivial, but after speaking to her again, realized what had really been brought out into the open. He said that he wanted to make my pain to hurt a little less, but that he was at a loss. My dad, in his infinite wisdom of plumbing, electricity, and algebraic equations said, “I’m your parent until one of us dies, and we’re stuck with each other. Sorry.”

Sorry, that day, was better than being safe, better than keeping my mouth shut and pretending, for the rest of my life, that my mother wouldn’t detest me, and my boyfriends, if she knew about them. *Sorry* was acceptance. *Sorry* was a five-letter word for love.

Estuary

Upward

I stare at ceilings. Popcorned, Styrofoam, Plain. It's better than looking at the walls. The walls are always white, all the time. Every poster that goes up has to be taken down. In Iowa, when I was sixteen, I painted the walls of my room blue, with green trim on the molding. Both were too pastel, and by the time I had finished, I felt like I had painted myself a nursery. It didn't matter. I moved out two weeks later.

#

Layers

Two scarves, three pairs of gloves. A t-shirt, a long-sleeved shirt, a sweater, a hoody, a jacket. Two hats, one that makes you look like you've schlepped across Siberia on foot. Pajama pants. Jeans. Another pair of jeans. Three pairs of socks. Boxers and briefs. Boots. 14 degrees. Your toes are warm. Your face is cold. New Years arrives with you shivering inside Port Authority instead of out on the streets of New York celebrating. You vow to tell no one.

#

Cream Colored Escape Artist

There's a spider that lives in my car. It perches itself between the window and the car door, alternating windows, leaving webs between the seats. I don't know how to get rid

of it. When the sun is rising, or when I'm getting on the highway, the spider scurries its thin legs across the windshield and I wonder what I can grab to smush it out of existence, to end it haunting me. It gets away every time.

#

The Last Hour

You find white cardboard with the face of a clock in the glove compartment of the rental car in Germany. You twirl its hands throughout the streets of Frankfurt while your mom drives. *Son las dos y media*, you say. *Son las once de la noche*. *Quiero dormir en las once de la noche*. You leave the clock in this position on your seat when your mother takes your hand and leads you into the American Embassy. You wait in a long line, wishing you had brought a book instead of your Gameboy. You're thirsty. You're bored. When you return to the car, there is a ticket on the windshield. The only part of it you understand is the time: 2300 hours.

#

Plush Scottish Terrier Keychain Behind the Washer

Four hours. I can move everything I own in less than four hours. Anything left behind must not be remembered. There's no looking back. That's how accidents happen—not looking where you're going.

#

Wal-Mart

Spanish Moss does not grow in correlation to the cardinal directions. Like an elderly woman's bun unraveled, it rests wherever it chooses to rest. In the afternoons, the

Floridian sun is hidden behind an assembly of clouds. You can't tell where you are by where you're standing. You just have to know. If you don't know, you can buy a map, and study it. But the cashier will laugh at you when you buy it. She'll say, "What, you don't have GPS?" And you will try not to ask her why she works at a discount store.

#

Gaijin Ryoushi

I didn't know what to do if I caught one. I just wanted to feel the fish dancing around in my fingers, to say that I caught it with my bare hands. I stalked them all that afternoon in Hanuama Bay, hoping most for the Humuhumunukunukuapua'a, mostly so I could use the word Humuhumunukunukuapua'a in a sentence. I was too clumsy. Too rash. Too excited. Two Japanese girls came up to me and asked me if I would take a picture with them—the brown American boy who tried to catch fish with his bare hands. I was scared. I ran up the beach and asked my dad if this was allowed. He shrugged and said, "What's stopping you?"

#

Tampa To Philadelphia

Hours 1-5: Excitement. A journey ahead. Even pacing. Level headed anticipation. Internal calculations.

Hours 5-10: Longing. Regret. Second guessing, mind wandering, doubtful considerations. Thoughtless snacking: sweet or salty. Sweet and salty. Chocolate covered pretzels. Life. Life is chocolate covered pretzels. You think you want more, even though you think you may have had enough. Just a little more, you think. A little.

