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PASSING ON

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CHARITY MONTGOMERY



## Passing On

Charity Montgomery  
Austin Peay State University  
December 2008

TO THE GRADUATE COUNCIL:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Charity Montgomery titled "Passing On." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Barry Kitterman", written over a horizontal line.

Barry Kitterman, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

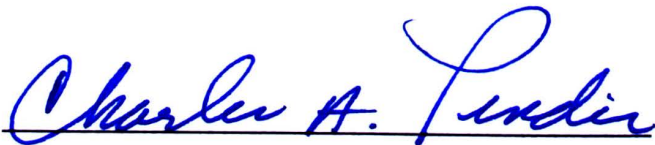
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This thesis is all about relationships, not solely in the conventional sense, but many types of relationships – romantic, familial, with self, with others. These pieces are about the things we say, the things we cannot say, what we learn from one another, what we learn about ourselves. They're about love and fear, longing and loss, proof, improving, earth and nature, life and what we leave behind, and the intangible. Each piece speaks to someone I've learned from in my life – professors, parents, friends, not friends, humanity. Each piece speaks to my relationship with my own education, how well I have been able to process and record, or document in a meaningful way, what I have gained so that others may share in the knowledge. I hope each piece gives thanks for the relationships I have been fortunate to have with each of those persons, and especially to BK, BF, JE, and DG.

Most gratefully, I dedicate this to the most amazing women in my life: Claudia, Joyce, Catherine, and Corrie.

## **A Thanks-giving: In Five Movements**

### **Lesson 1: Coffee**

One of my favorite couples is sitting with me in the coffee shop. Danielle's mother is coming for a visit, and Danielle is telling about the preparations they must make for the impending arrival. "De-gaying," she calls it. It hurts me to hear it. Together they remove every evidence of their love from their apartment, pictures of them together, even the evidence that they share a bedroom. They make the spare bedroom look "lived in."

Later, I talk to the other half of the couple, Aundrea. She tells me that she would rather move out for a week and avoid the potential complications than have the difficulties break them up. In that moment, I see love like no poet has ever captured satisfactorily for me. How can something as beautiful as love be so painful? I go home and remove my hopeful online personals ad that same night. I cannot take that kind of hurt.

### **Lesson 2: Hurricane**

On my birthday, number 26, a hurricane hits Virginia. It destroys the first floor of the beach house I spent many summer days in. When I was young, Momma and I used to go out on the beach searching for fossils: shark's teeth and scallop shells from creatures that existed millions of years before us. Today, Momma and I walk down the beach together, finding bits and pieces of other people's lives that the hurricane has scattered up and down the beach. Here, a broken dish, there an embroidered pillowcase, a single stray spoon. Someone's couch sticks awkwardly up from the water.



Momma stubs her toe on something quite hard, and we stop to investigate. The hurricane has caused considerable erosion on the beach. She starts digging in the sand, and discovers a large fossilized vertebra, from some prehistoric whale. We both dig a little farther, and after a few minutes time, realize that what we have here may be the entire whale. I ask her, should we take it back to the house? She puts back the backbone. “What would we do with it?”

### **Lesson 3: Charity**

My friends are having a party to celebrate a culmination of efforts. I spend all day with them, in their home in the country. Jesse and I cut thousands of cheese cubes and arrange them with grapes and crackers and greenery on antique glass trays. We painstakingly attend to every detail of the food, and pour wine for all of the guests throughout the evening. Chris asks me, “Why are you being so generous?” Before I can answer, he says, “Of course, it’s in your nature.”

I return home at the end of the evening to discover my front door standing at a strange angle, having been kicked in. I have been robbed. My TV is gone, along with the DVD player, my prescriptions, some jewelry, and four cans of Slim-Fast from the refrigerator. I cannot find my cat anywhere. I begin to cry. Frowning, the police officer says to me, “Ma’am, its just stuff. It’s replaceable.” I wail more loudly, and he looks at me, confused. Some garbled version of, “It’s my cat,” comes out of me. Six officers and two neighbors help me search the yard for quite some time.

## **Lesson 4: Hands**

He's the most handsome man, good natured, quick with a joke. He's driving behind me in his truck, following me to a diner. On the way, I see a cop driving by in the opposite direction. I have an urge to flip him off. But then I remember Michael, behind me.

What would it be like never to flip anyone off again? What would it be like never to hold your wife in your arms again, to skim your thumb over her nipple, to wind her hair over your hands as you sleep?

Michael lost both his hands, and most of his arms, in an accident some time ago. He seldom discusses it. He tells me one day it's the best thing that ever happened to him. He went back to school after the accident. He's fulfilling dreams he thought he never could. His wife cheated on him, then left. He is raising his three-year-old child on his own. He teaches school now, coaching both the school's athletics as well as his son's soccer team. I never thought about the mere presence of my hands so much before in my life.

## **Lesson 5: Contradiction**

What is the distinction between duty and kindness? Is love always entangled with pain? Is that better than the pain of loneliness? Can we find beauty in destruction, or hope in great loss? Where are the lessons, and why are they such bittersweet instruction? Momma asked me that day on the beach, "What would we do with it?" I suppose that is the question to ask in whatever situation we are dealing with: what would we do with it? What can we make of this?



Perhaps it is our nature as humans to seek out the blessings we can find in the worst trials facing us. We find the good in our humanity. We rediscover the ability to persevere. If there is a God, and that God is benevolent, this is the blessing I would like to thank God for: simply, that I wake up even on the worst of days, with hope. That single element keeps me searching and expectant.

## Expectations

Who would give a law to lovers? Love is unto itself a higher law. ~ Boethius,  
*The Consolation of Philosophy*, A.D. 524

Doug stood staring at the young woman across the courtyard. She hadn't noticed him yet, and that was the way he intended it. Doug thought she was about twenty-three, young, on the heavy side, lonely. Those made the best sort, he thought. He observed her outgrown hairstyle, the frayed edges of the cuffs on her jeans. Bringing his digital camera level, he centered the image in the viewfinder, and clicked off several shots.

Every face, every body, every scene could hold a surprise. Some pictures were everyday shots, some were extraordinary...like the time in Arkansas, when he saw a homeless man, collapsed asleep on a bench, and his extended arm drooping. What had made the image a prize was that the man was sleeping beneath a sign that read "Fantasy." There was an award-winning shot.

There had been the time at the governor's inauguration, when he had glanced away from the platform out of sheer boredom. How many hundreds of these events had he photographed? One news-making photo could pay the rent for a month; two could bring in enough to pay the bills as well. Instinctively, Doug knew a good shot when he saw it. He captured the governor's daughter speaking to her mother, the first lady of the state, who was also not paying attention to her husband's speech. Years later, when that Governor became President, and his wife's career choices caused a debate about her parenting skills, that photo had been published in a national news magazine. Stock shots like that paid seven dollars apiece. When the shot had been in the magazine, he had not been paid; only a photo cut-line recognized his work.



Doug returned home after a day's work, putting his feet up on the coffee table as he sat to watch television. He loved having his own apartment with no one else to tell him what to do or when. He had two bedrooms, with a bed in each. He never made either one. When the sheets in one got too dirty and sticky to sleep in, he switched bedrooms and slept in the other. When he felt like it, he'd take the sheets off, wash them, and put a new set on. He liked to eat in bed, mostly ravioli, but experience had taught him that tomato sauce and cream-colored sheets were not a good combination. It got lonely from time to time, but for the most part, he preferred independence.

At his office in town, the women were forever asking him over for dinner. The newspaper had a very transient flow of female employees, particularly in the circulation offices. He certainly wasn't underfed, but he supposed there was no harm in a dinner out every now and then. Sometimes, Rhoda would cut out recipes for him, put them in an envelope and put them on his desk. All her recipes contained six or less ingredients, often involving a can of cream-of-something soup. Rhoda was the office grandmother. She clucked her tongue over every illness, doted over the new babies, and offered candy to all visiting children. Doug liked her, and in return for the recipes, he'd leave a special picture for her.

In his twenty-seven years, he had never settled down. Some part of him felt that he really should, by now, be married, or own a house, or even have a kid. He had been pretty committed to one woman, Julie, for several years, but things had broken off after college. She just had not been ready to "make the leap," she said, twisting his promise ring off her finger and refusing to meet his eyes. It was over. It was as if the investment

in time and emotion over the three years they had been together was totally erased. He'd been burned and was in no hurry to step back into the bonfire commonly referred to as the dating pool. Still, that nagging desire for domesticity haunted the recesses of his mind.

"Doug, why does a man like you even need two bedrooms, if you're not looking to be married?" Rhoda was doing her twice-yearly self-assigned duty, reminding Doug that there was more to life than being a bachelor.

"Aww, Rhoda, are you asking me to marry you, you sly fox?" Doug had long ago learned to dodge Rhoda, in a pleasant and comical manner. He'd already been through the standard answer, that everyone needed a guest room. Besides, it was handy when his sister crashed, or his mother paid him a visit.

"I'm just saying, Doug...people expect a man your age to be married. Or they start to wonder about him." Rhoda was of an age where wondering about a man was ominous. "People will get the wrong idea about you. We can't have that."

Knowing that saying it aloud would upset Rhoda, he thought to himself, "So what?" He didn't think that being gay would be a bad life, but he really wasn't. He'd always had friends who were gay, and it didn't threaten him, although initially the idea had taken a little getting used to.

"Dougie?" It was Shellie on the phone. Whatever his sister wanted, she got, when she used that voice. "Doug, I need a really huge big, big favor. Before you answer, would you just hear me out, please?"



“Honey, of course. What is it?”

He could hear Shellie take a big breath before she began to ask. While she paused, he grabbed his checkbook, glancing at the balance. He could spare a good bit, he figured. Shellie rarely asked for money, and he was glad to help. She had just graduated college and was on her own for the first time.

“Well, it’s complicated. I have this friend who needs a place to crash for a few days, in the city. You’ve got the bedroom set up, and it would be perfect. She really needs to get away for a few days.”

“A few days?”

“Three or four days, a week at most,” Shellie said.

“That doesn’t sound like such a huge deal. When’s she coming?” He picked up a wide-angle lens, gently blowing the dust from it and cleaning it. Unzipping his camera bag, he checked for film and batteries as she talked. He liked to choose between the digital and conventional cameras, depending on the pictures he was taking.

“Well, that’s the trick. She needs to leave when her roommate is not home. The roomie is kind of freaking out about stuff right now. Can I give her your number?”

