

Discovering the Craft and Art of Writing: Senior Project

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PREFACE

"Words are always a gamble, words are like splinters from cut glass. I write because it is dangerous, a bloody risk, to be touched, to reveal how vulnerable we are, how transient"

(Williams 7).

I. THE AMATUER ARTIST

I am in the ceramics studio with a chunk of reddish-gray clay in my hands.

Around me, the instructor and his advanced students create bowls and vases and textured cups on the pottery wheel with ease, but I have yet to make anything myself. So, I straddle a wheel, throw my clay down into the center, and send the wheel spinning with a touch of my foot.

When the wheel has stopped, I have something that could resemble a bowl. It is neither beautiful nor useful, but I send it to be fired anyway because I need a grade and this is the best I can do at this point. Is it art?

II. IN SEARCH OF WORDS

I attempt to work the Bemidji State University campus like I might work a crowd if I were a social animal. I try the computer lab, but find no words. I try the library—the tables by the windows, the small cubicles on the top floor, the soft chairs scattered about. No luck. I try the picnic tables out on the lawn, but just as I leave the building and find a seat in the sun, a thick, gray, endless cloud passes overhead, leaving me in the shade. And no words come.

It is as though I have moved a resting limb, and the space left void feels colder than it should. Wherever I replace the limb, it is never the same, warm spot where it had once lain.

My pencil goes dull from notes. Worthless notes. "Things to do." "Birthdays in

May.” Beginnings to essays I’ll never finish. I begin to suspect that I’ve gone insane trying to skip rough drafts and go straight to “art.” My pencil marks get lighter and lighter. My words grow fuzzy, fat, and lethargic.

I leave the page behind and go to check my email and eat five neon Cheetos—my vending machine meal for the day.

III. DEFINING THE GOAL

Regardless which media is involved—clay, paint, voice, body, film, instrument, lithograph, *language*, etc.-- “art” is a slippery term. A lot of people try to define it and still others are satisfied just to *sense* it, but certainly the words of true, inarguable definition for that tiny, three-letter word remain elusive.

In lacking definition, we are given a sort of freedom of movement. It is left for us each to judge individually what art is to us. Still, are there some qualities which all classic, lasting, widely accepted art and literature hold?

In order for something to be art, says poet David Citano, it should combine beauty and usefulness (Citano 177). Who defines “beauty” and “usefulness?” Is Michelangelo’s David useful? Is Chopin useful? Is literature useful?

It is this last question that I seek to answer. “Only dead things bear strict definition. And literature, to be literature, must be alive” (Roorbach 3). In creative writing (fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry), “all literature aspires to art,” but how does a student writer (or any writer, for that matter) know when what she has made is literary art (Roorbach 3)? Should that be her goal?

IV. THE SPACE LEFT VOID

Later, I try to find a reason for my lack of words. One possible explanation was in a book about writing nonfiction, a book I was referencing for my Contemporary

Writers and Literary Theory class:

Some people think that the more you learn about writing, the easier it is to write. Actually, the opposite is probably true. It's easier to write when no one's warned you about pitfalls like the Passive Voice or the dreaded Dialogue-Done-in-Confounding-Dialect or the Cliché (Mazur 187).

I couldn't have written it better myself.

In this, my fifth year at BSU, I am increasingly overwhelmed with the things I must consider when I sit to write, things like emphasis, point-of-view, dialogue, style, voice, white space, the balance of show and tell, etc. Upon entering college in 1997, I learned quickly about the *cliché* monster. The phrase "bite the bullet" was underlined in purple pen on my first College Writing essay.

Later, Will Weaver alerted me to my shifting *point-of-view* in Fiction class. Susan Hauser asked me to work on *transitions*. And Dr. Donovan said I could start sentences with "and." I could go on and on. Everyone seemed to think I had the talent, but did I have the skill?

V. THE INTERMEDIATE

I study more technique from my professor, view slides, learn about other ceramic artists, and read books about the "rules" of pottery. I continue to study the craft, and as I practice, things start to look better, perhaps even beautiful, and they may even be useful.

But again I ask, is my latest pottery art? It is beautiful and useful, but it is beautiful and useful to whom? Not to me. I am dissatisfied, and therein lies a significant discovery for me. I am creating things for the wrong reasons. I am creating the pottery as craft, without art. I am still making a cup, a cup for a grade, a cup to fit someone else's requirements, a cup, not because I need the cup, but because I must prove that I

know how to make one. I must remind myself: I am in an Intro class. I am still discovering my materials.

VI. DEFINING THE GOAL

Bill Roorbach writes in his book, Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth:

What good, alive writing comes down to is an individual—one person, writing in a way not quite like anyone else's, yet enough like everyone else's (grammar, structure, language, syntax, content, form) that other humans can make sense of it. And past mere sense comes emotion, from the rawest—anger, fear, joy—to the most refined: intellectual pleasure (Roorbach 3).

Sounds straightforward enough, *n'est-pas*? Yeah. Hey, Bill, let's not set the standards too high, shall we?

VII. LANGUAGE SKILL

"After language talent comes language skill—a matter of craft, of years of study and practice (and much reading)" (Roorbach 4). Poet David Citano suggests that writers must go through an apprenticeship of sorts, must "[study] at the work-table of masters, before he or she is ready to make poetry" (Citino 178).

Working toward a double major in English and Creative Writing, I feel that I have been an apprentice. I've studied the masters of American, British, and World literature. I've studied literary theory and completed a series of classes in linguistics, tutoring, and writing. Of course, there is a plethora of things that I have yet to learn, authors I have yet to read, and writing techniques I have yet to try.

I admit, I still write for deadlines (and past deadlines), for writing prompts as ambiguous as "What do you do?", for student audiences, for professors, for craft, but I am not writing for A-R-T. I am creating over and over again the same basic form, to

prove I know the basics.

VIII. THE INTERMEDIATE

I decide to create a cup that symbolizes my relationship with my mother. My sketchbook is filled with ideas, associations, textures, colors, lines, etc. I use my knowledge of the basics, but I expand them. This is an important piece for me. This is not a cup for a grade, this is a cup for meaning, for me, for my mother, for others who might think upon their mothers, or themselves, or women, or struggle, or relationships, or sacrifice when they see this piece.

IX. BUILDING ON THE BASICS

I've decided to change my focus. I no longer seek to skip the rough drafts. I no longer try to define myself as a "writer," a term I find synonymous with "artist." Art. There's that ugly little word again. I take up the words of Susan Gordon Lydon as my new mantra: "We write not to create art, but to build character" (qtd in DeSalvo 72).

I am starting to agree with many of the writers that I have studied these past few years; that "all real writing is exploratory"; that "writing is autobiographical"; that writing serves to give "names to the nameless so it can be thought" (Li-Young Lee and Audre Lorde qtd in Citano 182).

In reading Li-Young Lee's poems, I see that they are steeped in the personal (his family, his ethnicity, his death, and his love), but his words are intended to communicate both the personal and the universal. That is art. That is meaningful.

During this past month or so, after reading Writing as a Way of Healing by Louise DeSalvo, I have come to define the role of writing in my life as a means to healing. According to DeSalvo and her sources, healing writing happens when we "[represent] our feelings... let [ourselves] feel them deeply, explore them, understand them, learn their

sources, and link them to past and present events in [our] lives" (DeSalvo 18-19). When this is done in a *creative* way, when it involves craft and meaning, and when it is received by and impacts others, it becomes art, and art in writing is *literature*, right?

X. MY WRITING

Many of the topics that I write about center around my need to heal. I have written a great many pieces that deal with rivalries and friendships (see "Vanity," "Liz," and "Second Middle Child"), social anxieties (see "Abandoned," "Personal Space Invasion," and "In the Darkness"), struggles with identity, feelings of isolation, and the resurrection of spirit in (see "Late April," "To Live So Briefly," and "Where the Water Flows").

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole. This wholeness means that it's lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy...that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are all parts of the work of art (Virginia Woolf qtd in DeSalvo 42).

I am starting to see Virginia Woolf's world. Through the act of writing, I have begun to see that we are all connected by grief and by healing. Within that connection, we find art.

XI. THE ADVANCING ARTIST

Our inherited Catholic guilt, her listening ear. Our shared love of image and language, her authority and age. Resentment, love, and sacrifice. As I design the Mother vessel and create it from the clay, I uncover the complexities. I shape them, I meditate on them, and I make peace with them.

XII. THE WRITING LIFE

Within the world of words, what am I? Who am I? What does all this mean to me?

I am an apprentice, not for a trade, but for a *lifestyle*, a mentality, a mode of self-discovery. I am not planning on writing the next "Great American Novel." I just want to figure things out, with no thought to grade or audience (outside myself). I am a creator of many useless cups, who looks forward to leaving the structure of school, assignments, and grades behind, and using the craft to create art for my sake.

I am one who seeks and finds connections in my thoughts, but has yet to perfect the transition to language. I am one who loves the music and taste of words, phrases and sound, line and metaphor. All these loves have been surfacing in my writing. Even when I am writing about something "ugly," there is beauty.

XIII. IN CONCLUSION

The study of writing, literature, and theory has helped me to see myself as one who is still learning a craft. Even this past semester, I have received so many new insights and ideas, like the braiding of this essay (Miller 14), the re-creation of self as character in creative nonfiction, and the understanding of the complexities of perspective in fiction.

I am beginning to write beyond memory and detail. I am finding humor in humanity and nature; I am identifying wounds and gifts from life events; I am meditating on the act of writing and working to incorporate writing into my life.

The comments jotted at the end of my creative writing papers during the last few years say "reflect on what this means to you today." I'm ready now. It is time for me to apply what I have learned, to leave the structure of school and writing prompts and grades, and to write honestly. I am ready to use writing to build character. I am ready to

use my words to “stay awake to the chance associations and intuitive connections that make life bearable” (Miller 21). The beauty is in the words; the usefulness is in the associations; the A-R-T is in the connections.

POSTSCRIPT

I have much to learn, but I have also been taught much. I hope you enjoy this collection of writing-- from my first poems, essays, and stories, to my most recent writings.

Melissa Daigle

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Late April
April 13, 1998

Late April born petals
Of purple and white
Shimmer like the shadow I spread
Over my eyes to look
Beautiful.

Beautiful ones,
picked first,
Die first.