Hours 10-13: Singing to stay awake. Conscious attempts to stay under the speed limit. The cops are supposed to be vicious here. You're scared. You have to pee. You think you'll hold it past the state line.

Hours 13-16: Traffic. Stop. Go. Stop. Don't go. Hills. Hills scare you. Your car can't take hills like it used to. You want to point back at your license plate when the others zoom by. You say sorry to your windows. You know they don't hear you. No one will hear you.

Hour 17: Arrival. Locking the doors to your only way out. They want hugs. You ask for a shower.

#

Roommates

Pharmacy major. Fire alarm with unsupervised bagel. Progressive Catholic demi-god. Kitchen utensil leaving Marine. Pear-shaped. Gamer. Big breasted tomboy, Computer nerd Virgo, Lies to boyfriend to get pregnant. Ex-bouncer. Cock-a-doodle-do alarm clock. Figurine collector. Jewish siblings.

#

Waffles

When you were seven, you got stuck overnight in Houston. You were by yourself. You were a ward of the airline company. They put you up in a nice hotel room with two beds and a television set that you could leave on all night if you wanted to. And you did. You watched *Jaws*. You jumped from bed to bed frightened, refusing to let a foot touch the floor. The airline company took you out to breakfast at the Waffle House the next

morning. You were allowed to order anything you wanted. You forgot you were homesick.

#

Wives' Tale

The sailors' wives call it the three-year itch. It itches, too—worse than the chicken pox my parents never let me catch, worse than the poison ivy I did. It itches late at night, when the moon is full and I can't breathe. I think it's the asthma, but asthma doesn't make a person want to disappear into the walls. It doesn't make them want to row onto the ocean and stay there, nestled by the thrashing of the molecules that have been to India and back; that have tasted Norway and cuddled the coast of Chile. Asthma doesn't make a person jealous of water.

#

Anti-Diphenhydramine

You think you have the opposite of motion sickness. But instead of wanting to throw up, it makes you want to cry.

#

Fluffy Snow

I worked all summer between sophomore and junior year of college. The end of August appeared. I knew that the next fifteen weeks would mean more work. A full time student is a full time employee. I knew that I had to take my chance, in this week before school began to make a break for it. I hadn't been to Arkansas. What's in Arkansas? I had to find out. I drove from Tampa Bay up to the Bayou, up through the western ends of

Mississippi. There was cotton everywhere, fields of snowy white in the warm, hazy afternoon. I was tempted to stop and take a ball, as a memento. I stopped the car by a field without a fence. I got out. Hand on my door, I thought about the penalties of stealing cotton in the Bible belt.

#

Not Your Cheese

Your mom is a photographer who doesn't take pictures of you. You ask her to take a snapshot of where you're standing behind a snow bank in South Korea. You love the cleanliness of snow; how it makes everything disappear. After the shutter clicks, you slip on black ice. You think the universe is taking retribution for your self-centeredness. You become ashamed of having your picture taken.

#

Farmland Footbridges

I moved to the Midwest for a change of pace. I thought perhaps that it would slow me down, force me to appreciate the land and the sky. Every day, I walked downriver to Theater Literature, to Intro Philosophy, to Math for Bio-Sciences Majors. Every day, I crossed a bridge I wished I hadn't.

#

Flying Away

You used to chew Juicy Fruit to keep your ears from popping. When it would run out of flavor, you would add another stick to the old wad, letting it grow in your mouth. Now you prefer spearmint, one piece. It loses its flavor before the plane takes off, but you keep

chewing long after you've landed. You don't want to throw the gum away because it's the only thing that connects you with feeling like you live above the clouds.

#

Death Wish

I bought an orange suitcase to organize my papers for a conference in Chicago. I got it six months in advance, and took it with me everywhere I went. I wanted to go overseas to somewhere exotic with it, like Urubamba or Kali Gandaki. And when I fell off the side of the valley, or was found in a ditch suitcase open in hand—contents scattered—I wanted the locals to be unable to identify me. I wanted them to bury me, in these rough sun hinted places, with a tombstone reading, “Man with Orange Briefcase.”