“Yeah, that’s cool. Since I’m out taking pictures all day, it’s pretty easy to run home in between. Is this a bad situation? Is there anything I should know?” He opened the freezer, pulling out his stash of batteries and dumping them in the pocket of his bag.

“No, what there is to know, I’m sure she’ll tell you.”

“I’ll get the room ready. What’s her name?”

“Her name is Jacinda. And she cooks. You’ll love her.”

“I’ll be waiting for her call. Love you.”

Across town, Jacinda lay in her bed, thinking of what to pack. It was their bed, actually, but not for much longer, she thought. She smoothed the sheets as she got up, half-heartedly putting the bed back into some semblance of order. She wobbled to the bathroom, inspecting her bed-head and brushing her teeth. She teetered into the shower, being careful not to slip, and spent a long time letting the deliciously hot water pour over her. Lou teased her about taking “Hour of Power” showers. Jacinda’s long hair alone took a full fifteen minutes to wash, rinse, condition, and rinse again.

Getting out of the shower, she wondered if this would be the day she would finally leave. The woman she lived with, Lou, was in and out of the apartment much of the time. She worked just downstairs and around the corner, so on breaks between her clients, Lou could dash home from the law firm and grab lunch or a snack, or throw a load of laundry in the wash. Jacinda and Lou had a love-hate relationship, and lately, it had been more hate than love. Jacinda quickly pulled her bathrobe over her shoulders and went to the bedroom to dress.

She was disappointed when her loosest pants felt tight, and she somehow couldn’t find a shirt that suited her mood. She hated days when nothing fit, nothing felt right, and nothing satisfied her. She wished she had more big gray sloppy t-shirts to wear. Even if she felt like a slob in them, she was at least comfortable. At this point, comfort was her first consideration. She pulled on the pants, deciding not to button them, found an old flannel shirt, and decided it was a passable outfit. She put on some well-worn slip-on shoes and went to work on her hair.



Doug walked through the university campus at a fast but casual clip. He was looking for a good shot of a student gathering for the paper. He came across a group, a poetry class, sitting in the slanting fall sunlight. From a display on someone's laptop, he gathered that they were studying Robert Penn Warren. Standing just far enough away to be unnoticed, he started taking pictures. He noticed a woman among the group, wearing a flannel shirt, pants, slip-on shoes. Her long dark hair looked thick and well kept. She was not waif thin, and he liked that. He preferred women with a little substance to them. He approached the group to secure permission to print the pictures, addressing the woman in the flannel shirt.

"Hi. I'm Doug from the Times-Democrat. I was just taking some pictures, you know, stock shots, and some of your group is in them. Anyone mind having their picture in the paper?"

Everyone shook their heads no, except one large irritable woman, who said that it was intrusive and ridiculous. Doug assured her that he would not include her picture. The woman in the flannel shirt joked and said, "I hope you got my good side!" She gave him a large flirty smile, her eyes nearly squinting shut.

Doug said, "Always!" Then he added a little flirt of his own, "I don't think you have a bad side."

"Cocky," she muttered, smiling.

He looked up, addressing the group again, "If anyone has questions or regrets later, I'll leave my card." He slickly handed his card to the young woman, hoping she might call him herself. She slipped it into her notebook without so much as a glance at it.

It was about lunchtime, and Doug decided that he should probably go home and check his answering machine, in case Shellie's friend had called. He didn't want to leave the woman in the lurch. Sure enough, the light on the answering machine was blinking. He pushed the play button to hear Shellie's voice.

"Doug, Jacinda misplaced your number, so she asked me to call you. She's thinking of coming on Thursday, if that's all right. I gave her your number again, just in case, but you should be looking for her then. Love you!"

Doug put down his bag and headed for the second bedroom, the larger of the two. He could do the gentleman thing and lend her the nicer bedroom. He took the sheets and blankets from the bed and took them to the washer. Going back to the kitchen, he grabbed a quick PBJ on whole wheat bread and headed back out to work.

Back at work, Doug hooked his digital camera into the computer, sorting through the shots worth keeping. He picked stock shots and discarded others, making a nice file of pictures to use at a moment's notice for a feature story or a filler article. Pictures sometimes sold a story to the readers, and that in turn sold more papers, thereby keeping him employed.

As he sorted, he noticed that he had a couple of different pictures of the same woman in different settings. There she was on the park bench, then again in the campus group. How odd. Doug normally recognized faces and rarely wound up with the same person twice, unintentionally. There was just something about this woman, her build, her face. She looked beautiful, her olive skin and dark shiny hair drawing attention to her features.



Rhoda crept in behind him. “Who’s that? She’s lovely.”

“Just some lady. Stock shots. How are you today?”

“Good, Doug. I made some brownies. They’re in the break room. You might go after that one, she looks like a good girl.”

“Oh, Rhoda...you know you’re the only woman in my life. Too bad you’re taken.”

“Yes, and Henry would have something to say about that!” She smiled and patted Doug’s shoulder. “Go get some brownies before they’re all gone.”

Doug rode the elevator up to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. He walked up to his apartment door and removed the Chinese delivery menu that had been stuck to it. While he loved Chinese food, he hated that the different restaurants plastered their ads throughout his building. He glanced at it, determined that he had this one, and went on inside. His apartment was naturally well-lit, the sun shining in the living room and into the bedroom off the balcony.

He decided that he’d stay in tonight, maybe catch a game on TV. He flipped on the set, picking up the newspaper to consult the schedule. The Oakland A’s would be playing the Detroit Tigers a little later. He walked into the kitchen to grab a soda and some popcorn before the game began. He was looking forward to seeing the Tigers’ Dmitri Young in action. Young, #25, was generally good for a homer in a game.

Just as he was settling in, Doug heard a knock at the door. He hit the mute button on the television, setting down his drink next to the remote. He strode over to the door and flipped the deadbolt, opening the door to find a dark haired woman with olive skin



standing on the threshold. He blinked for a long moment, and managed to utter a strangled sounding, “Yes? Um, hi!”

“Are you Doug?”

“That’d be me. And you are?”

“I’m Jacinda. Shellie’s friend?” The woman ran her hand over her belly. “Is that popcorn I smell?”

“Yes. Please, come in. Would you like some popcorn? Have a seat.” Doug was astounded. He’d been taking pictures of her all along. He thought about how fascinated he had been with her features. Now she was staying with him?

“Wow, the A’s game is on! And it’s just started!” Jacinda grabbed the remote and hit the volume switch. “Are you a big fan?”

“Uh, no, I was just watching it for the heck of it, I guess,” said Doug. “Would you like to put your things in your room? I have it all ready.”

“Sure! That’d be great. Sorry, I was just so happy to sit down. This is a nice couch.” Jacinda made a move to get up, spreading her knees a bit apart and pushing heavily on the arm of the navy blue couch. She rocked back and forth once or twice, garnering the centrifugal force to get out of the cushy seat. “This baby...can’t get around hardly...such a hefty load,” she said.

Doug felt another shockwave go through him. “Baby?”

“Oh yes. Didn’t Shellie mention that? I hope it’s still ok for me to be here.” She looked at him with an expression both hurt and hopeful at the same time.

Doug recovered quickly, faking a smile. He looked pointedly at her stomach and said, “It’s just, well, you are not showing is all, and I, well, you don’t look pregnant, and

I, well no, Shellie didn't mention it, of course it's ok, I mean, what are you going to, well nothing we, I mean you, nothing can be done about it now." He trailed off, stammering.

"Doug?" Jacinda had a smug look. She could tell he was genuinely trying to disguise his shock. "Quit while you're ahead, hon."

"Is it that obvious?" He grimaced. "Anyhow, the room is this way. You have the master suite, so there's a bathroom right in your bedroom. There's fresh sheets and towels in there."

"Wow. Just a regular Martha, aren't you?" She plopped down on the edge of the bed.

"Pretty spiffy for a bachelor." He grinned. "Just when you thought all men were scum! Is that why you left your boyfriend?"

Jacinda gave Doug a funny look, and swallowed hard. She was silent for several useless moments. "I don't have a boyfriend," she started slowly. "I left my girlfriend."

Doug tried to cover, quickly. "Well, I guess it's none of my business. I mean, that's your stuff. Sorry." He made to leave the room.

"No! It's ok. I wanted to tell you – I didn't know how much Shellie had filled you in on." She gestured to the chair in the room. "Lou, that's my girlfriend, she's angry because, well, you know what it takes to get pregnant. She's afraid I'd leave her for the father. It was making me claustrophobic. She was so needy and clingy, I just couldn't take it, and I left."

"And the father? Is he around?"

"We both just made a mistake. But something good came of it. I know it sounds horrid, but..."



“No judgments, no apologies. Again, not my business.” Doug cleared his throat. He sat back, waiting for her to continue.

“What about Lou? Does she want it? Does she even know where you are? Should you call and let her know you’re safe?”

Jacinda rolled her eyes.

“Yes, Mother,” she said in her best obedient voice. “I’ll call her. But I don’t want to see her, yet. I can’t just now.”

“Sorry. Ok. Next big question, when is the baby due?”

“November 9<sup>th</sup>. He’ll be a fall baby. And no, I don’t have a name yet.” Ready for the usual barrage of questions, she smiled encouragingly. Doug took it as his cue to leave the room, let Jacinda settle in.

*This is going to be complicated. At least she’s down to earth, tells it like it is.*

*Wow. Do I mention the pictures? How would I introduce that? “Hey, any chance you’re straight? Because I am clearly fascinated with you, see?” How can I feel so protective of a woman who clearly does not need my protection?*

In the morning, Doug carefully left a note and a house key for his guest. He went off to work as usual, after describing in his note where to find coffee, tea, and other necessities. He went about his work, but admittedly could not stay focused. He called his sister and discussed matters with her.

“Do you know Lou? Is she going to let Jacinda come back?”

“I don’t know, Doug. Are you cool with her for a while? I can try to find another place for her. It’s just...complicated, right now.”

“It’s ok. She’s ok. I was just, surprised, is all.”

He hung up with Shellie, then headed out to take some pictures of a local book signing. As he walked, he allowed himself a small fantasy. *Him, her, a baby. A happy household. A family of sorts. Baby toys, home cooked meals, someone to come home to each night.* Breaking out of his daydream, he chastised himself – what was he thinking? This baby had a family already.

When he had finished for the day, Doug arrived home to find Jacinda in the living room.

“I’m going to go out in a bit. I know a great Thai place. Then I’m going to go baby shopping.”

Doug got the hint. “I’ll just be in the shower, then,” he said, excusing himself.