Like Children and Sugar Cubes

June 2001

a young boy, satin blonde hair
and smart sly eyes

a slow slide from chair
to floor
creeping low

beating lightly on a slow drum
across a tight berber carpet
through a forest of tall legs

I watch him with more interest than
the poet at the mic commands

on this, his third journey
to the refreshment table
to catch a cube of sugar

Abandoned

June 2001

*After a visit to Galleria dell'Accademia,
Firenze, Italia*

a marble mother
moans
cries out in pain
at her eternal
labor
her full grown
child man
still bound inside
her
clawing at his
prison
screaming hoarse
and mad
never to die, never
to be born

because Michelangelo walked away

Sour

June 2001

my lips are sour, my womb
is emptied,
aching,
again.

he tries to find a lover's name
there's no one,
and I think,
by now,
he must know
that

the expiration date
on first kisses
passed
years ago.

Windowpane

June 2001

watercolor eyes focus
to run scatter-hued blues wet
into wet
frayed edges drawn out, blended
back with salty sidelong glances
and a lick of dipped
lashes

A New Game

June 2001

come out, come out
wherever you are—
the neighbor kids' voices
are fading

she is spread thin
between a door
and a baby
blue wall

they are on to a new game
and she
is sick— not to be found— and sick
to think of leaving
that perfect
hiding
place.

Vanity
June 2001

a toothpaste speckled mirror
and five-year
distanced
sisters

standing together apart,
brushing their teeth,

cold feet bare,
stuck to tile floor,
as mint-white foam grows over their lips,
their brushes,
their hands

and before she spits,
she gargles to her younger
sister
 watching her self in the mirror
 swaying forward to see her pupils dilate
you're vain,
then, spits,
promptly peels her feet from the tiles
and leaves

Dusk at Grace Lake
June 2001

I am
a skipping stone

smooth,
slender, round
found,
turned ,
and examined
cradled in hand
spun over water

to jump jump

jump
and dive

Drowning

June 2001

Wrinkled hands forget new tasks
and I remain below,
flailing to stay
beneath
blue water.

Now ready to reach for breath, I am
unable
to figure
which way
was
up.

Tongue-tied

June 2001

A first-grade narrator for *The Little Engine That Could* read beautifully from the page, they said, but secretly wished she'd been chosen to be part of the cast.

Ee-nun-sea-ate, spat her principal as she passed through Church aisles, asked a third-grader to read at Mass-- to read to read to read to-- and changed "they were *sore* afraid" to read "*so*."

In suntan-colored nylons, a seventh-grader, she choked during speech finals reciting the discovery of white-out, and later refused debate because for that she had no script.

Open Mic
March 2002

He dives his incense
cigarette
into the ashtray and
uses it to write
his boredom
in herbal powder. Circles
in circles, the ashtray becomes
a little Zen Garden
in the middle
of a smoky bar.

At another table, young women
with careful,
random braids
spread out their sketchbooks
like winning hands
in poker and bring out 2B pencils
to draw their friends.
Their smokes burn my eyes –
a blend of organic veggies, art, abortion, reduce-
reuse-recycle, "Make love, not war,"
Second-hand smoke.

At last, a band plays,
and the women drop their pencils
to pick up the beat.
From another table, a woman with a dark bra
and a thin, white shirt gets up
to dance. Her bump-and-grind seems
too obvious
(artless)
in this covered
(meatless)
market.

And I continue to draw my words from his ashes.

The Difference Between Flowers and Weeds

April 18, 2002

Dandelions break through first, through the blue, the purple, and the white of winter, through the indifferent scent of dirt and water. They bubble up through papery dead grasses and pop.

I remember when, one spring long ago, Dad gave us a cent a head, and we massacred them, unblinkingly. The dandelions' sticky white blood stained our hands brown. I made seven dollars that spring and bought myself a book: *More Little Visits With God*.

I remember the dandelions pulled hairs from my arm, because I learned slowly that my sister was not beyond using a flower to hurt me. Dragging the powerless weed along my arm, she laughed at her joke, her nostrils flaring. The flower was torn and tossed, and I recall that the punch-line was "urine."

Elmer's glue and grass-- the smell is what keeps a flower a weed. I sat on the sidewalks of high school with my one friend and tied stems together. We stuck them in our shoelaces, behind our ears, in our hair, those one-cent weeds, and walked intoxicated through April's halls.

In This Moment
April 18, 2002

Lake Bemidji arches her back and shakes the ice from her limbs. Shards of cool, blue glass plink and trinkle down over the shoreline of Cameron Park. I stand near the water and watch as the growing hill comes alive, a million breathing prisms groping and sliding blindly toward land.

Against us, the wind blows warm then cool, fresh then foul. It is a shifting, superhero wind, the kind that pulls at hair and hats, the kind that would send me flying if only I could close my eyes completely.

In this moment, I ache to laugh, to laugh with all my body until I collapse and die in the delight of it all. In this moment, the wind infuses my limbs, my nostrils, my ears, my lungs. I feel something like sexy, something like power, wind-generated.

Above me, the promises of spring are murmured in arms of branches, but the frantic songs of birds remind me that moment is not eternal. *After spring... what is left of water?* She sleeps beneath winter's ice, dies in autumn's shadow, and lies helpless in summer's wake.

To Live So Briefly

April 18, 2002

The week of or after my birthday brings hepatica to our yard. I set off down spongy trails, scanning the ground under brittle trees, searching hungrily for purple and white petals.

Always down the trail by the old tree house, I can find them, clusters of fuzzy, long stems with tight-lipped buds. A few days brings their song. Their purple eyes open and thin yellow voices rise from pupils.

Hepatica lives so briefly, my desperation drives me to hold on to her, to collect her, to press her petals into the pages of my book.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

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Diving Lesson
September 1997

Clutching tightly the plastic bag that contained my ruffled turquoise swimsuit and Masters of the Universe towel, I followed the rest of my class down the black stairs of the bus and into the big, intimidating high school. As soon as we got through the doors, we started running for the locker rooms. Behind me, I could hear Mrs. Johnson calling out names of the unfortunate kids who had to go back to the doors and start towards the lockers again, this time walking.

Once in the steamy locker room, I reached into my bag for my swimsuit. Using the "reveal nothing" method of changing, I managed to pull off my clothes and pull on my swimsuit at the same time. My swimsuit was still damp and felt cold and gross against my skin. My bare feet were freezing on the tile floor, so I ran on the tips of my toes to the showers. I stood under the pelting, hot water and screamed with the rest of the girls for a few seconds. Then, we filed out into the pool area together.

My whole class crammed onto the blue plastic bench, girls on one side, boys on the other because none of us wanted to get boy germs or girl germs. Dripping wet, teeth chattering, and full of goose bumps, we waited for the whistle to send us leaping into the warm pool water. Just as the whistle reached her lips, we were in and splashing.

That day, instead of staying in the secure waters of the shallow end, our instructor led my group, the Minnows, to the Deep End. We were going to learn about diving. Crouching down, the instructor showed us where to put our feet and how to extend our arms towards the water. We all mimicked her, but when she told us to fall in, we all stared in horror. There was a reason that we were still Minnows. Finally, a few brave

kids fell in and bobbed up, smiling. On my third attempt, I closed my eyes, plugged my nose, and fell into the water.

At first, being under water was okay. But then I got panicky. I couldn't find which way was up! Everywhere I looked were the same blue-green ripples. For what seemed like an eternity, I held my breath, twisting through the water with my eyes wide open and burning from the chlorine. I finally just floated up to the surface and gasped for air. I pulled my weak body out of the water and sat at the edge of the pool until the whistle blew, signaling the end of the lesson.

I went to the locker room and changed back into dry clothes. After I squeezed all of the water out my swimsuit and packed it away into my Kmart bag, I pulled on my coat, hat, and, mittens. Quietly, I waited in line for the bus. My hair was frozen in chunks, my eyes were bloodshot, and my ears were popping. I climbed into the bus and found a seat. I sat in silence, looking out the hole that I had made with the heat of my breath on the frosty bus window, and I daydreamed about how tomorrow I would try the big diving board.

Babble of "I"
November 1997

I listen to the music and assess my "reaction" to it with disappointment. I know that the instant my pen hits the paper, it will leak out another confused introspection. I wish that for once, I could have a moment's peace from this incessant babble of "I."

The first song (a strong and inspiring Scottish ditty) finishes, and I look to my paper to reread the words that have been written. *Surprise, surprise.* I have written about the intense urge I felt to change. "My inner life is like this music, spirited and clear. But, somehow, I lose that in my outer translation." For a moment, I wonder. Does it really matter which music plays? Would I still come back to this?

With the second song, I try to push my introspection aside and try a fiction story. As I listen to the sporadic drumbeats and murmuring voices, I picture a huge red fire, around which natives dance wildly. Their painted faces and flying limbs do not frighten me. No, it is not a nightmare as others in the class have imagined. To me, it is a celebration. I have pictured myself among the natives, dancing with uninhibited motion. I yell into the fire and steal a drum from a cross-legged old man. Jumping and hitting the drum, I feel a release. Nothing is holding me back any longer. I have left that boring life that I once lead and have joined the free spirits.

While these vivid images flash through my thoughts, I know that this behavior is in me. But, I sit with my legs crossed neatly, my hair combed and pulled back. The quiet girl in the corner... Does anyone realize how much lies beneath the surface? Who is to know that behind it all is a girl who wants to join in an unbridled dance amid the flames with ratted hair and a drum under her arm? A girl who has such a pent up inner spirit just waiting for something or someone to set it free?

When we did get caught, we'd leave the fort for a while and go swimming in the lake. Sometimes, we'd climb in someone's car and pretend we were driving to town. I was always the sister, Jenny was the mom, and Sara was the baby. Sometimes, we'd get the cutest little cousin to be the baby, and then Sara was my sister. I liked that. I always wanted Sara to be my sister.

At some point in the day, we'd always wander back to our spot in the birches. We never really did much there except cook some and talk about how our cousin, Mike, was such a dork. Sometimes, we'd call our friends up on the stick phone, or we'd cook some Chicken and Dandelion Soup. But, the best part was that there were no crabby moms or aunts around to tell us what to do, no little sisters and brothers to whine for us to play with them, no big uncles to give us whisker rubs with their unshaven faces. Nope, no one. Just us girls.

Beyond the Wheel

January 2001

I was staring out the bus window at a brilliant, sunbathed Italian landscape, hills and valleys of rich green, lined with short, spindly vines, dotted with old churches and small towns, and all the while, I guiltily yearned for home, summer, solitude, and a good book. The thirty extroverts who had become fast friends around me, talked, laughed, and slept, while my best friend, in her boredom, sang her every thought aloud, to the tune of They Might Be Giants' "Particle Man."