#

You Can't Miss Your Flight

You are four years old and you're running as fast as your plump legs can take you so you can keep up with your mom in the airport. You're late for your flight. You can't miss your flight. You think your mom will leave you behind if she makes it and you don't. You trip. Your two bulging front teeth inject themselves into your lower lip. They leave exit wounds like bullets your tongue has coughed up in a war against itself. You cry. And you run. You can't miss your flight. You make it to the gate. You and your mom are the last to board. Your chin is covered in blood and tears. The flight attendant hands your mom gauze and something that tastes like sugar for the wound. The skin beneath your lip never heals. Hair will refuse to grow in this spot when you reach puberty. You will feel deformed.

#

Smelly Locker

Out of all of the things about Hawaii I miss the most, it would be the spam musubis my dad would pick up for me from Seven-Eleven. Spam, rice, with a seaweed wrapper around the middle. This is what the afterlife tastes like. When I was in Japan, in high school, I rode the bus with a Filipino kid who knew how to make them. When I did him a favor, or when I had a major tennis match, he would bring some to school and hand them over to me by third period. His locker was right by the door to English 9th grade honors. I would walk by his locker, nose close to the metal grate, and inhale.

#

How You Came to Hear a Rooster Crowing in the Outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida

You love running but hate treadmills. You run at four or five in the morning, so you can see the stars and avoid the locals driving down the state roads. You swear the air tastes different at this hour. You love that there are no mirrors around to display your reflection. To run and run and still be in one place at the gym underneath the fluorescent light feels like drowning to you. Two neighborhoods west, a dog will run along beside you. Three neighborhoods south, as you near a major intersection, you will hear a rooster mourn the loss of this dewy air.

#

New

Port Saint Lucie is a town so new that the city council hasn't gotten around to putting up sidewalks in all of the residential areas. Or, like most Floridian towns, refuses to build

them. There are only ditches to save the homes from flooding. I used to walk the 2.6 miles to the local community college. Once, a tall man in a black pick-up truck pulled over by the side of the road in front of me and asked me if I was having car troubles. On another day, it rained without warning. The ditches swelled. I stood out in the middle of the road, without an umbrella, and stared up into the sky with a look of twisted, angry shock. There, standing on the heated black asphalt between earth and sky, I flooded too.

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

Welcome to the Author Hour here on LGBT radio. I'm your fabulous drag queen host, Opal Soledad, and I'm here today with Sherard Harrington, who is about to defend his thesis, *Please Don't Interrupt Me While I'm Ignoring You*. If you've just tuned in, don't be an asshole and change the channel. What made you decide to do this essay in interview form, Sherard?

It was one of those decisions that happen, as poet Brendan Constantine suggests, “at the four A.M. of the soul.” It was also inspired by a drag show I watched in Chicago where a guy—well, girl—came out on the stage wearing a monopoly game. Dress made of the paper money, board doubling over as shoulder pads...it was nothing short of impressive.

Last week I was Lady Gaga in her *Telephone* era. Guys kept coming up to me asking me for a soda. But I love the Gaga. And the color orange. Would you consider Brendan Constantine to be one of your influences?

Oh, no. When it comes to my work, I'm more so influenced by Kim Addonizio, or Joseph Mills, given the lowbrow prose feel to their poetry, and their ability to really hit the reader at the end of their poems. I'm not there yet with my endings, but it is something I envy. When it comes to prose writers, I'm enamored with Rita Ciresi, Nick Flynn, Lorrie Moore, and David Sedaris of course—I modeled this thesis after his first publication, *Barrel Fever*.

***Barrel Fever?* There's a cream for that, honey.**

No, *Barrel Fever* is amazing. I chose it specifically because it's a collection of stories and essays, in that order. I really wanted to do a collection of short stories, and I think that bipartisan collections like these are undervalued by the market and I don't know why. I think it's very telling to see an author's fiction and nonfiction in the same collection.

What could that tell me about you?

Um. Uh. Way to put me on the spot there.

We could put me on the spot. *I* look pretty damn good today. *You* haven't even noticed.

I'm sorry. You look very—

I know. So what kind of writerly habits do you have?