Doug slept in the way one does when expecting someone home, lightly and with a lot of tossing and turning. He hadn’t heard Jacinda come in, and he found himself somewhat worried. He tried to rationalize that she was a big girl, could take care of herself, but he wasn’t falling for it. Finally, around three a.m., he heard her come in. He rolled over, sighing. He yanked his sheets up around him, readjusted his pillow. Now he could sleep.

In a few minutes, Doug heard Jacinda, shuffling toward his door, sniffing. She knocked and he said, “C’mon in.” When she entered, she looked more vulnerable than she’d looked before, the soft light from the hallway backlighting her. If he’d had a camera, it would have been a beautiful shot.

“What’s up? Are you okay?”



“How would you feel about a couple of weeks extra with me? I could try to pay you something, but I am on a student budget,” she broke off.

“Jacinda, what’s wrong? Did something happen? Are you crying?” Doug spoke softly, his words echoing through the dark. He sat up in his bed to speak to her. A primal need to protect her, a crying woman, surged in him.

She began to explain. She had planned to find a place to live on her own, to care for her child. She was sure things were not going to work out with Lou at this point. She had gone out for dinner, and then for a walk. The evening had been beautiful, quiet, and breezy. She had run into Lou unexpectedly, and Lou’s jealousy erupted. They had argued for quite some time.

“How can my life be falling apart like this?” She began to sob. Doug did the only thing he knew to do, holding her while she cried.

“Shhh,” he murmured into her hair. It smelled like oranges. “Everything will be ok. We’ll work it out.” He handed her the box of Kleenex from the bedside table. It was going to be a long night. And several long days faced them. Doug was supportive, helping Jacinda with the necessary calls to find an apartment. Everything seemed so expensive for a single mother; Doug worried that she’d be overwhelmed by the costs, the responsibilities, and the stress.

After two weeks, Doug knew what he would do. Having Jacinda around these past weeks had allowed Doug to realize that he felt that he really should, by now, be married, or own a house, or even have a kid. He enjoyed her touches around the house, the smell of her Indian cooking, the way she left her schoolbooks neatly stacked on the

coffee table. It was nice banging around the apartment with someone. It felt companionable and comfortable. Besides, it was good karma.

Doug decided that he would get the pictures, bring them home from work. He had thought it over and over in his head. She needed him, he was sure of that. She was a student; she couldn't do this without help and support. He could work his schedule around hers to help care for the baby. He would talk to her tonight. He was sitting at his desk, pondering the pictures.

"Oh, Doug, still after the pretty ones." Rhoda walked by, observing what Doug was looking at. "You ought to ask her out. Ladies like that." Doug chuckled inwardly at the things Rhoda did not know.

"I'll think about it, Rhoda," he said, laying the pictures down. He envisioned how she would enjoy his desk with baby photos on it.

At Doug's apartment, Jacinda hung up the phone, knowing she was doing the right thing. She threw some clothes in the washer, then went to get ready for class. Her tummy stretched, the baby actively kicking inside her. Jacinda absent-mindedly rubbed her tummy as she gathered her books. She packed a lunch, packed her book bag, and thought about more packing she would have to do soon.

Doug arrived home with flowers. He knew just what he would say. He opened the door to his apartment, walking in to find Jacinda napping on the couch. He thought he would let her sleep a while, as he busied himself putting the flowers in a vase. He thought he heard her stirring, and peeked out of the kitchen to check.



“Hey, nice nap?”

“Mmm, yeah. Did you have a good day?” She yawned and stretched. “Nice flowers,” she said, as he set them on the table.

“So, I need to show you something. Stay right there,” Doug said, “you don’t need to get up.” He brought the pictures and sat at the edge of the couch, just above her. She moved a little to get up. Doug started, awkwardly. “Jacinda, I want to show you these pictures. Before I even knew you, I took these.” He showed her the pictures he had taken at the school, her class gathering. Flipping through several shots, he came across the photo he was looking for, the woman on the bench in the park. “Do you remember this one?”

Doug thought she looked confused, maybe stunned. Jacinda was quiet, nodding her head softly, the afternoon sunlight streaming in on her. She clasped her hands together. She reached out and fiddled with a flower, then sat back.

He nervously drew a deep breath, pushed it out. Jacinda picked up a picture, absently tracing the shadows with a fingertip. “I think these pictures are kind of...what’s the word? Fate? Prophetic? Like I was meant to meet you, to know you. There’s a reason I was drawn to you, it was...”

“Don’t say ‘kismet’,” Jacinda interrupted. “I know it’s Indian, but it’s all wrong.”

He chuckled at her joke, grateful for a little comic relief in the situation, and started again. “I’ve been thinking about you, and the baby, and maybe what would be best for us all. I know you wouldn’t want to ...marry me, but I think we could make a go of this. I can rearrange my schedule to suit you. We can take care of your son together. He’d have two parents.” He looked up at her hopefully.

Jacinda's face had fallen. Doug heard her let out her breath. He hadn't realized she'd been holding it. She cleared her throat. "Doug, that's very sweet. I appreciate it." She paused to gather her thoughts, and her breath. There was nothing else to be done but to tell him, she decided.

"Doug, I talked to Lou today. She said that in light of recent events, she realized how selfish she had been. And this is her chance to be a mother, as well as mine. I don't know what to say to you, you've been so good to me. And someday I will find a way to pay you back. Lou...she wants me to move back in this weekend. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, now." She was trying to hold back tears, but they streaked down her face, leaving tracks that glistened remorse. She felt as though she had used him, and that it was transparent.

Doug was silent. He put the pictures down on the table beside the flowers, went to his bedroom and shut the door behind him. *Haven't I tried to do the right thing by her? Geesh, I put myself out on a limb. All right Doug, get it together.*

As he helped Lou carry out the last of the boxes that weekend, seeing them together, he knew that Jacinda's decision had been for the best. Lou was caring for Jacinda, not letting her overexert herself, affectionately rubbing her belly now and then. He watched as they kissed, and then helped Jacinda into the truck.

Doug started to walk off, but thinking better, he turned on his heel. "Hey," he called out, "call me when he's born – I'll take the best newborn shots you'll ever see." He watched them drive off, waving until they reached the intersection.



Doug went back inside, riding the elevator up to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, and entered his newly empty apartment. The palpable feeling of loss crept over him. He walked into the living room, and seeing the flowers still on the table, swept them up. He walked over to the window and dropped them out, vase and all.

## L'Chaim

Cheery Christmas lights and ornaments lined most of the shop windows up and down South Grafton Street. In the square, a Salvation Army volunteer rang a bell in one hand and grasped a steaming cup of coffee in the other. The citizens of the town of Creighton were proud of the tastefully decorated tree directly centered in the square. Andrea Miltis stood back and admired her handiwork, then pulled her scarf a little more snugly around her neck. She'd carefully chosen classic white lights and holiday snowflakes, stars, and candles for the fifteen foot evergreen that was her town's tribute to the Christmas season.

Andrea was the proprietor of Creighton Florist, which she had taken over from her father three years ago, when he decided to retire. She had a small staff, but with great pride had seen to the holiday trimmings for the town's tree herself. Her wreaths were on the doors of several local businesses. Shopkeepers and holiday shoppers smiled and waved to her as she hurried back up the street to the warmth of her shop.

As she closed up for the day, she remembered that she was to meet her husband Jacob at his parents' home for dinner that night. It had almost slipped her mind – she never had been good at remembering appointments. She tried keeping a personal calendar a few times, but she'd either forget to write something down, or forget about looking at the calendar. One year, she'd forgotten she had a calendar at all! Her assistant Macie took care of the arrangements for floral deliveries. Macie was a godsend, and never let a single order get overlooked.

Andrea checked herself in the mirror before she went to the Custis' home. Her long chestnut hair was perfectly straight and she kept it well groomed. She freshened the



eyeliner beneath her grey eyes, and put on some fresh lip gloss. She didn't think she looked twenty-seven. *Much younger*, she assured herself. She removed her smock, adjusted her skirt and sweater, and felt ready to go. She was halfway out the door when Macie shouted after her, "Andrea! Your keys!" Andrea took a deep breath, smoothed her sweaty palms over her skirt, and turned to take the keys from Macie.

"Thanks, Macie. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Macie smiled and patted Andrea affectionately. "Good luck with the in-laws," she offered.

Andrea pulled into the Custis' driveway promptly at six. The two-story Colonial sat firmly at the center of one of the best drives of Creighton. The circular concrete driveway was lined with well-manicured shrubbery and plants, as well as seasonal flowers in the growing season. She parked just behind the ostentatious land barge of a Lincoln her father-in-law drove, and next to her husband's own sensible sedan, a run-of-the-mill silver Honda Civic. She had brought flowers, a seasonal arrangement, for her mother-in-law, and was gratified to see one of her own wreaths hanging on the front door.

Madeline and Harold were the tasteful upper crust sort who would never consider allowing people to come in through the side entrance. Andrea was friendly with them – they had after all, produced the man she loved. However, she secretly thought of them by her pet names: Mad n' Harry. Although her in-laws kept up appearances in the neighborhood and the community, her mother-in-law was known to be quirky, eccentric even.

Madeline had been quite fussed when Andrea had not changed her last name after marrying Jacob. Andrea had gently and patiently explained her choice; since the flower shop had been run by her father, Joel Miltis, she wanted to keep the ownership of the business in the family name. Jacob had supported her completely in the choice. Madeline made under-her-breath but audible comments about rabid feminists messing up everything and what had every happened to tradition and values? At least they had been married, Andrea quietly said, and that was, after all, quite traditional.

Jacob greeted his bride at the door with a kiss and a glass of red wine. They had been married just six months, and were still very much the newlyweds.

“Mmm, thanks, honey,” Andrea said.

As she unwrapped herself from all of the winter necessities, she began to tell Jacob about her day, as he led her into his parents’ living room. She was greeted cordially by her in-laws, and awestruck by the Christmas tree. It was among the gaudiest displays of Christmas spirit in Andrea’s recent memory. The entire tree was decked out in metallic purple and gold ribbon, highlighted with iridescent plastic twists that she had once noticed at a bargain-basement discount store, made to resemble icicles, and dotted by both clear iridescent and purple glass balls of varying sizes.

“Andrea, darling! What do you think of the fabulous job Kenneth has done with our tree this year?” Kenneth was Jacob’s younger brother. Jacob’s parents referred to him as “the artistic type” and were horribly unaware, or in incredible denial, that he was terrifically gay. Andrea thought her response out carefully before saying, “What surprising touches he has added!” She took an especially large gulp of her red wine. She



wondered why he wasn't present this evening, but didn't dare ask, lest she delve into a wild tale about his recent excursions in blue cobalt mining.