Several times, I tried to escape in a book. In Oxford, I had bought a couple of Classics for two pounds apiece, but reading on the bus made me nauseous, and I must admit, so did the Classics. The last few summers, I choked down some Hawthorne, Bronte, Hardy, and Austen. Not that those books were completely unpleasant-- no, I loved them all in the end, but always with a sense of pain and exhaustion. What I was starving for was something warm and delicious, something instantly rewarding, something with a Holden Caulfield for me to befriend.

Holden Caulfield. I smiled to myself, keeping my eyes on the passing landscape. The *Catcher in the Rye* was the last book I could remember loving completely from the first page forward. The summer that followed the worst year in my life, my freshman year in high school, was the summer I followed Holden Caulfield to New York. I'd sit in the intense summer sunshine for hours, laughing aloud. I could practically feel Holden's language and attitude becoming my own. "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author who wrote it was a really terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it." I would have liked to have called up Mr. J.D. Salinger.

On that bus, though, I opened my copy of *Age of Innocence* for the tenth time and still found nothing to keep me going. Even the cover was ugly. I put the book into my backpack, turned on my headset, and continued to gaze out the window.

I've had a hard time picking books since I outgrew the public library's summer reading programs. All you had to do was spin a wheel and you knew right where to go for your books. Read a book about an animal. Read a book about space. Read a book about babies.

Beyond the wheel, I had no guidance. I clung to Nancy Drew until the series got out of hand. There is something ugly about Nancy Drew in a glossy neon paperback. I tried Stephen King after the advice of my big sister, but *Salem's Lot* left me feeling warped and evil for weeks. Eventually, I found myself thinking that Classics were my only option. That is about when I stopped reading for fun.

When I started college, I returned to the Classics. I made lists of books that sounded remotely interesting during the school year and waited for summer to arrive. After school let out, I went to the Owl's Nest Bookstore and picked out a couple cigar-soaked old books. Classic titles are not hard to find in used bookstores. Then, for weeks, I would agonize over jumping back into a complicated narration with two Mr. Heathcliffs during lunch breaks and after eight-hour shifts.

On that bus, though, I had no excuse. I had not worked a day for two months, and I had nine prime reading hours just flying by like the mountains of marble out my window. Still, I sat and watched as Italy turned to Austria, Austria to Germany, Germany to Minnesota.

When I got home, I moved to Little Falls alone. I bought a couple of sundresses at Savers and spent my lunch breaks barefoot on the lawn beside the college bookstore where I worked. I didn't bring my Classics with me; instead I invested in some beautiful new books at Barnes & Noble. Within the first few weeks, I was once again longing to call an author up.

Where the Water Flows

April 2001

The sun beats down on the juicy, white yard, melts rings around the bases of trees, and sends giant drips down from the branches. Sprays of wet slush go up with our every jump as my brother and I leap across the yard between the garage and the wood shed. John and Stanley follow us carefully, shaking their paws as they jump from crater to crater left by our steps.

By the time we reach the path that goes into the woods, water has seeped into our boots and soaked our socks. We see the tree house along the left side of the path. It sits on the ground, not a tree house at all, as it once had been. I steady myself against its wall to remove a soggy boot and pull a lazy, wet sock back over my heel.

Nearby, a steady stream of ice cold water pours from a white pipe and over a shallow pile of rocks, creating a little pool. From where the water flows, the pipe is stained Crayola green and the rocks are covered in the same slime. This is a sure sign that spring is on its way.

Beyond the swamp, ice sheets are suspended at least a foot above the ground, connected around trees and tall, dry weeds. Beneath the layer of ice, there is flowing water, the same water that flows from the pipe.

With careful steps, we seek out the weakest points in the ice sheets, places close to trees and along cracks already formed. Then, we set to work with the heavy heels of our boots, breaking off sections of ice, stomping on cracks to send great chunks of it splashing into the water below. John and Stanley keep their distance, but remind us often that they are watching and need attention. We ignore them. They always, *always* need our attention.

When the sliding door of the house rattles and Mom calls us in, we start back down the path. Our cheeks are cool, our noses are running, our mittens are full of tree bark, and our socks are squishing. We trudge back with heavy feet. The cats follow us eagerly, hoping for some petting before we go inside for the night.

The American Way of Debt

April 2001

The other day, I was talking with a co-worker about financial aid. She was one of those students who refuse to take out a single loan for college. Refuse? Yes. I asked her how she could manage. "Are your parents helping you out? Do you have a thirty-dollar per hour job? Were you given the coveted full-tuition scholarship?"

"None of the above," she said. "I just don't want to graduate with a huge debt to pay off right away, that's all. I'd rather save my first loan for a house or something."

"Okay, sure. Don't tell me your secret, but later or sooner, you'll end up in debt." After all, that is the great American Way, to stay in debt until, well, until you file for bankruptcy. Or you die. Or you win the lottery.

Maybe I exaggerate, but it all reminds me of this nightmare I used to have as a child. I was stuck in this pit of mud with a bunch of other unfortunate people. Try as we might to shovel our way out, we just kept sinking into the evil, hungry chocolate-pudding-colored mass. The only differences between that dream and my current reality are that I'm an adult and I'm awake. Okay, and maybe there's no mud. So what's in the pit now?

The pit: Credit card booths are set up in the student Union to exchange an extra-large silk-screened t-shirt for your privacy—a t-shirt for years of junk mail and "courtesy calls." E-mail is flooded with debt consolidation spam. The Financial Aid department at my University offers me a poopload of Direct Loan that feels like free money until I graduate and take my place at a \$25,000 job (or worse), with rent, and travel expenses, and health costs—not to mention the million friggin' wedding gifts to buy. The proceeds of the Dollar Dance go to me! I'll be the one with no money, no blender, no hubby.

Don't mistake me; I'm not bitter.

Seriously, I don't think about money as much as I did as a freshman. I figure that I'm going to come out of here with less debt than my private University friends anyway. Heh. My best friend won't even tell me how much she's borrowed to go to St. Scholastica, and she's going into *teaching*. Ouch.

Regardless, I have enough money to pay my rent, stay fed, and keep going to school. Even if most of it is borrowed, I don't mind. I may not stay ahead of the loans, but I do well in my classes, and I work hard to be a well-rounded person. Once in a while, someone notices my efforts and gives me a scholarship. And that feels better than any grant could, right? Right.

After further probing, I found out that my co-worker will graduate without debt, because her parents made her invest all of her birthday and graduation money. I didn't do that. Instead, I bought books with my birthday money and read like a maniac. I put all my graduation money directly towards college. I have no regrets.

So, I'll take out that loan, but I won't stop and fill out that form for the stupid Visa t-shirt. I'm a one-card girl, and besides, I look like a pinhead in extra-large t-shirts. And I won't waste my time on the phone with "Yolanda" from Citibank. She mispronounced my name anyway. And I won't take the max of my Direct Loan if at all possible. I know that that interest will come back to bite me in the ass in two years.

Instead, I'll spend money like I have only two bucks in my account. I'll work during school to replace what I spend, and I'll work two or three jobs in the summer to pay for next fall semester. Hey, I'm even moving back in with Mom and Dad to save money, and I'll be thankful that I have that luxury.

Debt may be the American Way, but everything is unhealthy in excess. I'm not going to go anorexic or bulimic with this loan business. Nah, I'll just write this paper, try my best, and thank God that the English Department noticed me this spring.

Considering Karma

April 19, 2002

A Japanese beetle was trying to parallel-park on the ceiling, but it was not managing very well. Every couple of seconds, I could hear the ping of its crisp bug body hitting the glass plate of the light fixture. It was then that I decided to ruin my karma.

I went into my parents' room and found an old plastic cylinder with a lid. (My mother saves every container with craft potential.) Then, I went through each bedroom in the house, scanning the windows and the ceiling for little tomato soup-colored pests. Using the cylinder as a scoop and a cage, I collected more than forty bugs. They stunk like grass and sweat. They crawled all over each other. They flew around and hit the sides of the plastic prison. I put them down in the living room and watched them.

So, this is what purgatory will be like, I figured, watching the bugs cling to the lid and make mad dashes for open air whenever I took the lid off to let a new bug in. What if these are the sins that God punishes us for, an eye for an eye in purgatory? What if reincarnation is the real truth? Have I just trapped my dead grandfather, my dead sister? Could that be Mother Teresa crawling on top of Chris Farley? No, certainly Mother Teresa would not be coming back as a bug.

I watched to see if the beetles would try to procreate or would become cannibals. This did not seem to happen. They just crawled over each other as though they were each obstacles, not fellow cellmates, not fellow members of the crusty bug race. They didn't help each other or stop to chat. They just moved around. Or played dead.

A couple days earlier, when I was sitting out on the sidewalk around the house, propped up in a lawn chair, trying to write anything, anything at all, I watched the beetles. They crawled all over, hiding under my little sister's toys, seeking shade from

the sun that I was basking in, sauntering around like fat, middle-aged people in grocery stores, looking for something, anything to buy. I resisted the urge to put a heavy index finger on their backs and skid them along, letting their clicking little black legs shred out from underneath them.

Mom says they bite. Maybe that's why I'm so violently inclined toward them. Premeditated self-defense. Or something. Maybe there are just too many of these beetles hanging around in my house. It's already too full.

When they first started invading the house, it was fall. And they didn't die in the winter like we'd hoped. They kept appearing in the windows of my baby sister's room, getting caught and dying in the long blue shag of my dad's basement office. At first, Mom crushed them, but she soon got sick of the smell. Then, Dad took the vacuum cleaner around, sucking them up in the places where they were sleeping in clumps. Mom sprayed 'em, tossed them out the door to face the elements, flushed them down the toilet. So many times this winter, I have taken my morning pee, knowing that beneath my rear end swam at least three beetles doing a desperate backstroke. But I continued to pee before I flushed. It is wrong to waste water.

Liz
Spring 2002

Liz sells Jesus Christ more subtly than Tina sells Mary Kay, but I come away from a meeting with either friend with the same feeling. This is something they think I need-- Liz's version of a savior, Tina's version of attractiveness. In a small way, I am insulted, and in an uncomfortable way (primarily with Jesus), I know I want that, I *need* that, but I'm unwilling to invest wholly in that. Too much maintenance for now.

Tina is virtually out of my life now, unless orders are coming due or unless she has a makeover party and gets points for the number of friends she brings. Liz, I see more often, though not much more often. Still, there is a distinct difference in how I feel about this saleswoman over the other.