Well, I write when I can. Sometimes I play around with writing exercises. Sometimes they'll give me an idea that'll give me an idea. That sort of thing. But the biggest inspiration for my short stories has to be other published works. I love to read a nonfiction piece like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* or Rachel Herz's *The Scent of Desire* and then create characters around them. A good writer is a better reader.

Let's talk about some major themes in your collection.

In my fiction, almost all of my stories portray a sort of nervous or neurotic character. They usually have a difficult time communicating with the people around them. So I would say that communication is a definite theme. My characters also tend to actively avoid conflict, or spend a great deal of time building themselves up to handle conflict.

A little tip to your characters: Valium. Kidding. I noticed that you had *Valley of the Dolls* on your list. I'm more of a Dirty Shirley kind of woman myself. Keepin' it classy. We all have weaknesses—like our pool boys. Would you say that avoiding conflict was one for you?

Yes, I—

Give me twenty dollars.

No.

Liar.

When it comes to fiction, one of my weaknesses would have to be conflict. I avoid it a lot in my personal life, and that seems to have trickled onto the page. When it comes to nonfiction, I still find myself sort of holding back when it comes to my friends and family.

Did you feel guilty exposing your friends and family on the page?

My general rule is that for as much as I sell out my friends and family, I try to sell myself out even more.

A good rule to have. Let's talk about the influences for each story, starting with "The Lotus Flower."

"The Lotus Flower," was the result of mixing an imaginary discussion with my closest friend from high school and the more glamorous career path of my older cousin. As an extra on the television show *Law & Order*, as a model, and as a track star, my cousin quickly "banquished"—causing both my banishment and my vanquishing from what I thought was a commendable life track in the eyes of my mother's family members—me into the black sheep category, and for a brief moment, I wanted to stand in his feet and view the world through his eyes. But I also wanted to maintain the fears and the insecurities that I face when confronted with a future in the arts.

Is he single? You should give me his number at the end of this interview. How about "Underwater?"

"Underwater" was inspired after reading *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. Here we have a neurotic housewife who is smarter than she initially seems. She is self-conscious about her physical appearance and the social expectations of America—knowing that most marriages in America end in divorce, she attempts to create a new way

to prevent her marriage from crumbling, while putting her marriage in danger in the process.

And “Connection?”

“Connection” is a flash that draws from my experience in my Model United Nations club in high school and my interest in the tangible aspects of diplomacy and world summits. Having served as Secretary-General to the Far East M.U.N. conference in 2005, I found myself in a great position of power despite the fact that I was more personable than professional in my speeches. Dr. Akmed is based off of that time in my life.

When I was eighteen, which we’ll pretend was three years ago, I found myself doing something similar. I was hosting the fashion show at my high school, and this girl came onto the stage wearing this beautiful, orange, Gaultier inspired gown with the infamous breast cones, and when she got down to the end of the runway, she turned the wrong way and knocked the girl after her clear off the runway with her cylinder boobage. So tell me about “Golden Auratum.” What a name. I may pass that on to a friend who does drag in lots of glitter.

Auratum is a scientific name for “lily.” Darlin’ Neal, author of *Rattlesnakes and the Moon*, learned that I had spent several years in Japan, and that it had affected my life and my writing to a substantial degree. “Have you ever written about your experience over there?” she asked. And my answer was an uneasy *no*. “Golden Auratum” was

created from that chasm. I had just finished reading Rachel Herz's *The Scent of Desire* and the year before I had watched *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* as directed by Tom Tykwer and I knew that I had to write a story in which the olfactory sense played a pivotal role. Thus Yuri became a perfume vendor. Yuri leads a life of subtle desperation, as most Japanese men and women do. When I wrote this story, I thought back not only to my experiences in Japan (such as c-mail, meaning cellphone-mail, instead of texting) but also to my studies in learning Japanese. Some of the sentences I wrote for "Golden Auratum" came to me in Japanese and then I translated them into English, which is why the syntax for this story may feel more foreign than my other work.

And "Who's Hungry?"