"Look what's under the tree," Harold said, with a singsong measure of excitement. Andrea stepped closer to inspect the packages. There was an absolutely huge box for her, wrapped all in gold paper, with an envelope on the top. There were several smaller packages marked with Jacob's and Kenneth's names, as well as the gifts that were marked for various other recipients. Andrea was stunned. She rubbed her hands together in a well-acted show of anticipation. Mad was known for her love of shopping and excessively bad taste in gifts.

"Jacob, I thought you told me your parents said no gifts?"

"They did, sweetie. But Mother just cannot resist! She loves to shop." He cleared his throat and covered by adjusting his tie. He turned his back to his parents and convincingly asked Andrea if his tie looked straight, taking the moment to roll his eyes at his wife. She barely suppressed a giggle.

"We'll open them after dinner," Madeline said. Andrea was shocked again – it was still 2 ½ weeks until the holiday. "Harold and I will be leaving for a cruise this weekend, so we wanted you to have your presents now, so we could see you enjoying them," Madeline continued. "So much to do before we leave! I must have my hair done! And a manicure, I think." Andrea wondered what the point was. Her mother-in-law's hair always reminded her of a painting she had once seen of a British Judge in his chambers – the same white rolled wig look was firmly in place on Madeline's head.

After dinner, Jacob and his father went into the den to look at Harold's computer, with which he had been having difficulty. Andrea heard her father-in-law mutter something about having installed a new program and stifled a giggle as she thought of the impatient man who had endured his wife for almost thirty-six years now. Jacob was a computer expert, and had made a career of his expertise.

Madeline sat in her place at the table, surveying the remains of the meal. Andrea stared at the ring on her finger for a moment, and then got up to start clearing the dishes. The elegant gold-rimmed Mikasa china had been set out in perfect place settings for the meal, along with Madeline's best silver service pieces. Linen napkins in cheery Christmas colors contrasted perfectly with the placemats at each seat.

Andrea wondered with an inner smirk just who had chosen the dishes. The tasteful, brand name pieces were in keeping with all of the best names in housewares, but Mad's quirkiness certainly didn't account for their presence. Compared to her "fabulous" Christmas tree and her stiffly rolled hairdo, the simple fact that she had mixed her gold-rimmed plates with a silver service, which was ghastly alone, Andrea could not account for the simple elegance of such china in her mother-in-law's cupboards.

"Oh, Andrea, dear, don't bother. Consuela will take care of those tomorrow. You just relax and let your dinner digest. How is the house coming along?"

Andrea was glad for the discussion topic and gladly started describing the paint colors, the carpet samples, and a simply must-have Biedermeier piece that she'd found in an antique shop. She wanted everything just so in their new home. Andrea could talk to Madeline about these surface subjects, like furniture and decor, but on a personal level, was totally reserved.



“It’s so good that you’ll have beautiful pieces to pass on someday, dear. I look forward to seeing the house come together.”

Thirty minutes had passed, and Andrea was starting to become uncomfortable alone with Madeline. It was odd trying to relate to a mother-in-law she felt like she hardly understood. “Shall we call the boys?”

Andrea had always loved presents and couldn’t handle suspense. When Jacob had proposed to her, he had taken this into careful account, scrupulously planning every detail of the day so that she would be entirely surprised. He’d hand picked the perfect emerald cut diamond and had it set on an eternity band of smaller emerald cut baguettes, gotten down on one knee, and proposed at sunset by the river. “Andrea,” he’d said, “I want to spend all of my eternity with you. Will you be my wife?” Of course, she’d said yes, and he kissed her hand as he slipped the beautiful ring on her finger.

Now Andrea was anticipating that huge package under her in-laws’ Christmas tree with the same anticipation that a little child feels on Christmas Eve, waiting to hear Santa’s familiar “Ho-ho-ho!” She gleefully ripped off the bright gold paper and ribbons and tossed them aside, then looked at the box. A vacuum cleaner. *A vacuum cleaner? A vacuum cleaner!*

It was practical, and entirely impersonal. She had been raised in a family which felt that an impersonal gift was insincere, a thing born out of duty rather than love or care. As a result, she took great care in choosing gifts for others, even in choosing flowers for her customers, recording and referring to their personal preferences when

making an arrangement. She wanted the people she cared about to know by her very actions that she cared, deeply.

Andrea prayed that her carefully pasted on smile was holding up. Their house had one carpeted room, and Andrea owned two vacuum cleaners at present. When she and Jacob had married, she had one, and they had received another as a wedding gift. She had decided at the time to keep the spare for backup, in case the first died.

“Look, honey!” She carefully angled the box toward Jacob and prayed that his reaction would offer a momentary distraction. He played right into it. Clearly, she thought, her mother-in-law had not taken one moment to consider what Andrea might have really liked to have. Even if the gift had been practical, it didn’t have to be impersonal. In her business and her personal life, she’d learned to show little or no reaction at imperative times, but her poker face was cracking – she could feel it. *Breathe*, she chanted to herself, *breathe!*

Dutifully, Jacob offered, “Oh wow. Looks like that’s got a lot of useful features!” Andrea took a moment and then turned to her in-laws, offering a grateful thanks.

Madeline said, “You’re very welcome! But you forgot the card!” Andrea hastily dug through the pile of paper to retrieve the card. It was addressed to the couple.

“Jacob, this is addressed to both of us. Come here and read it with me.” A big smile and imploring eyes met his.

Jacob came and knelt on the perfect off-white carpeted floor, behind Andrea, as she slit open the envelope with a fingernail. It was a standard-issue greeting card, nothing too fancy. The inscription read, “For Jacob and Andrea. Merry First Christmas as a married couple. May you truly spend eternity together.” The words “spend eternity” had



been underlined, so they could not miss Madeline's carefully worded reference to Jacob's marriage proposal. Enclosed was a smaller envelope, which Andrea opened next.

Secreted in the envelope was a certificate of deed. Madeline and Harold had purchased the most eternal of all gifts. Jacob and Andrea were now the proud owners of adjoining cemetery plots. Was this the strangest Christmas gift ever? Andrea was breathless...but not in the usual sense of the word. Breathless in the I-have-no-earthly-idea-as-to-how-I-could-possibly-respond-to-this-gift sense.

"Hey babe, now we can dance on our own graves," said Jacob.

*dance on our graves. do we want to do that at our age? you're thirty-one! I'm twenty-seven! I don't want to consider dying! what if we're not together for eternity, anyway? people get divorced. things happen. this is so weird. what were mad n' harry thinking? I want to be cremated anyway. do they bury ashes? why do we bury people anyhow? it's just kind of a waste of space, really. two hundred years from now, it will be some forgotten grave that someone wants to build a mass superstore chain over, and some city council will ban it as sacred ground. I'm not sacred. I guess it keeps the smell and the disease away to bury people. I wonder how it smells when people are being cremated? eww. hey, if the ashes spill, I can vacuum them up...*

Andrea came out of her momentary stupor and did the only thing she could think to do to disguise her horror at the morbid Christmas gift. She went and tightly embraced both in-laws in turn, and thanked them. "What an incredible gift," she said. *In-credible, is right*, she thought. *Un-believable! Merry Freakin' Christmas!*

Carefully, Madeline patted her hair after the embrace, checking to see that it had not become mussed in Andrea's sudden show of affection. Madeline was much more reserved than all that hugging. Harold peered through his black wire rimmed glasses at his daughter-in-law and looked somewhat bemused. "Well then," he issued forth, "who needs a drink?"

"I'll help you!" Andrea said. She rose quickly, and went to assist Harold with the aperitifs. She'd be grateful for some alcohol just now, she thought, and then hoped she wasn't thinking like a person too close to becoming an alcoholic.

*now there would be a way to die. you'd die happy, and maybe without even realizing it. at the funeral, people would cluck their tongues and say, tsk tsk, what a shame, embalmed herself. wonder who did the flowers?*

Ice clinking in the glass that Harry had just tossed back for starters brought Andrea back around. Harry looked at her. His sparkling old blue eyes, lined with wrinkles and creases, met her eyes directly and winked. He patted Andrea's hand and whispered conspiratorially, "You handled that well. Was a 'dead ringer' for actually being pleased!" He'd elbowed Andrea in the ribs as he said "dead ringer." Andrea just shook her head, and held out a glass. Harold asked, "One finger, or two?"

"Three."

Harold chuckled and chimed his glass against Andrea's in a mock toast, as if to say, "It won't last much longer, anyway." It was all incredibly ironic – her wonderful husband, the closeted brother-in-law, her father-in-law who had just given an incredible example of his for-better-or-for-worse, grin-and-bear-it mentality, her loopy mother-in-



law, Christmas, and cemetery plots. Embracing the irony, Andrea raised her glass and sighed, and proclaimed, “L’Chaim!”

## A Proven Theory

In the late 1600's, 1687 to be precise, I am sure Sir Isaac Newton thought a lot about physics and the laws of motion prior to recording his Third Law of Motion in his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. I am sure he never considered how his scientific theory would thoroughly integrate itself into my life. In fact, his Third Law is common knowledge, etched into the psyche of everyone who ever had a seventh grade science class. "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." I can still hear the awkward way my dad emphasized "RE" in the word. Its reverberations echo in my mind almost daily – but I am thoroughly unscientific, mathematically challenged, and have never studied physics.

In my life, the Third Law of Motion is equivalent to the Golden Rule of the Bible...except in a bitter, cynical, satirical re-make version. My yearly summer visits to my father usually included a visit to his wife's home place, a riverside beach house in rural tidewater Virginia. My father gave this recitation each time we would embark on a boat trip – by canoe, by sailboat, by motorboat, even in the old rusty johnboat. It was his don't-rock-the-boat, don't-blame-me-if-the-boat-tips-over speech. He would pack his cooler full of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, two packs of Chesterfield Kings, and a lighter. He made sure it was out of the way, where I couldn't get his cigarettes wet.

On the boat trips I would sit, frightened as hell, while the boat rocked gently over muddy green river water. I was not frightened by the water or the boat itself, but of upsetting the delicate balance of temporary peace in the vessel. There was no father-daughter conversation, no joy at spending time together. I am not even sure, to this day, why my father ever took me on these ventures. In whatever comment I might make –



how hot the sun was, how smooth the water was, however innocuous, he found his invitation to unleash himself on me.

The hot Virginia sun thrummed down on me, as my father's ire sluiced over me. No matter what I might venture to say, I knew Dad would tell me why I was wrong, how I was failing him, what a shameful thing it was for him to have a daughter who was bright, but fat. "Fat makes people look stupid," he would say. "Smart people can control how much they eat. Fat people are weak and stupid and can not stop themselves from the next bite." Although I was my father's female doppelganger, one of his favorite comments was to tell me angrily, "You're just like your mother!"