I met Liz in high school. She was a friend of friends, a beautiful woman of a teenager, a crude, clever, and funny girl. I was immediately infatuated with her in the sense that everything she did, said, and was, I admired and envied. Unlike me, Liz was confident and friendly, but she was not your basic social butterfly. She spoke in faux foreign accents, laughed at bathroom humor, and sang Billie Holiday during art class. She wore brave second-hand treasures, plaid pants and old men's sweaters, 70's-collared everything. She swayed her hips in that polyester so naturally, you'd never guess the seeming contrast she embodied. Liz was sexy *and* devout, constantly being worshipped by men who wanted her body, her energy, her humor, while she sang, wrote, silently blessed her food, and drew us, unwillingly at times, into tangents on faith and Jesus Christ.

During the college years, the tangents got bolder, the plaid got tamer, and our friendship changed. Along with our friend Cassidy, Liz and I formed the Dork Squad,

taking silly pictures of ourselves around campus and in the photo booth at the mall, talking about guys in our Honors classes and blundering through our first swing dance lessons.

Soon, though, we began to pursue different interests and studies. We began to have more meetings and classes than time together. The years passed, and intentions began to replace interactions. Last spring, Liz graduated and got married.

She and I have tried to reconnect in the last few months. She is living her until this fall when she will go to grad school in California. We get together every once in a while for lunch, and we chat about her blissful, blessed marriage, my ever-changing plans for the future, and the soup and sandwich quality at Raphael's Bakery (Soup: good. Sandwiches: not so good).

It's hard to know when to maintain and when to move on, but six years of friendship are bound to see change. I still admire and envy Liz. She is a beautiful individual. Though we don't see much of each other already, I will certainly miss her when she is too far away to subtly pitch Jesus to me over lunch.

Personal Space Invasion

March 2002

I do it all the time, but I'm seriously, abnormally, diagnosably more anxious than average folk. My problem exists in a chemical imbalance, I like to think. My nervous system prepares for a battle whenever a stranger nears my bubble, my 12' x 12' personal space bubble. My back tenses, my face wrinkles, my thoughts race, and I think, finally, *Ah! The escape is in my pocket.* I must look desperately for the tube of Chapstick in my pocket. Oh, such trouble to search through keys and wallets and gum to find that lip balm! It'll take just long enough to pass the space invader without making a decision. I am Preoccupied.

But, I am not the only one. I know this. I have seen that look flash across the faces of many-- that look of panic, that glance to a wall or to a watch, that fiddling with papers and shirt cuffs, that determinedly nonchalant stare into the nothing just beyond a stranger's head. Such bizarre and silly behavior, and the question it surrounds? *Do I know you well enough to say "hello"?* Is that the question? Maybe it's not the whole question, but why is it such a dilemma anyway? Say "hi" and smile in the hallways of BSU or pretend that the tobacco drips on the walls of the tunnel are suddenly fascinating. What kind of personal compromise is it to acknowledge that another person, another talking, eating, thinking, pissing human being has just passed by?

Maybe you aren't in a friendly mood. I understand that. There is a definite difference in personal space etiquette when one is in a glowing, the-world-is-a-beautiful-amusing-place mood. Even then, I can grin and wave. But if not in that mood, what then? Is it your responsibility to uphold Minnesota Nice, the small town "I know your mother, your boss, your dog" tradition of smiling on sidewalks? Is Bemidji too big for

that? Are you too aware for that? Too aware that there are too many people to know, too many ingenuine acts, too many muscles to pull up a smile as you move from Point A to Point B? (Hey, smiling burns calories. In America, shouldn't that be incentive enough?)

So, I sat in the Student Union and had a construction paper Valentine-making table. I was a sophomore and all my ideas were good, even the bad ones. A fella sat at the table and whipped out a three-dimensional cherub Valentine for someone. *Hmm*, I thought, *Taken*. Good, that meant we could talk. So, we did. Blah, blah, blah, my major, your major.

Then, I watched as he gave the Valentine to his male friend-- a joke seriously. They were not a couple. Therein lies the dilemma. He is not taken, and we have small-talked once. I see him in the hallway and then what? Do I know you well enough to say "hello"? Do I ask hollowly, "How's it going?" as I move by? Who waits for the answer anymore?

Quitting the Band *February 2002*

I don't know why the punk band's here, but I must have hired them. Who else? I *do* know that I can't concentrate with them around. I *do* know that I hate punk music, and I wish they would take their tour elsewhere.

I feel their pounding bass in the back corner of my brain. I sense guitar strings pulled tight, waiting for release, in the muscles of my upper arms and along my shoulders. Buzzing, neon pink posters line the walls of my stomach, and drumsticks smack the backs of my locked knees, yet my body, as a whole, seems to sit and play over and over again the few chords it knows, like a high school musician's first bored ballad.

No, I'm not schizophrenic. There are really no British men in ripped t-shirts and leather pants torturing my psyche. I'm just in a constant state of anxiety lately. I can't tell if it's boredom or Senioritis, or what, but the noise of it all is wearing me out. Why didn't my body tune into Cat Stevens instead?

Even my house resonates with noise. The TV is always on, and it calls to me. The punk band must like the FBI Crime Files, too, because they quiet down to hear. My two-year-old sister is constantly calling for me ("My Issa, come 'ere"), pulling me around in circles, begging for a piece of gum. My brother's voice booms through everything, its sound frequency always creating discord in my ear, as he unwittingly insults my mother, the way that I do, the way that friends do when they've spent too much time together. And Mom hushes us while Crime Files plays and pauses. During commercials, she recounts the details of her phone conversation with my older sister, Stephanie, the conversation she told me about as soon as I walked through the door hours earlier.

Even now, when everyone is in bed, the punk band waits impatiently to play and the refrigerator pops and gurgles like an upset stomach. I can't think of a thing to write. No silence, no space, no privacy. There is just too much noise. If only I could muster enough courage to ask the punk band to leave. "Take your leather pants, and get outta here." It could be that easy. The family, however, would require a much different approach. No one at home owns leather pants, and I am the one who must leave.

Second Middle Child

February 2002

Biologically, I claim the position of Second Middle Child, third in a set of four, but my sibling count extends way beyond that. While I was growing up and still today, my parents loaned themselves out to dozens of displaced babies, daycare toddlers, and dysfunctional friends. Most have moved on, even one from the biological four, but I still feel that my family has been and continues to be remarkably large.

My parents started by having Stephanie and Jessica, one right after the other. Four years later, they signed on to care for newborns for Catholic Charities out of Crookston, Minnesota. Their first baby through Catholic Charities knew my home as his own a year before I was even conceived. Finally, my mom gave birth to my brother, Christopher, three years after she had me.

While I was going through elementary and middle school, it seemed there were always babies, babies, *babies* waiting for their mothers to make the heavy decision to adopt them out or to keep them. The official count of the babies that passed through our home exceeds twenty. Brady, Anna, Jonathan, Aaron, Issac, Emily, Derrick... That's just a few off the top of my head.

There were times when a baby would not stop crying, and I would get so frustrated, I would cry, too. Then, there were times when a baby would fall asleep in my arms, and I would feel the way a mother must, a love so intense that it seemed the baby had come from my own womb. As one might expect then, every time a baby left, I experienced a little death. I would never see that child again. Sure, sometimes my parents got a couple of pictures or letters from mothers or adopted parents, but most of the time, the baby was just gone.

At some point, Catholic Charities dissolved, and my mother tried her hand at daycare. For many years, Erik, Kyle, and Kia borrowed my parents, my home, my time, and my love. During that time, too, we took in a couple of my oldest sister Stephanie's friends-- one, a daughter fighting with her mother, and the other, a young, single mother with her infant daughter. Add that to a pregnant teen cousin and her compulsive liar brother. Mind you, not everyone was there at once (thank God), but when these older boarders were around, it felt as though they would never leave.

Mom joined on with Cass County foster care. A few more foster kids passed through our house, these a little older and a lot more troubled than the infants we had taken in before. A different kind of sadness came with their leaving-- a sadness based in uncertainty. Defining who was the abuser and the abused was getting harder. Were the parents to blame? The system? The culture?

When my older sister, Jessica, died in a snowmobile accident in 1997, the foster care losses and the distance of five years in age numbed me a little, but her death brought a guilt with it that was not easily explained by the gap in age or the accumulation of losses.

Jessica Mary Daigle was nineteen when she crashed her boyfriend's snowmobile into a culvert five days before Christmas. She was nineteen when her neck snapped from the impact. She was nineteen when she died in the cold, alone, while her boyfriend circled back to find out why she had fallen so far behind. She was nineteen. We had been sisters for fourteen years. We had been friends for only one year.

Jessica moved out of the house after she graduated from high school in '92. We

were all relieved to see her go. She had been a moody teenager, and she had liked to use her long nails to win her angry arguments on our arms. After she left, Jessica found a good job, she found her true love, Jon, and she seemed to find some kind of peace. Jessica started to come home to talk with Mom. She joined us for Thanksgiving. She picked me up after school and took me, and our younger brother, Chris, to go miniature golfing. I was only starting to *really* like her, though I had always loved her. Maybe I had been waiting for her to like me.

When she died, it was too early for me. It was too early for all of us.

Now, my mother takes care of two three-year-olds-- Nathan and Lizbet-- the son of Jessie's Jon and his wife, Lanette, and the daughter of my dad's co-worker, Kris. And I'm happy to say, we have a more recent and perfect and permanent addition to our family in Tia, a foster baby we've raised since she was three days old. She's two now, and will, I hope, never be one I count among my losses.

So Midwestern
April 2002

"That's so Midwestern," said Liz several times last weekend, said of our painfully, polite indecision when picking a restaurant, said of our typical crafter/hunter parental combo, said of the predictable characters and story I was imagining for a fiction class. "So Midwestern," like it's an insult. She can say that now, because she is leaving, moving to sunny California in a few months, shedding her long johns and replacing them with a skirt and a tank top.

Lara knew she was leaving, too. Lara, my cosmopolitan friend who grew up in a trailer park, her bedroom no bigger than a handicapped bathroom stall, her favorite restaurant: Country Kitchen, her favorite after school activity in youth: roller skating at the Smart Skate. She was the one who first planted the idea in my mind that "Midwestern" was a curse word and that Bemidji's soil grew a boring crop. After a trip to New Orleans ("N'Awlins," duh), she seethed with disdain for Bemidji's denim-lined streets. We had no vampires, no street performers, no Mardi Gras, no Bourbon Street. We only had lakes and parks, resorts and bars, a bowling alley and Paul Bunyan.