"Who's Hungry?" was the compromise that I wished I could have achieved with my own mother. Having spent a few years in New England, I wanted to capture one of the local voices without sounding too schmaltzy. And so, I set out to create what is in my view, a likeably unlikable narrator. I wanted her heart to be in the right place for all of the wrong reasons.

Ok, what about "The Party," girl?

"The Party" was originally a narrative prose poem that I did not have the courage to show to anyone, because in my opinion it failed as a poem. But as flash fiction, it blossomed. Here, I wanted to capture in as few descriptions and lines as possible the beautiful spirit of knowledgeable, well-traveled older women who somehow continue to

remain humble and earthy, even in the even of personal catastrophe. The examples of this spirit in my personal life continue to grow at a remarkable rate.

“Only?”

Imagining my life if I hadn't have chosen creative writing but went with my deep respect for architecture instead, I conjured up the base elements of “Only.” But with projections of myself and my life (as suggested in “Switching Teams”), there is a house, a pet, a decent car, but seldom is there any sort of romantic partner. Instead, the Weimaraner—chosen here because of their documented distaste for abandonment—became the fixating point for conflict and intimacy. Originally this story was from the dog's perspective, but I have found that the sadness of this piece became more enriched when I relayed the facts through Scott's point of view.

And the last short story in your collection *Please Don't Interrupt Me While I'm Ignoring You* is called “Warning: Graphic Novel.” Tell me about that. And where did you get the name *Please Don't Interrupt Me While I'm Ignoring You*?

“Warning Graphic Novel,” was inspired by my periodical interest in manga series, but then revisited more thoroughly when I began to read graphic novels. I wanted to draw attention to the field, and how underworldly it still is compared to mainstream literature despite its tremendous possibility and impact in popular culture.

My title actually came from a refrigerator magnet I bought to help make our office look more presentable.

Our?

I share an office with two other gay guys.

Oh—you slut—let’s talk about the essays then.

“Ghouls and Goblins,” was an essay about a Halloween experience I had with my friend Clint. In undergraduate, both of us were very introverted, and the change of pace of going out—at a gay bar—affected us both in different manners. I wanted to hint at the social underpinnings that we both lived and breathed: gay men are vapid, superficial, and primarily concern themselves with their physical appearance and the physical appearance of others. I also wanted to give an answer to all of those people who admired me for moving place to place and seeing the world. As wonderful as the experience may be, it also gives the feel of perpetually being the “new kid on the block” and observing a culture from the outside, rather than participating in it.

And the next one on the list?

“How to Date Your Teenage Boyfriend” was a Lorrie Moore inspired satirical account of my best friend and her relationship with her boyfriend. Without realizing it, this was my first attempt at nonfiction.

Then comes “Switching Teams,” which is my personal favorite.

Oh. Uh, thank you. The joke is that wild animals raise a person if they are proven to have poor manners or social skills. As for me, I was raised by high school students. “Switching Teams” reflects this as I intertwine the here and then of handling a pressing issue of a friend back in high school and handling a pressing of “now” given my personality and my upbringing in Japanese culture by two teenagers who believed in both public and internal debate at equal measure. We all grew up faster than we should have, and we all appreciated the dry, sardonic wit of the television show *Daria*, of movies produced by Mel Brooks, and more. For inquiring minds, I did not actually sleep with Eugene, although the following year we became friends so I could spy on him for my friend Britney.

Tell me what sparked “Big, Black, Woman, Tamra.” I think that’s the right kind of attitude to have: Big. Black. Woman. Opal Soledad.

“Big, Black, Woman, Tamra,” was another nonfiction flash. This one depicts my sharing a hotel room (which shall remain nameless) in the heart of downtown Chicago for a writing conference, Association of Writer’s and Writing Programs, 2012. Tamra, whose vivacious personality sooner or later had to be placed into print, came out of the bathroom, relayed her story, and decided that we both should write a nonfiction flash about it. Afterwards, we showed each other our versions and marveled at the difference that perspective can make. I had originally excluded the racism factor, but after reviewing what I wrote, Tamra insisted that I put in there, which gratefully broke one of my personal taboos: avoid writing about race. That’s always been a tough one for me. I’ve

always felt like there's no good way to go about it, but—as it were—Tamra's comment was more about unison than it was division, and you know how division can create conflict.