We sailed along in utter misery, leaving a trail of Pabst cans floating behind the boat as we journeyed farther down river. The cigarette butts only floated briefly on the water's surface, but on occasion we would see one being ingested by a curious catfish. Dad lectured to me about the potential I had; since, he claimed, I would argue anything, including that the sky was not, actually blue, I might make a good lawyer someday. The law was his pet profession for each of his daughters.

By the time we got back to the beach house, Dad would be drunk and his two packs gone. I would be sun burnt, sick at heart, and disgusted. Dad's mantras on my failures were on repeat cycle in my juvenile mind. At the end of the summer, when I returned home to my reassuring mother, I would be both determined to do better, to try harder, and convinced that such goals were impossible, lofty dreams. Mom would tell me that she loved me no matter what, and no matter what I did when I grew up, as long as I did the best I could at it, she would be proud of me. Unfortunately, the damage was already done.

The equal and opposite reaction to my father's actions were clear. I was an insecure, defensive, fat kid with little self-esteem. This played itself out in many ways that have lasting effects even now. I am still that kid, only much older. As much as I attempt to ameliorate my mannerisms, I am still rather misunderstood, often categorized as unlikable, or socially awkward. Sometimes, I try so hard to prove myself, I accidentally push people away. I have learned, over the years to control a lot of the behaviors that remind me most of my father, but there are times when I think, "That was just like Dad," and I am genuinely concerned for myself.

Now, at 61, my father seems to realize that his parenting was less than stellar. Once in a while, I get a long sentimental email from him that begs forgiveness and understanding, but he has not amended his ways. One such letter said, in part,

"Dear Charity,

Stumbled across the Centralia Evening Sentinel web site this evening. Four years or so ago, the Sentinel approached me about becoming the managing editor of its Mount Vernon edition. M\_\_\_\_ B\_\_\_\_, who was the society editor when we lived in Centralia, had seen my name in the Colonial Williamsburg journal. When she got home, she wrote to ask if I was the same Dennis Montgomery.

There was no possibility of my taking the managing editor's job at the salary the Sentinel was advertising, but I did let the newspaper fly me back to negotiate. Rented a car in St. Louis, drove in, and stopped at the apartment on the golf course—neither of which had changed much in thirty years—and sat in the parking lot long enough to recall Charity in the



second bedroom in her crib, and her mother posing for a photograph in a bandanna with a washtub scrubbing the grass.

Forty years later, I wonder why we didn't have the good sense to stay where we were thriving and happy."

He still drinks, only now, he only drinks wine. It's sophisticated, he says, and it's good for your heart. He still gets just as drunk as ever. He still smokes, and when I do have to speak with him, there is always tension.

I wish I could say to my father that for his actions, which affected me so, I am having an equal and opposite REaction. Do unto others, Dad. I cannot ever prove myself to him, and as a result, I vainly attempted to prove myself to everyone else. And sometimes, people hated me for it.

I have provided myself some moderate successes in life, graduating college nearly twice now, and having had some accomplishments along the way. I've also discovered a philosophy, a way of thinking, that gets me past some more belligerent rough patches, thanks to re-runs of *Murder, She Wrote* and courtesy of the ever-wise Jessica Fletcher, who said, "I've found that those with something to prove, seldom succeed in doing so."

Undoubtedly, Newton's laws have had an adverse effect on my physical existence. If only I could leave proofs to mathematics and sciences, and to Sir Isaac Newton and his god-damned apple...in life, in literature, in love, and in experience, there are no absolute proofs. EVER.

In the spirit...

*"...shut your eyes and see the gladsome ghosts who once made these places their home."*

*The Rev. Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin, 1927, Letter to Joan Scott*

Who can explain how a child becomes afraid of the dark? At some time during youth, most children seem to acquire these inexplicable fears – monsters under the bed, ghosts, things that creak and rattle, and strange spooky visions that only abound at the edges of cozy dozing. I too, was one of those children, constantly alert for the invasions of the unseen or unknown in my bedroom.

Many factors worked together to culminate my fear, which had become obsessively focused on ghosts, and particular to one locale. When I was ten, my father married our stepmother Joyce, and brought us to Virginia each summer to stay. If one is going to experience ghosts, Virginia, one of the oldest states in the nation, is a likely place. My younger sisters were just coming into the age in which one begins to have nagging worries about things that lie beyond the dark, and it seemed logical to join right in.

The house Joyce lived in was built by her father. The back fence looked out over the Claremont cemetery, and I was sure that spirits swirled all around nearby. To validate my concerns, it seemed that the garage door, an old wooden model with no automatic openers, opened and shut of its own volition. No one had used the garage for years except for storage, and there was no rational explanation why the heavy door was admitting unseen visitors.



I decided that first summer that the answer to the problem was knowledge. I read books checked out from our unincorporated town's bookmobile. I was an avid reader, and ruthlessly borrowed book after book, never mind how scary they seemed. I read books about the ghosts of Colonial Williamsburg with a fervor. There were rumored to be twenty-five or more ghosts at any time in the historic area. Nearby at Bacon's Castle, there were shining lights and cold spots often associated with hauntings. I even read old copies of an aunt's *Fate Magazine*, terrifying myself, armed with knowledge, and fascination. In the daytime, knowledge was empowering, but at nighttime, it was compounded interest on a bad, bad investment.

Our stepmother told fantastic stories. When the "littles," (our code name for the younger children) were away, my stepmother would often regale my cousins, Brian and Catherine, and myself, with semi-scary stories. As best I can recall, she told once of how as a girl no older than ourselves, she had been all alone at the river cabin down the hill when she heard strange and scary noises outside. It was dusk, and she bravely peeked out the window to see if she could determine what was out there. What should she happen to see but two enormous glowing eyeballs?

At the time, there was no telephone in the cabin. She couldn't run for help, *finally* because that thing, which she was certain was a Yeti, was outside. She turned out all of the lights in the house and carefully traveled from room to room, checking locks and windows. She could hear the Sasquatch snorting and shuffling around the house, and she huddled nervously in the farthest inside corner. Eventually she was able to fall asleep, and when she woke the next morning, she had quite a surprise.

She heard a truck and a trailer banging its way down the dirt river road. When she looked out the window, she recognized a neighbor, and he was loading the offending creature into the trailer. A bull had become lost from his farm and decided to amble out to the river, perhaps for a little rest and relaxation. Mr. Allhouse had greeted Joyce kindly, but she chose not to relate her experience to him.

Another story she told was of how she had been up late one night, watching television alone in the dark in the living room of the very house we were in. She saw something glowing out of the corner of her eye, and looked up to examine it. A glowing blue fireball floated solemnly toward her, then crossed the room, hovered over the piano for a moment, and exploded. Her parents were asleep in the back of the house, but she decided not to tell them. What would she say?

In an odd twist of reverse psychology, my father thought that it would be logical to insist that we girls watch movies such as “Poltergeist” to prove that ghosts were not real. To a ten year old, huddling on the couch with her six and four year old sisters, nothing seemed more real. Almost nothing, anyway. Filled with anxious fear, we marched to our beds in our large shared bedroom upstairs.

All the children talked and talked, later and later into the night, until Joyce finally came in to quiet us. I told her what she probably already knew – we had had the wits scared out of us by that movie, and there was little or no chance of any of us falling asleep any time soon. A wise look crossed her patient face, and she began to tell yet another story, this one more brilliant than any other material we had heard before.

“You know what will get rid of ghosts every time?” she asked. “There’s one thing that is guaranteed. Ghosts are so afraid of this substance, all you have to do is mention it,



and they won't come anywhere near you. Very few people know about it, and if I tell you, you can't share the secret." Of course, we girls were hooked. I sat up eagerly in my bed, awaiting this new and precious knowledge.

She continued, in a carefully measured tone. "Ghosts are afraid of foam rubber. They cannot materialize through it or anywhere around it. If they get near it, they just vaporize! Now, there is foam rubber in the soles of all of your shoes. So what you do, is every night, when you go to bed, line up all of your shoes around the edges of your bed. Then, the moment you think you see or hear a ghost approaching, you simply shout out, "FOAM RUBBER!" and they will disappear as quick as they can. They cannot stand the stuff!"

Reassured, we went to sleep, secure in the knowledge that we had a fail-proof solution. I cringe to think how many times my parents must have woken to the sound of "FOAM RUBBER!" being shouted at an intruding ghost, or how long it took them before they learned to sleep through the mantra. And let me tell you, it worked every time. Never failed.

Eventually, I became fascinated with ghosts, hauntings, spirits said to reveal themselves. Not in a new age, psychic, creepy, let's-talk-to-the-dead-and-reveal-the-mysteries-of-the-great-beyond sort of way, but in a way that revered the idea that there was something else out there. My mother and stepfather soon moved our family to Marion, Ohio, where a newer sort of specter engrossed me.

We'd moved into the ritziest neighborhood in Marion, not by design, but because that was where they had a house big enough for all of us. My mother liked to joke that people were dying to get into our neighborhood – but only because on our very street, we

were sandwiched between two graveyards and a National Memorial. President Harding lay in eternal rest just up the street from us. The hill atop which he rests was the best place for sledding ever. The locals referred to the spot as Devil's Hill.

In the Marion Cemetery, just next door to us, there was a grave of such wonder, such fascination, that people had come from all over to see and study it. It's called the Merchants Ball. This grave, a two ton marble ball on a pedestal, has been affixed and reaffixed to its base. There's an obvious spot of cement that pockmarks the smooth black marble at the spot where, ideally, the ball should rest. Still, it moves of its own volition in an uncertain pattern approximately two inches a year. There are no deep grooves in the marble, and no human could possibly move the ball.

Some say the grave is haunted, some say its motion is simply, "due to the Coriolis effect...Galileo used a moving church bell rope to prove that the earth rotated on its axis...the moving ball in the cemetery lends itself to a unique proof that the earth rotates on its axis - the ball moves at right angles to the rotation of the earth. If the ball didn't move, the early Catholic church would have been right and the earth would be the center of the universe." (Dan Rupert, <http://www.graveaddiction.com/marion.html>)

Yet, others argue that, "no one knows why the Ball moves the way it does. It was set back on its base (the unpolished spot) about two years after the monument was set. It has since been left alone to move freely. It has nothing to do with Coriolis Effect as the "spot" moves erratically and not in a straight line at a right angle to the Earth's movement. It has been tested by scientists from around the world with no conclusive results." (Dodi, <http://www.graveaddiction.com/marion.html>) Living so near to such a mystery added fuel to my spectral fire.