Now, I see Midwestern all around me. There is a filter of resentment over my eyes as I see my old Midwestern classmates marry each other and start their businesses and do their drugs in Bemidji. There is a filter of discontent, knowing that the Midwestern check out girl at Target knew me when I was small, when I picked my nose, when I wore my hair in a side ponytail. There is a filter of boredom, making Midwestern plans to see a movie or to bowl or to go dancing at the bars. Where are the art and science and history museums? Where are the blues and jazz and rock concerts? Where are the plays, the operas, the dance companies? Where? Not here.

My friend, Inga, once told Lara after a Christmas get-together, "At least we got out," sneering at my choice to stay and learn in a brick college overlooking Lake Bemidji. She had gotten out, joined the crew on a cruise ship, dated the middle-aged captains, danced with old men, visited foreign lands. Lara had gotten out, accepted Harvard, lured snooty men, dressed in black, spotted celebrities every other day.

I'm getting out. I'm moving to Minneapolis to find a new life. I'm exchanging my hometown of twenty-three years for a city of strangers, though I am told that wherever I go, Bemidji people will be there. Everyone who gets out has gone where I'm going, and in twenty years, most of us will be desperate to return to the familiar Midwestern way of life.

Stations of the Cross
January 30, 2002

Each year, during Lent, the students and teachers at St. Philip's School migrated across the tarred alley and into the old, brick church for Stations of the Cross. We traded the light of a bright winter's day for the narrow dimness of the church's entrance, with its deep red carpet and a table filled with Catholic magazines and prayer cards with pictures of Mary, always with her head bowed, heart aglow, and hand raised in a gesture of peace. Beyond the table, on either side of the doors leading into the body of the church, stood polished marble with bowls carved into the top of each to hold holy water. One by one, we dipped our cold hands into the slightly warmer water, blessed ourselves, and moved into the body of the church.

It was considerably brighter in there. Gold orbs hung from the ceiling on white cords twisted around silver chains. Fans extended on thin poles from the ceiling and looked as if they might shake loose and buzz away. The thick, warm smell of incense rushed to fill our noses and sting our eyes as we filed down the red aisle to our pews. Stern teachers ushered us into our seats, hushed whispering girls, and occasionally pulled a mischievous boy aside.

The wooden pews of St. Philip's Church were dark like seasoned stoneware, worn from years of use, and varnished to shine. We would often drop and slide until we bumped into our neighbor. After we settled into our seats, it was time to flip through the brown hymnals, stick our sleeves into the hat clips, examine the stained glass windows with their pictures of haloed and rosy-cheeked Apostles, and wonder at the gold and black fleur-de-lis design in the red carpet.

Father Rick waited until the younger kids were seated in the front few pews of the

church before he began the Stations. He would boom in his great, low voice the opening lines from the black binder he held in his hands. As the Stations began, he turned to the first white statue on the wall. It showed Jesus, hands tied behind his back and Pontius Pilate, his arm extended, pointing at his prisoner. "The First Station: Jesus is condemned to death."

"We adore you, oh Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world." And from that point, Father Rick walked along the walls of the church, from the first Station on the left of the altar, around to the back of the church, and back to the front for the fourteenth Station.

All the while, we participated in the elaborate dance of Catholic worship: standing, sitting, kneeling, reciting, and singing. The novelty of the Stations kept us unusually quiet and involved, but always, at the first Station, kneelers were carelessly dropped, sending a chorus of heavy thuds through the church.

Standing sitting, kneeling, reciting, and singing. The ritual continued for forty-five minutes. After Stations, we filed back out of the church, the rows of little kids leaving first to gather their things for the bus ride home. We stood talking freely now, the teachers no longer concerned with our behavior. It was Friday, and all there was left to do was bless ourselves on the way out to the idling busses.

And There They Were

March 2002

That school year, whenever I cleaned my room, I would try on the smooth, red knit sundress that Mom had bought me at the summer's end. I liked the way the extra seams curved in over my ribs and began to flare out just beneath my stomach and down from there. I liked the way it spun out in wide circles when I twirled around and the way it bounced in folds when I danced on my bed, singing "We Built This City On Rock and Roll." I liked the way it made me look older, not like the hand-me-down dresses that I got from my sisters, rummage sale buys already, with their full, square tops and pleated skirts sewed on just below the hips, as though they were an afterthought. This snug-fitting, new red Kmart dress was beautiful, and I felt beautiful in it.

I decided to save my sundress for the last day of school. It was sixth grade, and I had managed to stay in with the cool girls almost all year, despite my unrolled jeans and my baby blue and gray velcro-strapped Payless Pony tennis shoes. By the end of sixth grade, the girls had taught me how to roll my pants, and my velcro Ponies had disappeared.

Those shoes... Everyone in class, it seemed, everyone whose opinion mattered, anyways, was wearing British Knights, or Reeboks, or Nikes, or Adidas. I didn't think twice about my Ponies until one day, while waiting in line for lunch, my best friend and a boy in our class started to make fun of them. I don't even remember what they said, but I went home and threw one of those shoes into the woods, and told my mom that I lost it on the bus. They were replaced with white Pamida tennies with laces, but my mom kept the lone Pony just in case the other decided to show up.

But, I figured I owed my position as sixth coolest girl in class to my favorite shirt

which I wore nearly every other day, the green one that said "Paris Sport Club" on it. In retrospect, I think my class ranking had more to do with the fifth coolest girl's need for a best friend, but I didn't know that then. I used my summer babysitting money to buy the shirt. It was twelve dollars at Maurice's, and it was extra large.

I managed to convince my parents to buy me a yearbook that year, too. The cover had cartoon lockers on it with all sorts of junk hanging out of them: a dragon's tale, post-it notes that had actual messages that you could read, basketballs, tennis shoes, and food. In the back of the books, there were several pages for autographs, pages that screamed to be filled with words of friendship and invites to summer sleep-overs.

At St. Philip's, the last day of school was yearbook day. The whole day was a goof-off day. In the morning, everyone who could afford one was given their thin, twenty-page yearbook, and we were given an hour at the end of the day just to get them signed. The whole school would gather in the gymnasium/cafeteria and the grades would mix around, all the younger kids finding their older heroes, all the older kids, filling in the pages they had reserved in their friends' books as soon as they were in hand. I only got signatures in mine and the random, "Have a great summer," from whomever.

I woke up for the last day of school that sixth grade year, not as eager for yearbook day as I would have thought. I woke up late and rushed around, pulling on my red dress, and gathering my cold lunch. Before I ran for the bus, though, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. And stopped. My red dress did not cling flat to my ribs anymore, instead it clung to two ugly bumps that I had never noticed while I was swimming in my extra large Paris Sport Club top. I was horrified. I cried right then and there. My mom yelled up the stairs that I was going to miss the bus, and I said "I'm not

going to school today," between sobs. She came up, and my dad got out of bed to check on me, as I sat, crumpled on the ground in the hallway, facing the full-length mirror.

I stammered something about my dress and my parents exchanged glances. Mom gave me a hug, stood me up in front of the mirror, and told me that I looked beautiful, but there they were, still awkwardly sitting just inside the curved seams of my beautiful dress. I started to cry again. This time, I tried a new excuse for my tears that I didn't even realize I had until I said it. "No one's going to sign my yearbook. I'm going to stand around all day just like last year while everyone talks and takes pictures."

The bus honked at the end of the driveway, and my dad went to the door in his underwear to wave it on. I went back to bed for a while, changed, and went with my parents to a funeral, instead. I didn't go in to the Church, though. I was still strawberry birthmarked-up from crying, so I stayed in the car and read a book. We didn't talk much as we drove, and that was all right with me.

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Loose Stitches
1999, Revised 2002

When Edith returned from her trip to town, she found that Abraham had fallen asleep in his chair again. She pulled a thick afghan from the quilt rack and laid it atop her brother. Standing over him for a moment, she watched his wrinkled face. Worry, terror, relief twisted his soft features, and Edith sighed. *Probably another nightmare about the war*, she guessed.

It was difficult for her to watch him and not awaken him, but she knew that Abe needed his rest, uneasy as it was. She sat heavily on the couch, instead, and pulled a faded purple afghan across her lap. *Mom's afghan*, she remembered lovingly, as she ran her fingers across the places where holes had been repaired. She had stitched those holes shut herself many years back, but now she could see places where new holes threatened. Mom's afghans would last forever, if she could help it. Edith reached for her own knitting that lay at her feet under the oak coffee table.

Edith glanced up to see movement on the TV, and she shook her head softly. *I'll never understand why that man watches football on mute*, she smiled. Setting her knitting aside, she hefted herself out of the couch and went to grab the remote from the end table next to Abe's recliner. The smell of whiskey distracted her for a moment, and then she spotted his empty glass. *I don't know where he keeps it, but when I find it, it's down the drain. I refuse to spend my last years taking care of a drunken old fool*. She grabbed the remote, continued back to her seat on the couch, and turned the football game to the Home and Garden network.

Abe had convinced his kids that he'd gotten help, that he wasn't going to drink anymore. His son, Randy, had introduced him to a man he met when he was in Al Anon.

The man was a vet, too. He and Abe had gotten together twice to talk about the war, about alcohol, about family and God. Things looked promising, and they celebrated his third month of sobriety only a few weeks back. Edith tried for the past week to deny the biting smell of whiskey that had mysteriously reentered the air. She had never outright caught him drinking, so she kept her suspicions from the kids. *I hope to God that this is just a brief fall off the wagon. He'd better pull himself out of it before Thanksgiving, because if he doesn't, the kids will never forgive him.* She looked over at her fitfully sleeping brother. Edith sighed heavily, pulled her knitting onto her lap, and began to click, click, click the needles.

Meanwhile, Abraham's face continued to twist in grief. *It had been so silent before we landed. The young men, talking quietly of anything but war... or not talking at all. Now, as they ran threw the water and came ashore, these same men were screaming, hollering, roaring like provoked animals. I watched as they climbed up the bank, shooting their black weapons at the hidden enemy. To my left, a young soldier yelled in my direction, "I've been hit!" as blood began to drain from his neck. I ran to him and put my hand over the hole, but the blood kept coming. Bullets flew all around and his blood ran in scarlet ribbons between my fingers.*

Bizzzz.... Abraham ran an oak board across the table saw. Bizzz.... Sawdust flew to the ground at his feet. He pushed his thick glasses farther up his nose, brushed the sawdust from his thin, wiry beard, and breathed in deeply. He loved the smell of fresh sawdust.