Six vodka sprites divided by two hours squared by Jimmy Choos equals all sorts of conflicts. Hmm, I feel like dancing. We should go out dancing. Tell me about the next one, babe.

“Ai No Corrida?” This was my most Nick Flynn inspired, intimate and revealing essay. It was the most difficult to write, and then to contour. Parts I was trying to hold back needed to be visible on the page, and parts were so fresh that I was concerned I wouldn't be able to bring them to light in a way that wasn't theatric by the lack of time between the events my records of them. The title comes from a jazz song first produced in 1980 by Chaz Jankel and Kenny Young (who had taken the title from a 1976 Franco-Japanese film, *Ai no Korida*), and has been subsequently covered by multiple bands. “Ai No” means “Love's” in Japanese and “Corrida” means “Bullfight” in Spanish, which symbolizes not only my family dynamic but also references to two foreign countries where I have spent the most time growing up.

Ai no corrida, that's where I am...you send me there, your dream is my command...

Wow, you know the song?

I perform three days a week, sweetie. I know how get three A.M. stains out of orange velour—lyrics are child’s play. Ok, last one. Tell me about “Estuary” and its significance.

The final essay in my collection, “Estuary,” feels the most like a continuing story. I wanted to write a piece that felt as disjointed as my upbringing and my life, with the one tie that has bound it all together: movement. Another central theme in my life has been water—I applied to the University of Iowa while I was in high school specifically because it seemed the most removed from the coastline. (As an ironic twist, I lived within two minutes of the Iowa River). And so I wanted this piece to have a feel of pushing and pulling and of bitterness and sweetness constantly intertwining in turbulent and serene scenes. I also wanted it to begin with a feeling of sprawling and fanning out, while becoming more and more direct and connected as the piece neared its end, as if the reader was trudging upriver. The Tampa Aquarium, which is designed in a similar fashion (beginning with a stream and leading into an ocean, not only in terms of animals on display but in the design of the building itself and even in temperature and humidity levels) was a source of inspiration for this piece, and as post-inspiration, I had the honor of reading this essay at an art opening for Bethany DuVall in a vegan bakery in downtown Orlando known as Rasphodic Cooperative Company, and her painting “Faith Chasm” immediately stood out to me because of its depiction of two people in cooler hues split by this upward lifting yellow river-wall not unlike the Biblical reproductions of Moses parting the Red Sea gushing between them.

I love art. I think it's very important to educate yourself on the arts, and to go to museums, art galleries...drag shows...and cheer on your local artists. Friday at ten. I'm doing a show at Friday at ten at Mr. Sisters. Be there or fuck off. Are you going to be there?

I, uh. Absolutely.

That's what I thought. What are some of your other plans for the future?

I'm going to continue to write fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. But I think that I'm going to try to publish the fiction and nonfiction separately, in two different collections of shorts. As for the poetry, maybe someone will pick it up someday, but I'm comfortable with it just feeding my other work as well.

So, being a multi-genre author heavily affects your work?

Oh definitely. So does the time I spent living in Japan, which I think gives my work something of a understated feel because in Japan, bigger is not necessarily better.

You speak for yourself. Big checks, big cars, big dicks. Life is better supersized.

No, I disagree. I think that—at least when it comes to literature—the beauty is in the smaller things. But I do sort of understand where you're coming from; I would list Margaret Cho and Kathy Griffin among my influences and neither of them got where they are being very demure.

At no point did I mention a woman. You can keep that. Okay, time for traditional LGBT radio interview question: if you were work was a bottle of lube, what would your bottle say?

Hah. I guess, "For a great time?" "Increases your daily pleasure?" "Occasional warming sensation." I don't know, "Strawberry flavored?"

Sounds hot. Thank you so much Sherard. This has been Author Hour, with your beautiful drag queen host, Opal Soledad. Up next, Lesbian Lingo: who should get the cat if you and your lezzie lover split? Coming up after these short messages.

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