I visited that grave, and many others in the Marion cemetery, many a time. I spent many happy hours sledding down the gravesite of a President. I was pretty convinced at the time that there was a supernatural explanation for the phenomenon, but nowadays, I lean toward old Galileo. Phantoms were now a captivating form of intrigue. I never saw any ghouls (or boys!), but I imagined the lives of people as I wandered among the markers that remembered them.

I kept on reading everything about ghosts for years. I watched all the ghost shows, listened to everyone's ghost stories. I read scientific explanations that proved the existence of ghosts, and scientific explanations that proved that every paranormal phenomenon had a logical, reasonable explanation. I read spiritual tales that gave the appearance of spirits an angelic sort of purpose. I read scary tales that claimed ghosts were banshees, harbingers of certain death.

The idea of ghosts has been acknowledged even in the Bible, if I read that confusing book correctly. In John 20: 19-31, Jesus says something to his friend Thomas, which acknowledges ghosts in general. To paraphrase, Jesus says that Thomas should not be afraid of Jesus, that He is not a ghost. Jesus' words suggest that there are, in fact, ghosts, and that people do have legitimate fears of the unknown wanderers. Perhaps Shakespeare said it best, that there are more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in philosophy. (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5, 159-167)

There's something to the idea of ghosts being around for a purpose. I despise the stories that present ghosts as beings to be feared. Ghosts were real live people at one time. They were individuals with lives and relatives, and homes, and friends; and for one reason or another, have not left their connection to those memories.

For my last birthday, I received a great book of Irish ghost stories as a gift. I read it before I went to bed that night. Earlier, I had been watching my favorite ghost show, *Most Haunted*. As I approached my bedroom, in total darkness, a fleeting thought crossed my mind. *Boy, I sure hope nothing reaches out from under the bed and grabs me!* Then I realized, *those darn ghost shows NEVER check under the bed. No wonder they never catch a ghost on film!* Consumed with giggles at my silly idea, I went to bed, and never slept more soundly. These days, the only foam rubber required for a good night's sleep is my trusty memory foam pillow.

Ultimately, we live in the same houses, in the same environment, whether the lights are on or off. What is there when the lights are on, is what is there when they are off. We tend to think that if the lights are on, we are safe, protected, but we are as haunted by fear in the daytime as we are at night. Really, there are so many more pressing fears than ghosts, than of loved ones who have passed on. As adults, we have bills and responsibilities, wars, jobs, car accidents, terrorism, disease. It is much more reasonable to be afraid of living, sometimes, than it is to be afraid of the dead!

*"I wouldn't give a hoot for anybody who doesn't believe in ghosts."*

*The Reverend Dr. W. A. R. Goodwin,*

*1936 Interview w/ Ernie Pyle*



## Unbecoming

Dear Well Intentioned Friend:

You might not believe this to look at me, but I have had an obsession with my appearance since I was a pre-teen. I've worked and re-worked what to wear, as well as what not to wear. How to wear things is important; it's not enough just to put on the latest fashion – a lot lies in how it is worn. What makes me look worse? What camouflages me sufficiently? Dresses are too fussy and frilly, too fake for my sensibilities. Jeans, anything with two legs for that matter, are better. Nowadays, I strategically avoid color or things that fit. It's all about hiding.

My father told unpleasant truths; first, I should never wear clothing with pictures of food, or large animals. That would just remind people of my weight problem. At the time, I was twelve and wearing my favorite pink t-shirt with a large ice cream cone, a cherry perched on the top. My grandmother had given the t-shirt to me. He insisted that I needed to dress differently.

Second, I needed to wear makeup to cover my pimples. He bought me tubes and tubes of tinted menthol-scented Clearasil, but no other cosmetics. Dots of the medicated remedy stood out nuclear-orange on my pale skin. It would have looked better to just keep the angry pink blotches. I never had that many blemishes, anyhow. When I refused to use the pimple cream, he yelled at me until a purple vein throbbed in his neck.

He sent me shopping with my stepmother, who bought me a suit and penny loafers, the amount for which, he would later deduct from my mother's child support check. It was a beige blazer and calf length skirt; at least, it would have been calf length

on a taller girl. When we got home, my stepmother revealed the label on the inside collar to Dad: a miniature ice cream cone above the name of the designer.

For some unknown reason, I believed my father's taste was better for me. I wore that beige suit and the matching leather shoes to the first day of seventh grade. I complimented it with the black plastic military-issue briefcase my grandfather had sent. Had I been a painting that day, the title would have been, "Nerd in Miniature" and the picture would have exemplified the characteristic nonconformity of a Picasso; he would have had a "Brown Period."

Through my adolescent years, many of my peers tried to convince me of my need to conform. I dressed preppy, but could never coordinate the hair and makeup. I begged my parents for clothes from Benetton and Esprit, and usually got them. Three different girls, I am sure with good intent, took me to their respective homes to be their personal Charity project.

I wanted people to be my friends, and allowed myself to be dragged into the bathroom, drawn on, curled, poofed, and painted. The girls plastered on makeup and sprayed on cans full of noxious gas called Aqua Net, and sent me back into the world, just as socially inept and unhappy as ever. Those girls had high expectations from Cover Girl. I learned that the point of make-up was to make up for what you could not be.

When I tried to recreate what the girls had done to me, the results were disastrous. Every picture of me from those days is of a chubby girl with huge brown Sally-Jessy Raphael glasses, my cropped red-brown hair in its characteristic "my head has wings" style, attempting a half-hearted smile. There is always an orangey-mask of the wrong color foundation that ends abruptly after my chin, highlighted by twin swoops of mint-



green eye shadow and purple eyeliner. I look like my father, in bad drag, minus a cigarette. No amount of make-up or expensive clothes disguised the fact that I was just plain unacceptable.

I went in a new dress and fancy make-up to the end-of-the-year dance. A cute guy named Scott asked me to dance and I was foolish enough to believe he was sincere. He laughed as I got up and told me the guys had bet him forty dollars that he wouldn't ask me. I ran out of the auditorium in my first fancy high heels, past the chaperones who told me I couldn't leave, found the nearest pay phone and called my mother to come rescue me.

These days, if I dare to dress up, just because I feel like it, which is admittedly rare, people say, "Do you have a date?" or "Who died?" It feels like stepping barefoot on a piece of glass – it hurts for a brief surprised moment, but the relief is that at least you can dislodge it easily. They all know I am not dateable.

I will always be socially inept, and painfully aware. It won't matter whether I am fat or thin, wearing Burberry or the Blue Light special. I won't trust clothes or thick gooey foundation to put a façade out there, only to have it fall uncontrollably. What I know, is that no matter what I wear or cake on, I will still always manage to stick my foot in my mouth; to eke out the one bit of information that makes it Too Much Information; to alert people to my complete lack of self-esteem without even intending they should know. I will always try to do better, and fall just short of the eyeliner mark.

I know you had the best of intentions when you told me I should go on that makeover show. Did you really believe that would fix me right up, that I would suddenly become a well-dressed, socially-acceptable, productive, happy member of society? I know you did not mean to dredge up the hurt, pain, and anger that surfaced in me. And now, I know that you never wanted to know me at all.

In the halls, I could hear the  
rolling of another cart being rolled through corridors.  
I walked through the halls, somewhat distressed by  
the way the world darkened, solemn and quiet. It  
felt like my heart was weeping rather than hopeless, as if

from both seventy-seven years ago. Her parents, my  
lifelong rural existence on land that was in the



## Passing On

Outside, the world was dark, light just beginning to turn the horizon a velvety purple. Cars rushed by, people oblivious to what was going on here, speeding on their way to goodness knows where. Cold raindrops tapped against the darkened glass of the fifth-floor room in which she wafted through unconsciousness. In moments such as these, I often found myself wondering how I had carried on my day-to-day life, senseless, numb to the pain of others. It's a bit incredible really, how ignorant humans can be of one another, how dull the concerns of an individual can appear when shared with another.

Behind me, a machine beeped listlessly, cold, unfeeling, mechanic. That machine was connected to my comatose mother, stringing her days together, its music humming her through sleep so black and dreamless she hardly stirred. A nurse came in the room, gave a nod to me and went about her business, checking IV lines, straightening, recording information. To her, my mother was just another body, just another job to be done, a list of tasks to be checked off.

I turned and stared out the window as she worked. In the halls, I could hear the usual morning noises – people greeting one another, carts being rolled through corridors, a woman moaning. The smell of coffee floated through the halls, somewhat distressed by the scents of illness and disinfectant. I kept the room darkened, solemn and quiet. It seemed appropriate. I liked to think of my mother as sleeping rather than hopeless, as if awakening in bright light would startle her.

Elizabeth May Dottery had been born seventy-seven years ago. Her parents, my grandparents, were farmers, living a peaceful rural existence on land that was in the

family for well over a century. The white farmhouse in which my mother was raised, built by my great grandfather and his companions by hand, still stood on the land, its old cedar doors weepy with sticky sap-like offerings that a hundred years of hot summers and unforgiving humidity had forced out of the wood.

The house had been placed with great thought, lying north to south so that the rooms within would have the greatest benefit of the daylight and would absorb the least heat possible in those hot summers, yet retain heat in winter's most bitter days. Great Grandpa Olan carefully planted trees for shade and shelter, his landscaping a careful embrace that lasted for generations. The pecan tree, a consistent provider, had been my favorite to climb on my childhood visits. Great Grandmother's magnolia grew proud and strong in the front of the house, its buttery-white full flowers welcoming and fertile.

To the left of the house, and behind it lay the family's burial plot. It lay three acres back, its somber little graves recalling the fire of 1868 that burned down the original house and killed my great-great grandparents. With them lay now my great grandparents, my grandparents, my great aunt Hester, who died at age 7 of scarlet fever, and twin babies who had not survived their welcome into the world. There was a stranger there too, a man whose name was only recorded as "Mac" – a transient man who had labored on the farm for three days and had remained there eternally.

In a few days, a few weeks, not more than a couple of months, this is where I would bring my Momma. The doctors did not give her long to live, and she would certainly not recover. At some time, regardless of the machinery that now made a suffocating white noise and sustained Momma's lifelessness, she would simply "expire." That was their term, not mine. Until then, I stayed with her, reading to her, talking to her,



hoping to provide some comfort as she waited to leave. Expectantly, I waited with her, expecting wisdom, or patience, or mercy, none of which were arriving quickly or easily.