It had been his livelihood, carpentry. He had built cabinets, signs, bed frames, tables, even coffins, and in all those years, he never once tired of the smells of the trade. Dusty, old boards, fresh sawdust, varnish. Today, he was building a child's play table for his great granddaughter, Jessica. Little Jessie was Joanie's first granddaughter, and she often came to visit Abe and Edith with Joan. He grinned as he remembered her scribbled drawings of him sitting in his recliner and playing Go Fish with her. He kept them all.

Inside the house, Edith diligently scrubbed the countertops in the kitchen to prepare for company. Celebrating Thanksgiving at Abe and Catherine's used to be a family tradition up until Catherine died. Six years had passed and the tradition faded, but now that Abraham was sober again, the kids were eager to return.

Tradition is important, I know, but I'm too old to be doing all this bustling around, preparing for all these people. Edith grumbled guiltily as she pulled the loosened the plug in the kitchen sink and sent the dingy water down the drain. She rinsed out her washrag and sat down at the kitchen table. The Pine-Sol had made her fingers pruney and her head spin. She rose slowly from the table and made her way to her bedroom. *Time for a nap*, she sighed, holding her head in one hand, bracing herself against the wall the other.

Time for a drink, Abe thought, watching through the cloudy shop window as Edith shuffled past the sliding glass door on her way to her bedroom. He cleaned up a bit, and then went into the house. From beneath a stack of papers in his top desk drawer, Abe drew out a bottle of whiskey.

Brrring, brrring! Edith turned on her side, her nap interrupted. BRRRING! She flipped out of bed as quickly as was possible and headed toward the kitchen, but Abraham had gotten to the phone first. She turned around, ready to head back to bed, but stopped when she heard Abe's voice getting louder and louder, his speech noticeably slurred. "So what if I've been drinking? I'm a goddam adult, aren't I?"

"Abe, give me the phone. Who is it? Who is it? Give me that phone," Edith demanded. The thick familiar scent of whiskey surrounded Abe's unsteady body.

"It's just Randy. He's not coming for dinner tomorrow. Says he's not gonna bring his family 'round to see me if I've had a few. Goddam nonsense!"

"Abe, give me the phone and let me talk to him." She pried the phone from Abe's hand and waved him into the living room. Covering the phone, she mouthed, "Go sit down and shut up." He did as she said, growling all the way.

Safely out of earshot, in the kitchen, Edith talked with Randy for an hour. They resolved that it might be better for Randy and his family to have dinner with his wife's family. "You know, Randy, your dad's in pain, and he's thinking about the war a lot lately. Getting older is hard on him, and these constant nightmares of his keep him from getting any good rest. I don't know, but maybe he's just drinking to get some better sleep?"

"He doesn't need sleep at three in the afternoon, Edith," Randy said. "I just don't want to be around it anymore. He's always sneaking drinks and losing control. When you and I have problems, we deal with them. That's what being an adult is all about, right?" He paused. "You know, I don't want Dad to die alone, with everyone angry at

him, but if he keeps acting this way, that's *exactly* what's going to happen."

Edith nodded her silent agreement and said her good-bye. Angry tears welled up in her eyes and her lower lip began to tremble. It was true that Abe was alienating his family. She had seen her father do the same thing years ago. She hated to confront Abe, but she couldn't just stand there and watch him repeat that ugly history. Edith went into the living room where Abe was sitting in his recliner with another highball in his hand.

Edith began, shaking a pointed finger at the phone in the hall. "Randy has tried so hard to help you. He thought you had finally listened to your family. How can you blame him for being angry?" Her voice rose. "You know, Abraham, Ben never comes around since you pushed him around that one Christmas. Remember that? Don't you feel the least bit of regret for losing your oldest son? And Jillian! Jillian is afraid of you. She's sick of explaining this to her kids. 'Why does Grandpa yell so much? Why's he talking funny?' Because you're a goddam drunk, that's why!" Edith cried. She held back a sob and whispered, "You should be ashamed."

In a burst of embarrassed anger, Abe shot up from chair and pushed Edith aside. She landed in a pile on the couch and held her arms crossed in front of her face. Abe moved quickly to the door and didn't come back in until it was dark.

Abe treated Edith gently the next morning. He tried not to remember much of what he had done last night, but he knew by the way she wouldn't look at him or speak to him that he had hurt her feelings. "Edith. Edith," he said, approaching her in the kitchen. "About last night. I'm very, *very* sorry. That was my first drink in three months, and well... There's just no excuse, I know. It will never happen again. I don't want to live

my life like that anymore." Edith wanted to believe him. He gave her a hug.

Randy and his family surprised them by stopping in on their way through town. Teresa, Randy's wife, brought a pecan pie for dessert, though they wouldn't be staying. Abe gave everyone a hearty hug, even Randy, and he accepted the pie as if it were the best gift he'd ever received. "You know, my Catherine used to make pecan pies for me. They're my favorite. Oh, this looks really good, Teresa." He grinned at Randy. "You've found yourself quite a girl, Randy."

The kids had come with their parents so Abe lead them into the living room and let them help themselves to his stash of mixed nuts. They sat on his lap and gave him hugs and told him about school. Little Cathy had a boyfriend named Thomas. Abe laughed, "So they have boyfriends in preschool now!"

From the hallway, Randy, Teresa, and Edith watched them play. "I think he's been drinking for almost a month now. I wasn't sure, because I've been gone so much lately, but last night, after you called, Randy... I got really upset with him," Edith whispered. "Randy, I don't know if I'm going to stay around here much longer. I'm thinking of moving in with Bonnie for a while. She's offered me the spare room before."

"It's only been a month. Maybe he'll go back to A.A.," Teresa offered. Edith and Randy hung their heads. Both were thinking that "only a month" was far from accurate.

The others began to arrive around one o'clock, missing Randy by a couple of hours. Abe was sober when Bonnie and Mary came with their families. He was sipping a glass of ice water when Joan, her husband, Jim, and her three youngest kids drove up.

"Wow. Dad looks great! It's so nice to see him drinking something other than a highball," Joan laughed to Bonnie and Edith. Bonny agreed. When she came to visit last month, she had noticed the change, too. He was so happy and so friendly. Edith said nothing, but she nodded. He had been very good to the kids during the past few months.

The family bustled about, carrying in casserole dishes and pies, hanging up coats, hugging, and exchanging late birthday and anniversary wishes. Some had moved into the kitchen to help Edith with the food, some settled at the kitchen table to talk. Bonnie's youngest son was toting a video camera at his mother's request, taping snippets of action and conversation. The finished tape would be sent to Bonnie's oldest son, Joe, who was stationed in Germany.

Abe's son, Bill, arrived late, carrying two bottles of red wine and smelling as if he'd already emptied a third. At the door, Joan's husband greeted him with a heavy handshake, and warned him lightly, "Better keep that away from Abe. He's been doing so well lately, the girls would murder you if he has anything to drink today."

"He's a grown man, Jimmy," said Bill, brashly. "I think he can take care of himself. Jesus H. Christ, why is everyone so freaked out by a little booze these days? Last time I checked, we were Catholic, not Puritan." Jim directed Bill to the crowded kitchen to put the bottles into the fridge, advising him to hide them behind the milk cartons so Abe wouldn't spot them. Instead, Bill put one bottle in the fridge, then asked Edith for a couple of glasses. Edith smiled broadly and nodded a "hello." She gave the glasses to him, too busy stirring the gravy to notice the bottle of wine in his other hand.

"Hey, Bill. Go in and say 'hello' to your dad. He's in the living room with the kids." Bill stepped over a few of the younger nieces who were playing Go Fish on the

living room floor. A couple of giggling nephews ran by, slapping Bill on his big belly. He chased them a bit, then sat down by Abe and handed him a glass. "Here, Dad. Should we check if this stuff's any good?"

Between drinks of bitter, red wine, Abe asked Bill about his family. "Well, Dad. Beth's moved back to Fargo for a little while. She's working there until I get a job, I guess. Saw the kids last weekend, though. Yeah, both of the girls are on the honor roll at school." Bill nudged his glass towards Abraham. "Hey pour me some more, Dad. That's good stuff." Abe refilled Bill's glass and his own. Together, they finished the bottle and a highball each before one of Mary's daughters came into the living room to announce that dinner was ready.

Abe's daughters and sons and their families gathered around the table for Grace. Abe's was a good, old-fashioned Catholic family, eight kids in all. Ben was the oldest and the wealthiest. Then came Jillian and Joan, both nurses, now. Bonnie, Kenneth, Bill, and Mary came next with no more than a year or two between each. Randy was a surprise baby, born in 1968, five years after Mary. By the time Catherine died in 1996, Kenneth had moved to California, and Ben and Jill had stopped coming to the increasingly volatile family gatherings. Of course, now Randy was gone too, but still there were fifteen adult and children for this Thanksgiving dinner.

The table was set with steaming sweet potatoes, fresh corn, green beans, stuffing, and mashed potatoes. Two tall white candles stood in the center of the table besides bowls of cranberries and gravy. After Joan carried in the turkey from the kitchen, Edith said Grace. As soon as the "Amen" passed, the room exploded with movement and

conversation. The kids took their plates into the living room to eat at the card tables set up there. Bill opened a new bottle of wine. Everyone took some, except Abe; Edith flashed him an approving look across the table. Bonnie smiled broadly. Neither of them knew about the highballs and the wine he had had with Bill. And without Bill. Abe stayed very quiet during most of the meal, listening to Edith tell silly stories and watching Bill drain his glass.

Midway through the meal, Joan got up from the table with a start. "Oh, shoot!" she exclaimed, "I forgot to take the rolls out of the oven!" As she rushed into the kitchen, she accidentally bumped Abe and his glass of water fell onto his plate. Smoke filled the dining room as Joan opened the oven door to retrieve the burned buns. Everyone began to cough as Joanie ran to throw the rolls out the sliding door and into the snow.

Joan was laughing uncontrollably as Abe rose from the table. Everyone's smiles and coughs turned to looks of dismay when they turned to see Abe's red face and rigid stance. He began yelling. "For Chrissake's, Joan! Look what you've done! You've ruined the whole goddam meal!" He moved away from the table and staggered over to the sliding door. "You don't have much for a brain do you?" His moved face in close to hers and she could smell the wine on his breath. Joan looked desperate. She tried to open the door, but Abe blocked her. "Goddam idiot. Do you see that mess?"

Jim forced himself in between Joan and her father. "Come on, Joan. Let's get the kids and go home. We've got a long drive ahead of us." Joan pushed past her father, tearfully apologized to the family at the table, grabbed her coat and left out the front door. Abe swore as Mary began to sob into her plate.

Edith quickly moved into the kitchen to turn off the oven and escape the tension,

and Bonnie's husband went into the living room to check on the kids. Bill laughed bitterly and hollered, "You're all overreacting!"

Within an hour, only Mary was left to help Edith clean up. Her husband had taken the kids home just after Bonnie snapped and stormed out of the house. Abe had locked himself in the shop, and Bill passed out on the couch.

As the two women cleaned up the leftovers, Mary began to cry again. Edith just continued to clean. She didn't know what to say anymore. "Please stay with us tonight, Edith. We can have one of the girls sleep on the couch. It's no problem." Edith declined. She'd be okay.

The next morning, Edith got Bill out the door and ate a quick breakfast. She retreated to her room, then, knitting quietly. At one point, she heard Abe's heavy footsteps in the dining room. She told him that she wasn't feeling well, when he asked through the door.

Abe wasn't feeling well, either. His head ached tremendously. He hadn't kept very good track of how much he was drinking last night, but it was a lot. *Oh, God. I don't remember anyone leaving.*

Abe walked around, picked up a deck of cards strewn across the living room floor, and brought Bill's empty glasses into the kitchen. As he set them in the sink, he spotted the video camera that Bonnie's son had with him last night. It took him a few minutes to figure things out, but he managed to pull the cassette out and popped it into the VCR. After he rewound it, Abe sate down in his chair and began to watch.

The smiling faces of his middle-aged daughters flashed cross the TV screen. They looked so much like their mother, especially Joanie. She had her mother's big, green eyes, her dark curls.

Kids jumped in front of the camera, making faces and singing silly songs. "Hi, Cousin Joey! How's Germany?" giggled one of the granddaughters. Abe smiled. It reminded him of the old movies they used to make when the kids were still quite young. *Joey's gonna love this.*

Abe cringed to see his own goofy, old image, caught with a tiny slice of pie in his hands. *Do I really look that old?* he sighed. Then, there was a close up shot of someone's nose, followed by carpet and Bill's round belly. Soon, here was tape of everyone at around the table. The image wasn't bumping or shaking anymore. The camera had been set where he had found it earlier, on the kitchen counter, facing into the dining room.

Everyone looked so happy. Bill looked, well, Bill looked sick, but Joanie was smiling brightly, Bonnie was urging everyone to try this and that, and even sulky Mary looked relaxed and happy.

Edith looks old, he thought. Her silver hair hung loosely around her face. When she spoke or smiled, her face broke into a thousand wrinkles, but her eyes still twinkled. She was telling everyone about Thanksgivings when they were young. They had a huge family, fourteen in all. Edith and Abe were close in age. Middle children. The two of them got along best of all the brothers and sisters, but they were sure troublemakers. Yes, they caught the wrath of their father many time.

Suddenly, Joan shot up from the table. Her body and the smoke blocked the camera for a while. She moved to the sliding door, out of the camera's vision. Abe saw himself rise from the table. His face was red, and he was shaking. *How ridiculous*, Abe laughed. He watched himself stumble all over the dining room, swinging his arms in wild arcs, knocking Bill's hat off his greasy head.

Abe watched himself move off camera too, yelling at Joan all the way, obviously sloppy with drunkenness. He didn't want to remember this, but when the tape clicked off, he rewound it and watched again, first to hear what he had said more clearly, then again to watch the faces of his face, then again, and again. He saw the hatred on Bonnie's face. He watched as Mary's body shook with sobs. Edith was gone. *Edith, where did you go? Why didn't you tell me to shut up?* He finally turned the TV off, disgusted and embarrassed. He put on his coat and his old work boots and went outside. After a long walk, Abraham sat in his shop and cried.

Edith left that evening to spend a couple of nights at Bonnie's house. The first night, Abraham sat up watching TV and reading the Reader's Digest. He felt horribly alone, and he couldn't sleep. He didn't want to dream tonight. Instead, he fought the urge to drink, eventually pouring all his alcohol down the kitchen sink. While he watched it spiral down the drain, he wept again. He felt foolish and tired.

Abe went to his bedroom and found the business card that was tucked inside his Bible. He flipped it between his rough fingers for a few minutes. Finally, he picked up the phone. With hesitant fingers, he dialed the number that was scrawled in blue ink on the card's back. It rang four times. Abe was about to hang up when a man's groggy

voice came on the line. It was late, but the man was willing to talk and to listen.

Abraham told him about the tape. They talked for two hours, and they would talk again tomorrow.

In the Darkness
Spring 2002

The bathtub was much too small. Emma had to pull her knees up into the air to submerge her torso, and visa versa. Any which way she maneuvered-- left or right, up or down-- a thin, wet limb poked out into the frigid bathroom air. The goose bumps were almost painful.

She sank her neck and chin into the water long enough to feel the thick steam collect on invisible hairs beneath her nose. She touched her lips to the surface of the smooth water. It felt like a warm, gentle kiss, she imagined, and lingered there for a while. The dark blue shower curtain was pulled tight. The only light in the room came from a small foggy window. Emma shivered in the eerie blue darkness. She pushed herself up to turn the faucet on with a foot, an effort to keep the bath from nearing lukewarm, then she slid down again to gather the last clusters of raspberry-scented suds around her small breasts. Even alone, she felt self-conscious in her nakedness, but the darkness shielded her a bit.

The heaviness in her stomach was persistent, though. It was as if her insides were as dark, as empty, and as cold as her new apartment. The feeling had followed her home from work that night. Everyone in the accounting department had left early to hit the bars, but she stayed behind to finish some Xeroxing and to wash out her coffee mug. Emma didn't much care to go out anyhow. She didn't drink or dance, and she certainly wasn't looking to "hook up" with anyone. No, no. Not at all. She just wanted to rent a good movie and take a nice, long relaxing bath.

After everyone had left, though, she felt bruised. Maybe it was because it had

been such a slow, dragging week. Maybe it was that no one had even asked her to join them at the bar that night. Maybe it was because Tom had stayed a few minutes later than the others.

Tom was about her age, the New Guy, two months removed. He was good-natured and a little artsy. On his desk, he had a piece of raku pottery that he had made in college, and they had laughed once together about the destiny of so many of their ceramic pots: pencil holders for life. That was a while ago, though, maybe his second or third day at work, when everyone seemed like a potential friend. They had had lunch together every day those first two weeks, the two New People, the awkward new transplants from the Midwest. Then Marguerite, with her bleached white teeth and hair, started to sit on Tom's desk and ask about his after work plans.

The opportunity for Emma and Tom to talk never seemed to present itself again. Even now, Tom was hurrying to join the others at the bar, Emma assumed. She could hear his pen scratching feverishly across a wrinkled page of legal paper. Tom took pains to avoid eye contact when she carried her cup by his desk on her way to the break room.

His presence made her nervous, too. She was used to this last half hour alone, most nights listening to a classic rock station and singing along, walking around in her stocking feet, sending email home, and discretely spitting into Marguerite's Tupperware lunches in the staff fridge. With Tom there, she felt she could do none of these, and she felt too poor an actress to look truly busy until he left. She had to wash her coffee cup for at least ten minutes before Tom finally lifted from his seat, clicked a few figures into the computer, tore the page from his legal pad, and started for the door. "Have a good weekend," Emma said from the break room as he passed, but he did not hear.

way out? she wondered bitterly, then reached her foot out to turn on the faucet one last time.

Couldn't Get Enough Louis L'Amour
Spring 2002

Morgan stared at the shiny black boots that lay in among the tissue paper. She could see the sewn leather toe of one of the boots, with its flowers and twisted rope designs. Gram leaned in closer, her stale breath sending Morgan's sensitive nose hairs into cardiac arrest. "Gram. Gram, they're wild. Thanks."

"Take 'em out of the box, Hun, and try them on," Gram said, nudging Morgan's arm, and winking at Morgan's friends who were sitting all around the living room. She was speaking in the voice of a giddy girl, the voice she used only around Morgan's friends. "When I was your age, I couldn't get enough of Louis L'Amour. I wanted so badly to be a cowgirl and to live in the Wild West. You ever read any Louis L'Amour, girls?"

An awkward silence followed, though some of the girls smiled and shook their heads. "Um, no. He's a writer?" Morgan asked, glancing up from the box in her lap. Gram frowned.

"Yes, he's a writer. A darn good one. Your mom oughta get you out of that mall and into the library some more." The seven or so teens who covered the seats and the arms of the plaid couch snickered, and Morgan moved to set the boots aside. "Oh, hey. Would ya try 'em on for me so I know if Florence and I guessed the right size?"

Morgan bent forward, her hip-hugging pants pulling down in the back exposing a triangle of satin thong underwear. Gram pretended not to notice. Morgan pulled her chunky-heeled Doc Martin's off her feet, and tried to pull a long, black cowboy boot over her striped socks. She made like the effort behind the deed was immense.

"Honey, just pull 'em up by the boot straps. That's what they're there for."

Morgan rolled her eyes at the girls on the couch, and they tactlessly responded with sarcastic laughs. She pulled both boots on, and stood up to parade around, her feet turned out, and her eyes crossed.

Behind her, Gram smiled with delight.

The next day, Morgan and her best friend, Jo, inventoried the gifts. Thirteen was turning out to be a lucky age, they decided, as they looked through the stack of CDs. Jo snapped one of the CDs out of its case and put it into the player. Hip-hop filled the little room, and Jo began to bump and grind with Morgan's pink plush-shaded floor lamp.

Everything in Morgan's room was pink plush. Jo's room was purple plush, and their friend, Mikki's, was lime green plush. The lampshades, the picture frames, the slippers, the journals, all were purchased at the mall and all coordinated. Plush.

Morgan slid the box with Gram's present in it under the bed, then started to dance as she moved to hang her new glow-in-the-dark hippie beads over her bedroom door.

"So, you gonna wear those boots to the dance this weekend?" Jo asked.

"Yeah. They'll go nicely with my Wranglers and my ten-gallon hat." Jo laughed.

"Hey, Madonna does it, so why can't you?"

"Because Madonna's a bazillion years old, and she can wear *whatever* she wants.

Need I remind you of the cone bra?"

"You need not," Jo said, smiling.

A light knocking reached Morgan's ears through the music. She moved to the door and growled, "Creep, how many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?" The knocking stopped.