Instead, I watched the cars rush by outside. I watched other people with other lives going about their business. I wondered where they were going? What were they doing? Were they suffering, too? Did they have situations in their lives that forced them to hover between life and death, or was I as alone as I felt?

My grandfather, James, was a sensible farmer who taught me many things about the world. As we walked about the farm together, he stopped to show me a black snake. I was terrified of the snake but Grandpa reassured me that he was friendly and good. The snake kept mice out of the corn that we fed to the other animals. Even though he was ugly and frightening, he served a purpose, Grandpa said. Those snakes ate by suffocating their prey. They aren't venomous, but they can bite, hard, if they feel threatened.

We walked on into the barn, Grandpa checking through the stalls as we went. He turned and shushed to me, one wrinkly finger sticking up in front of his purpley-blue lips. He cocked his head a bit sideways and listened. We heard a faint mewling noise coming from the loft. Grandpa crouched down and told me that if I climbed up very carefully and quietly, so as not to startle the new mother cat, I could check her nest to see how many kittens had been born. Four little balls of squirmy fur lay next to the mother cat. She had risen up to watch me carefully, but did not disturb her babies.

Soon, we heard Grandmother calling to us to come in for lunch. As we walked in the house, the warm smell of hot biscuits tickled my nose. The meaty scent of ham announced the meal, along with cooked carrots and Grandpa's favorite potatoes, carefully

creamed. Grandmother's homemade mustard and a jar of her marmalade stood on the table, a jar of her sweet pickles just to the right of Grandpa's plate. Grandpa ate heartily, his ham steak slathered with the mustard, and then said, "That was one good pig! Thank you, Sally, that was a fine meal." I broke into tears, my seven-year-old innocence somewhat interrupted.

Grandpa found me later, hiding in the den under grandmother's secretary. Just as he explained the black snake, he explained to me about the pig. It was necessary. We needed the meat to sustain us. The pig was happy to help us and to be a fine meal for us, he said. He made death seem so simple.

I timed my arrival to the hospital intentionally early this morning. I wanted to get to mother's side, to watch the nurses at their tasks, to study what caring for her required. Bringing her home to die was my greatest aspiration at the moment. I hoped to bring her to the farmhouse where she had been born. The black wrought-iron bed she was born in still stood in the house, in the room she grew up in. She slept there until her hospitalization. My two daughters, both away at college, were relatively close, and could stay in the house for the funeral.

Chloe, my eldest daughter, had always loved to play among the graves. When she was little, four or five, we would lay magnolias on the graves together. I would watch as her tiny fingers traced the letters on the stones. I sometimes think that she first learned her alphabet from those unfeeling granite monuments. Sophie, my younger, always feared ghosts, the monsters in the closets, and stepping on the dead. She trod carefully in the family plot as though her steps would be felt by those who lay far below.



The nurse went about poking and prodding my mother, and I could only watch the routine with a disinterested half-absorption. I remembered the routine of motherhood, scaring monsters out of closets for Sophie, putting the always-dirty Chloe in the bathtub, the scent of their crayons as we drew pictures together. Both girls loved to draw, a skill that must have come from their father's side of the family. Tim had put their artistic offerings proudly on his desk at work, displaying the latest offerings to clients and co-workers alike.

I missed the routine of marriage now. Time moves so quickly – birth, marriage, birth of children, widowhood. When Tim died, I had no time to consider death, really. He had a massive coronary event, the doctors said, right at his desk, doing what he did best. Heart attack...it was senseless. Tim was a runner, very conscientious of his health, took an aspirin every day. He left us early, at fifty-six. I became a widow, but thanks to his careful planning, the girls' college was provided for, as was I. *Wishing for some type*

Tim was a good man, a fine husband. He was an insurance man, through and *My* through, his own career now providing for myself and the girls. He had insured Momma, too. He had insisted. He also insisted on cremation, picking the place he wanted to be left scattered far ahead of time. When it came time, our girls and I released him into the universe on his favorite stretch of river, his ashes floating on the surface momentarily *and* before we watched them sink beneath the muddy surface to the world below, leaving only an oily residue where moments before, my husband had been. *voice is hesitancy.*

It was an odd turn of events that I, a widow, a mother, was now caring for my own mother in her last days. Memories of our routines, when I myself was a child, would come to me throughout the days we spent together in her hospital room, at odd times. Straightening the thin flannel hospital blanket over her bony shoulder, I remembered her coming into my room in the early morning twilight to play the role of the tooth fairy. I had seen her and known. Before that morning, I had imagined a fairy in pink with silvery glitter trimmings floating in and out of my bedroom.

Reality is sometimes a shock. It strikes me now that I fear losing my mother, even though this illness is claiming more and more stake in her. Do I fear losing her, or losing the memories I associate with her? In her unconscious state, do her memories play in her mind like cinema films, moments of our lives captured on the silver screen that lies behind her unmoving eyelids?

I move to grasp my mother's thin, limp hand in my own. Wishing for some type of connection, I close my eyes tightly, wanting desperately to focus on her thoughts. My own thoughts dictate that she must be in misery, lying here, unfamiliar scents and noises all around her, unable to communicate. Her hand feels cold in mine, so timidly I rub it, attempting to create warmth.

An unfamiliar noise interrupts my quiet moment with Momma. I have not heard her machines make this noise before. It strikes me that it is coming from my purse. The cell phone Chloe insisted I get is ringing. It's Sophie. In her voice is hesitancy, uncertainty. "How's Gramma?" she asks.



"No change. Just the same." It's all I can bring myself to say. Sophie is nervous, waiting for Gramma to go. She doesn't do well with the idea, existing as though my mother will wake from her coma, healthy, and return to being the same Gramma as ever, the one who loves shopping and bridge club.

"What can I do?" she asks. I sigh, searching for the right answer to give her.

"What was your favorite thing to do with her?" I want for my daughter to feel a connection, to feel secure, and remember love. Her answer surprises me, because Sophie has never been domestic.

"Bread baking. But I don't really know how. I just remember kneading and kneading, and sticky hands. And messiness." Her words come in little fragments. I can hear in her voice the emotion she is withholding, the tears she is trying to hold back. She thinks she is being strong for me, but her reserve weakens me more than the actual tears would. Now I am painfully aware too, that my naïve, Holly-Golightly, eighteen-year-old daughter is losing hope.

There is an uncommon peace in the art of baking bread, the know-how, the act of kneading. Bread baking is the best companionship in solitude. The dough is a live thing that requires the baker's attention, attentiveness, but asks little of you for such a good reward. The scent of the yeast, the feel of the dough, the taste of fresh hot bread slathered with butter; all those elements combine to provide comfort.

"Where are you?" I say into the void, waiting for Sophie's voice on the other end of the line. I am less concerned with her physical location than her emotional state. When there is no response, I ask, "Can you go to Gramma's?"

Sophie and Chloe will leave the safety of their campus to make the hour-long journey to my mother's house together. They will reach into the rafters of the porch for the old fashioned key that will open the front door, their hands searching along the timbers until Chloe locates it. Chloe will enter first, her oldest-child assertiveness motivating her to take the lead.

Chloe calls me this time, to let me know they have arrived safely. "We're home," she says, although our home is thirty minutes away from my mother's house. I sink into an institutional blue hospital issue chair. Whoever bought these chairs was practical, considering function and not comfort. The upholstery matches the marbled blue wallpaper. I lean back into it, searching for just the right way to sit, trying to force the embrace of the fabric and foam and wood. Chloe chats on, telling me she needs to dust, she is going to vacuum. In the background, I hear Sophie in the kitchen, clattering dishes. I ask her to put Sophie on the phone.

Focusing on the bleak pastoral landscape painting on the far wall, I start to dictate the bread-making recipe. I cannot dictate to her the technique, the way you must punch down the risen dough, the way you knead the bread as though it were someone you loved. She asks how she will know if the water for the yeast is the right temperature.

Momma always said the water had to be just too hot for the baby, about 110 degrees Fahrenheit. I relate this to my daughter, telling her that if it were milk, and just too hot for a baby to drink, then she had it at the right temperature. I listen as she stirs in sugar and tears open the envelopes of yeast. I tell her how to proceed, dismissing myself from the phone call as a doctor walks in. Behind him is a hospice nurse with a serene face.



The doctor acknowledges me and moves to my mother's bed, checking the facts and figures in the chart against what he sees. When he is finished looking her over, I move to discuss my mother's condition with him, quietly. As if not to wake her, I remind myself.

"Would it be possible to take my mother home?" I ask Dr. Slater. He looks at me as though he has stopped just short of rolling his eyes, then puts on his best I-am-a-serious-physician face. The hospice nurse shifts a little closer to my mother, looks her over, and nods sagely.

"Mrs. Goodman, over the last two weeks, your mother has been dependent on life support. Although I feel she may be able to breathe independently if weaned from the ventilator, she would not be capable of surviving very long on her own."

He glances at the chart again, searching for some detail.

"Alice," he says, mispronouncing my name, Aleese, "the hospital, or perhaps a hospice is the best place for her now. We can provide the best medical care and keep her comfortable." His breath smells of garlic as he says this. The only reason she has been kept alive then, is because they have to. She has a living will that specifies not to resuscitate her when she dies, but until then, doctors are bound to do their best by her.

When he leaves, his grave statement in mind, I consider comfort. I think of the bread Sophie is making, the familiar indentations in my mother's old sofa that has embraced me many happy days, the scent of the lavender linen water Momma always used on sheets. I wish for the millionth time for the comfort Tim would offer me, his sheltering arms and a resting place for my heart.

I wonder that my mother missed that. I think of the man who would be my father, a young man who had sparkling green eyes just like mine, I am told. He met my mother and loved her, and went off to war, never coming home. Momma was left with me, and so stayed with my father's family for a while, until we were on our own. She might have come back to the farm, but Momma, always independent, was determined to make it on her own. She only moved back there when her own parents died. She brought me back to the farm often, and I relished the time I spent with my grandparents, who doted on me. My grandmother loved to dress me in her own creations, while Grandpa enjoyed being outdoors and teaching me about the animals and nature.

One Easter Sunday, hunting for the well hidden Easter eggs on the farm, I came across a tiny squirrel, half dead and bleeding. I screamed more in dismay than fright, and Grandpa came to me. He looked the tiny squirrel over and must have assessed the situation fairly quickly. Some black snake had missed its mark, or had been startled away by a little girl looking for treasures hidden in the grass. He sent me to the house with grandmother, not knowing that once I got there, I'd look out the window and past the pecan tree to where he was. I watched as he picked up the squirrel, snapped back the tiny head and broke its neck. I was angry for the choice he had made not to save the baby squirrel.