"I thought your brother was at a Bobby's house all weekend," Jo said, cracking open a new tube of purple nail polish.

"Aw, shit. That was probably Gram, then," Morgan said. She stood facing the door for a while, biting her lip. Then, she went to the bed and pulled out the box of cowboy boots. Carrying it in front of her, so Jo wouldn't see, Morgan set the box on top of her desk, beside her computer. "You wanna go for a walk past Zack's place?" she asked, moving toward the door.

Jo stood up, nail polish still in hand. She blew on her fingernails as she moved through the door. Morgan left the door slightly open.

The night Linda told her kids that Gram was coming to stay for a few months, they seemed really excited. Morgan even volunteered to make up the guest bedroom. Kevin asked if she was bringing her dogs. He had always wanted dogs. "No dogs, but Gram is going to stay with us until we can figure out something else."

Something else. Gram knew what was next. She had lived just fine on her own for nearly twenty years, but "you break one hip and forget a few things, and their ready to call you crazy and put you in a Home," she had told her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Jack.

"Mmm-hmm," Jack had replied. He wasn't much for talking.

Gram's friend, Florence, was more sympathetic, though. "Bastard kids. If I could go back fifty years, I'da never had 'em." Gram had laughed. Florence's kids were great, and she knew it.

Florence was five years Gram's senior, a friend of Gram's sister, Margaret, who

died from breast cancer in 1987. As each year passed, Gram and Flo had become closer and closer friends. It was Florence who first introduced Gram to line dancing, who first took Gram on a road trip to Las Vegas, who gave Gram her first puff of marijuana (also Gram's *last* puff of marijuana). None of Gram's kids new about any of that, though. It was important to keep some secrets.

Florence's kids on the other hand rallied behind every thing she did. Heck, where do you think she got the weed? They'd never put old Flo in a Home.

When Linda told Gram that Morgan and Kevin were excited that she was coming, Gram thought that Linda might have her stay for the long-term. Linda was virtually on her own with that husband of hers always on some business trip, so Gram figured she could use the extra help raising those kids. Gram had had enough experience with that.

At the same time, she was determined to be as self-sufficient as possible. Gram *liked* being independent.

"Creep, how many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?" Morgan's hiss burned in Gram's ear. When the door to Morgan's bedroom creaked opened moments later, Gram was lying on the guest bed, staring into the thin, veiny palms of her. She figured that either Linda had lied to her or that she had already overstayed her welcome, because Morgan kept her distance as soon as their first weekend together had ended, and Kevin only stuck around if Gram bribed him with a Dairy Queen outing.

"Maybe if you didn't give them everything they asked for, they'd stop treating you like a bank," Gram had told Linda earlier that day when Kevin called to tell them he was coming by to get some money for a movie. He was staying at Bobby's again that

night. Linda had just ignored the comment and went to get her purse. That's when Gram decided, maybe it was time to go visit with Morgan and her little friend, but...

A knock sounded on Gram's door. She lifted her head from the satin pillow, fluffed her wiry hair with her fingers, and got up to answer the door. "Yes?"

"Gram, you got a phone call," Kevin said.

"I thought you were staying at Bobby's," Gram said through the door.

"I am. I'm just here to pick up some mula for the movie. Mom made me come and get you, though. *Ph-oh-one*," he sang softly.

She pulled open the door, smiling, but Kevin was already half way down the hall.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

"Hey, Jack. What are you up to, ya Old Fart?"

"Not much. Say, Rhoda, Florence died last night. Her kids asked me to call you."

"Oh, no," Gram whispered.

"Died in her sleep."

"Oh, no."

"Well, the funeral's on Thursday, but the wake's on Wednesday. You want me to swing by and pick you up, or can Linda bring you out our way?"

"Um, I'll work something out with Linda, Jack. I gotta go, now. We just sat down to dinner."

That night after dinner, Linda pushed an earring through her ear and glancing about for her purse. "I can't bring you anywhere Wednesday or Thursday, Gram. I got a United Way meeting and Kevin's baseball game on Wednesday, and then I've got a sewing class on Thursday night. I've missed two weeks in a row now, so I can't miss this week. What's going on that you need a ride? Can't Jack come and get you?"

"Hmm... It's just out of the way for Jack to come get me. You see, Florence--".

"Florence? Your crazy friend who wore the cowboy gear? The one who backed over that horrible, yippy neighbor dog of yours?" Linda interrupted, smiling, and fastening the other earring.

"Yeah, that was Florence. Well, Jack called and said that Florence--".

"Oh, Gram! I have to go. My meeting starts in five minutes," Linda said, pulling the purse from beside the magazine rack in the living room. She gave Gram a kiss on the cheek and said, "We'll talk about this later. Ohmigod, I *love* Florence!" She smiled and laughed, pulling the door behind her.

"Why'd ya miss Florence's funeral?" Jack asked, a week later.

"Well, I tried to call you for a ride, but you never answered your phone."

"Huh. Well, what happened to Linda?"

"She had plans she couldn't get out of," Gram said lightly. Linda looked up from her salad and screwed her face up into an apologetic smile.

"Huh," Jack said.

Gram turned away from Linda and wished again that there were more phones in

the house. The only other phone was in Morgan's room, and Morgan had solidly communicated that her room was "off-limits." Gram closed her eyes tight, trying to keep them dry. "So, how was it? I mean, did a lot of people show up?"

"Not too many. Everyone was asking after you."

"Yeah, well... Next time," said Gram, turning back to Linda and forcing a smile.

"Talk to you later, Jack."

"Yeah. *Next time*," Jack said, roughly.

"I'm sorry you had to miss Flo's party," Linda said, glancing up to see Gram hang up the phone.

Gram packed up her things, slowly and quietly. The light in the guestroom was off, and only the light from the window lit the room. Gram folded her satin pillowcase and stuck it on the top of the full suitcase. She flipped the suitcase shut, and pulled the zipper silently.

Gram shuffled out the door of the guestroom and set the suitcase lightly in the hallway. Everyone was in bed, except Morgan who was still at a friend's house. Gram opened the door of Morgan's room and looked around. The room was well lit by yellow streetlights outside, so Gram didn't have to look long. She found the box and tucked it under her arm. She pulled Morgan's door closed, picked up her suitcase, and left by the front door.

Linda knocked on Gram's door and announced that she was driving the kids to school. When Gram didn't answer, Linda figured she was still asleep. "Nice to be able

to sleep in every day," Linda said under her breath, as she shoed Kevin and Morgan out the door.

When Gram didn't pick up the phone when Linda called during her lunch hour, Linda figured Gram was probably in the bathroom. When Gram didn't respond when Linda came home and knocked on her door again, Linda began to worry. She let herself into Gram's room and found that everything was gone.

For three hours, Linda tried to reach people who might have the numbers for Gram's friends. Finally, someone gave her Jack's number.

"Jack, do you know Florence's number? I think Gram's gone to visit."

"Hmm. I have it here somewhere." Jack shuffled papers and finally found the number for Florence's ranch house.

The phone rang several times before someone finally picked it up. The voice of a young woman came on the line. "Hi. This is Rhoda Marsh's daughter, Linda. Is Rhoda there?"

"Rhoda? Oh, man, I haven't seen Rhoda for ages. We missed her at the funeral."

"The funeral?"

"Oh, my God. Didn't Jack call? Nana Florence died last week. Jack said he was going to call."

Linda hung up the phone and hung her head. Just then, Morgan came into the kitchen. "Mom, have you seen those boots Gram gave me? They were on my desk yesterday, but I can't find them anywhere today." Linda began to cry.

A Long Ride To School *Spring 2002*

Elizabeth closed her eyes and tried to fall back asleep. The bus jumped and lurched along the frozen gravel roads and sent her head bouncing off of the hard plastic seats, but she gritted her teeth and kept her eyes closed tight. Little girls with uneven pigtails, chipped nail polish, and dirty, pink coats climbed over the seats as though they were jungle gyms, and snotty-nosed little boys fought, swore, and told tough little lies. Elizabeth felt a scream of frustration rise in her throat.

At age fifteen, she could not tolerate little kids at all, let alone on the filthy, frozen school bus at 6:45 in the morning. Elizabeth had begged for a ride that morning (okay, she begged every morning) but it was an impossible request. Dad headed off to work at 6:30, and Mom had daycare kids arriving at 7:00. Ugh, she could not WAIT until she got her drivers license... next fall.

The bus came to a stop and Elizabeth opened her eyes to watch a warmly bundled kid waddle up to the bus, up the steps, and down the aisle. The quiet little boy, whose mother stood waving at the end of the driveway, sat boldly with a protesting, teenage boy, just across the aisle from Elizabeth. The teenager growled for the kid to "get lost," but the little boy just put a mittened hand against the back of the seat in front of him as the bus launched forward, so as not to slide off the seat.

They had all witnessed it happen before, where a kid, all clad in slippery winter clothes, slid from the seat and flew down below, stopping only at the feet of the first kid whose legs reached the ground. It was tragic and hilarious, depending on the kid.

Elizabeth would not have felt too bad if her neighbor had gone flying. The girl that sat next to her was constantly sniffing, coughing up crisp chunks of phlegm, and

drumming her feet into the seat in front of them. Elizabeth stared hard at her and said desperately, "Please stop," but the girl just looked up at Elizabeth and drew the back of her coat sleeve across her snotty nose.

Just ignore it and fall asleep, Elizabeth was thinking when she heard the little boy across the aisle start to whimper. While she had been focusing on her immediate neighbor, Elizabeth had not noticed that the teenage boy had enlisted the help of two violent middle schoolers to pester the quiet boy out of his seat. The older boys took turns calling him names and slamming his face into the seat in front of him.

The boy had been bleeding out his nose for some time when Elizabeth finally noticed what was going on. Elizabeth's entire body immediately tensed. Her heart began to beat madly, and her eyes grew wide and wild. She shot up from her seat, pushed her little girl aside, and moved into the aisle without a thought. Elizabeth began to holler as loud as she could in a shrill, scratchy morning voice.

"Get the fuck away from that kid, you assholes!" Every kid on the bus froze. "If you lay another hand on that kid, I'll be giving you all bloody noses, you freaks! He's just a little kid! Goddam! Get the fuck away!"

Elizabeth stood red-faced and shaking. She pulled the little boy from the seat and sat him next to her snot-faced neighbor, all the while staring hard at the teenaged boys. The bus driver, who finally noticed the commotion came to a fast stop, and Elizabeth in all her anger, fell with a heavy thud and slid down the snow-soaked aisle.