In church that Sunday, I refused to sit next to him, pointedly stacking hymnals and Bibles in the pew to shelter me. As I listened to the sermon, I stole furtive glances at the face of death, now embodied in Grandpa. The sermon went on, but I paid little attention, although now, I am sure death and resurrection must have been the theme. I



busied myself wondering what Grandmother would have for lunch and I realized it would be ham. A pig, another pig. It was necessary. I unstacked the Bibles and hymnals and slid into my grandfather's lap.

Later that day, after lunch, he and I made a small grave for the squirrel. I laid some budding spring flowers over it and wished it well. Grandpa explained to me. He asked if I knew the meaning of mercy. He explained to me that it would have been so much worse to make the animal suffer, rather than allow it to die quickly and painlessly. He would never hurt anything needlessly.

Evening has come, and I am tired. Feeling hungry for the first time this day, I consider a brief foray to the cafeteria here in the hospital. They might offer something I can stomach, applesauce, or yogurt. I reach up and pat my hair, checking to see that I am in reasonable order, and decide that I should probably give myself a more thorough checking over. I slip into the bathroom in mother's room, staring at my haggard face in the mirror. When did my eyes develop such sagginess? How long has that mole been just above my left eyebrow? I stare at my own image relentlessly, studying, scrutinizing, considering. Do I see a bit of my grandfather in my features?

"No," I hear myself saying, "no." I shake my head, bracing my hands on the cool ceramic sink, noticing that for all of the orderliness of the hospital, there are spots on the faucet. I turn on the water and wipe the spots off, then splash some water on my face. I use a rough brown paper towel to dry my face off. I shut off the light and leave the tiny room, considering what a small thing power really is.

Standing by Momma's bed, I consider her face, her features. She looks peaceful in this moment. We have made it through another day together. I pick up her hand again, the hands that cared for me and disciplined me. She has my grandfather's hands, the same long fingers and knobby knuckles. The night nurse will soon be in to bed Momma down for the night, and I'll drive to the girls at Momma's house. I'll sleep there, in her bed, returning in the morning to do what is necessary again.

I bend down, placing my cheek against her forehead, and then turn to kiss her. For a moment, it is as though we are together. I imagine us walking through her house, counting all seventeen stairs to the second floor, the old green carpet lining the halls. I can hear the footfalls of children along the hardwood floors echoing back from the past; see the ten o'clock sunlight in the windows, the wind billowing out the white Irish linen curtains on a warm breezy day. The scent of grandmother's best pecan pie comes to me, as does the dusty scent of the fields. I think of the way hay felt as I wallowed through the barn loft, or how cozy I once felt hiding in the closets.

I call to the desk to ask if the hospice nurse, Janis, will come back to speak with me. She comes right away to Momma's room, greeting me respectfully, and looks over my mother once again. She is quiet, supportive, and understanding as I speak to her with a certain intensity. I've studied these machines, I tell her, watched how they are operated, seen the nurses turn off the alarms as they perform various functions. Janis tells me that nurses' procedures often take as much as fifteen minutes, so the nurses at the main station will not be alarmed to find the machines offline. In my heart I feel I am making the best decision, what my grandpa would have called mercy, what my mother will find as rest. I shut the door to the room firmly, but quietly.



Janis only nods knowingly as she walks down the hall. The room is darkened, as it ever was. I walk to the machines, turn off the alarms, and then unplug them from the walls. I listen, in the silence, to the noises of death. I rest my head on Momma's chest to hear her last heartbeats, to be as close to her as possible.

In fifteen minutes, Momma is gone from me. I know it is over, and I plug back in the machines, turn back on the alarms. I wait, grieving for a while with Momma, then re-gather myself before calling for the nurse. The hollowness statement I have ever made follows: I think there is something wrong with my mother. The nurse rushes in, calls for a doctor, and they go about the business of death. Later a nurse says to me, "I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Goodman."

I drive the half-hour back to Momma's house. As I walk in, I smell the yeasty hominess of Momma's bread recipe. I call to my girls, who were already on the way to me as soon as they heard the crunch of my tires on the gravel driveway. Chloe holds me in a firm embrace, and Sophie begins to sob. I haven't told them, yet, they know.

At night, Sophie climbs into bed with me, saying she can't sleep. I whisper to her that it's going to be all right, that Gramma would want us here. She whispers back that she dreamt that Gramma's soul was flying all around her, and it scared her. I move to hold my baby, reminding her that the people we loved in life would not harm us. Ever. We can't quit loving Gramma just because she died, I tell her. "But, she can't reciprocate," Sophie argues. Someday, Sophie will know the reciprocation. I hold her a little tighter in the meantime.

Chloe and I go to town to see to the details. We visit the florist, the funeral home, the stonemason. I ask Chloe to pick a stone, and the lettering. She is given samples to choose from, and she runs her fingers over them, feeling, searching, exploring the letters for connection. She chooses a fine cut lettering with deep grooves and a little scrollwork. Her eyes gleam, and I look directly into the eyes of my grandmother. It startles me.

We move through the next days accepting callers, making endless pots of coffee, being handed casseroles and dishes and luncheon trays. Friends stop by to share memories, to offer condolences and assistance, subtly checking on us as they do. I've known most of these people all of my life. Our nearest neighbor, Wenchell Hudson, says he will drive over with the tractor in the morning to dig the grave in the plot.

"With her momma and daddy, right?" I nod my head in silent agreement, and he rubs his hand comfortingly on my shoulder, saying all he can say, "We'll see you, then."

The day we bury Momma, as her casket is lowered into the ground, the girls grasp my hands on either side. I am finally able to cry. I wonder if I will ever explain to them what I chose for my mother. Would they understand my motivation? More importantly, will they someday do the same for me?

At home in Momma's living room, we sit on the old familiar couch, looking at photo albums, playing the "I remember" game as we search through pictures of moments in our lives that may have been forgotten. Chloe, my ever practical daughter has scooted to the floor, spreading out albums all around her on the floor, looking for her favorite moments. She finds a picture of me holding her as a baby, and I sigh, "I looked so much



younger twenty years ago.” The phone rings and I move to go answer it, but Sophie shakes her head subtly and goes to answer it. Chloe leans her head against my knee. I rest my hand on her fine brown hair, feeling the softness and warmth beneath my fingers. I feel hot tears trickle down my leg, but there is no noise.

“Chloe?” I venture forth. She’s never been one for public grief. She starts to really cry, the lack of breath making her body shake. This is not grief. It’s fear. I slide down on the floor with my daughter, hugging her close. She trembles in my arms.

“Mom,” she whispers, barely audible, “oh, Mom.” I wait her out; it’s all that can be done. She folds her body into a fetal position, and it is then that I know. I smile to myself. I wonder whose eyes the baby will have, whose fingers. And I hope to teach it the wisdom I know, about patience, about mercy. I cradle my baby and look expectantly around my mother’s house.

## Tattoo

Nightmares have plagued me in heat-fraught wrestles with my sheets – tattoos that I can't explain are appearing on my body. A turquoise green cross is emblazoned down the length of my torso, inscribed with the words "Milli Vanilli" and no sooner than I recognize and regret that, a bold red and black lightning bolt appears on the length of my thigh. My mind struggles to think why I did that and when. Then, a cartoonish rainbow with clouds on either end shows up on my bicep. The horror of regret seeps over me just before I wake.

I write because I am too afraid of commitment to get a tattoo. These permanent marks are oddly fascinating – the ink, the pictures, the pain, and the stories. I know a man who is simply beguiling. He is a poet -- mysterious and unfathomable.

Conversations with him are hard work, like delving a little more deeply into his soul. Yet, he has tattoos, and when asked about them, he inks out an artfully embellished tale of where he was, who he was with, and what his inspiration was when he got it.

What's a tattoo really but an oddity, a bit of art, a commemoration of a place in time, evidence of strong emotion? But the threat of remorse lingers just heavily enough to prevent a permanent commission of obligation to a thought, idea, or promise. Anyone remember the phrase, "Winona Forever"?

The history of tattoos goes far back in time, before recorded history. In 1991, scientists found a mummified man, preserved well over 5,000 years, on a mountain between Italy and Austria, with tattoos on his body. It was theorized that the mummy's marks could have been placed for therapeutic reasons, maybe to ward off evil, as a symbol of devotion to the gods, or to instill fear in enemies in the battlefield. Still, the



scientists wanted to explain the story of the tattoos...the reasoning behind the indelible stories.

When a story is set down, a writer is often prone to insert bits of his or her own reality in between the dialogues of characters, in actions, motivations, or detail. It's a way to remember those people or situations, hedging any regret about the way someone or something has been portrayed in the welcoming shelter of the word, "fiction." When looking back on a story, a writer might remember who or what inspired the actions of a character, or even who or what inspired the story itself. But those are the author's personal stories, not necessarily the same ones that are shared on the page. If a writer chooses to, he or she can acknowledge facts, or simply protest, thereby disguising any regret, that this is a work of fiction.

Same goes for tattoos; some people are clever enough to get a tattoo where it can be hidden, and chosen to share quite easily, or just as easily be concealed. The recipient chooses the image for a certain purpose, which only he or she knows. She tells one story to others about how and why she got it, but she is in sole charge of her own truth, and when or how she shares it. If she regrets that decision, she changes her story to couch that.

The disadvantage to tattoos is that they perish with their possessors. Humans are only semi-permanent. Yet, somehow, we manage to leave our permanent marks on the planets we visit. Sometimes that is through art, or monument, and yes, even literature. We cannot know what was in the mind of an artist as he or she painted a masterpiece. Archeologists are still trying to explain the stories of the people who built Stonehenge in England, or the ancient passage tombs at Bru Na Boinne in Ireland.

In Ireland on a spring day in May, standing at the entrance to the passage tombs of Bru Na Boinne at Knowth, Ireland, a tour guide pointed out Neolithic art, engraved in the stones, and said that the meanings of the etchings were inexplicable. Visitors were invited to record any thoughts on the possible meanings of the designs. After that day, as I traveled around Ireland, I became cognizant of inscriptions I saw at many ancient sites we visited.

Perhaps people did not have the language to tell their stories -- the words, the letters, the structures. However, they had been compelled to make their mark, to leave their story behind, to make their own tattoo on their world. Myself, I am not artistic, and will leave no etchings behind. I will construct no monuments, and do not expect that my stories will exist beyond my lifetime. My writing is a temporary commitment on biodegradable paper that someday will be gone. Yet, for now, I have told my story.