THE FORUM

VOLUME XXV

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 THE FORUM will be accepting submissions for Spring 2005 edition in Fall 2004. There are no requirements for submissions, except that the writing be in essay form.

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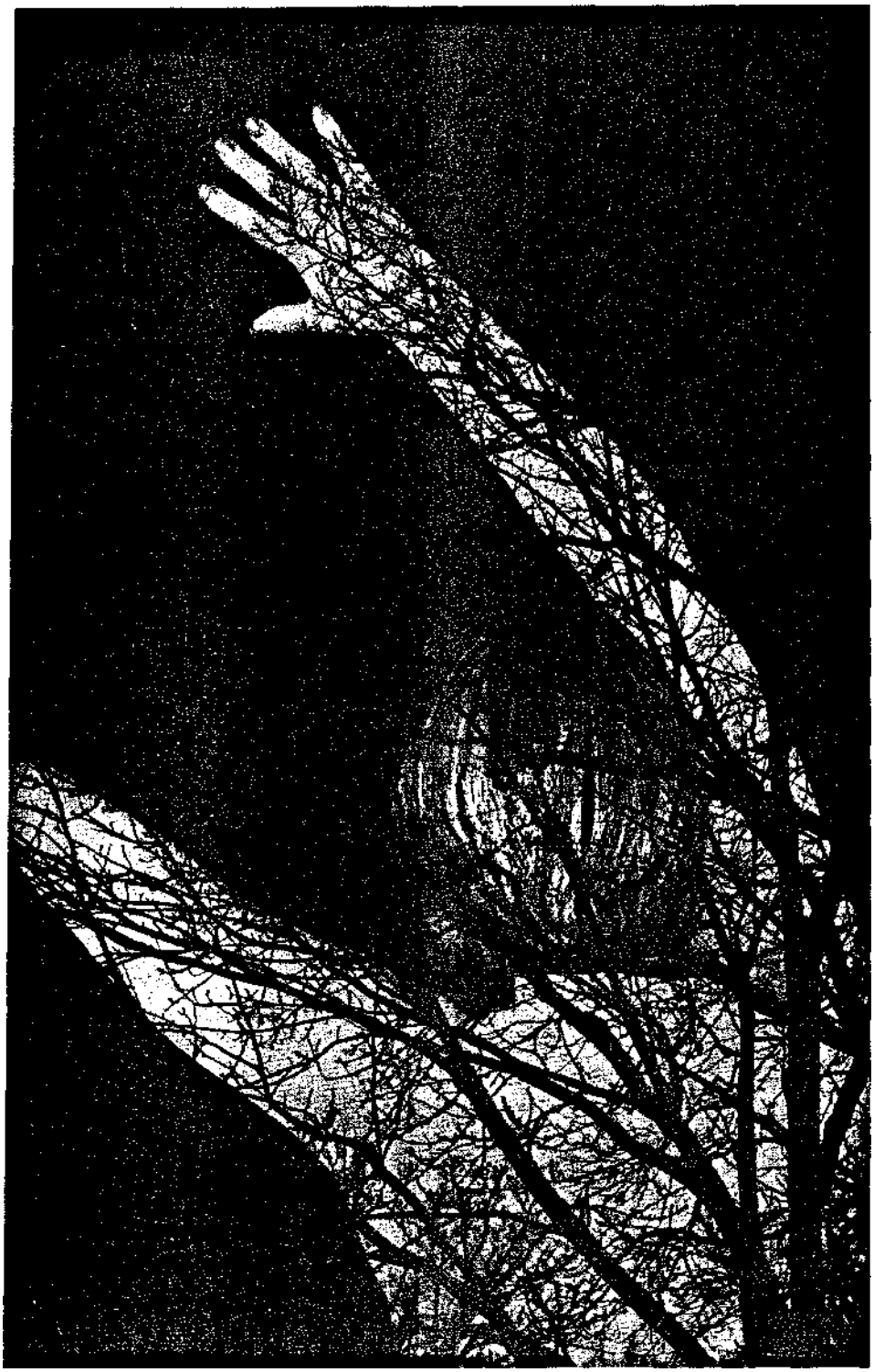

Editor's Note

"Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another."
-Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

For anyone who has ever written creatively, there is an inevitable moment when one looks through pieces from months or years before, cringes, and wonders "what was I thinking?" Perhaps the work was boring, overblown, incoherent, or simply self-indulgent; whatever the reason, we all have hidden papers and old computer files that we wouldn't care include in a portfolio.

You won't find any of those fossils in The Forum. Every year, this magazine publishes the best undergraduate essays to be found at Loyola; his is the creative work that could not hide for long. This edition's pieces owe their lasting significance to a great many influences, among them parents, grandparents, friendships, childhood experiences, and historical events. They are the products of young writers who are unafraid to ask questions of themselves and others that have no ready answers. They are examples of the constant dialogue every writer wishes to have with his or her world.

For four years, I have often heard our academic atmosphere facetiously referred to as the "Loyola Bubble." One needs only to read this magazine to understand that this term is truly a misnomer. Here is the evidence that my fellow students are continually engaged by ideas: ideas we receive from the world around us, ideas we present to each other, ideas taken from our pasts and brought to our futures.

Our years here are alive with ideas. They should be spoken, and then they should be written. Now they may be read.

Susannah Wetzel, Editor
April 2004

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Reality TV: Just Entertainment?

Who would want to marry a millionaire, find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real, or have a big brother watching? Apparently, millions of Americans would. For the not-so-perfect average American, reality TV offers an opportunity for a pseudo-fame that was previously reserved only for those who walked the red carpet or had their house on MTV's Cribs. Too short? Not a problem. Large thighs? That's okay, our audience can relate to you. A third nipple? Well, try out anyway! Reality TV "stars" do not need to be airbrushed, Atkins-dieted, or talented in the field of drama. We'll take you just as you are! Sweatpants and your favorite pair of jeans! Alcoholism and depression! Fat ankles and hairy backs!

I am an average, twenty-one year old college student sitting on the couch. I am sure there is something I am supposed to be doing besides watching TV. Calling my mom, writing that philosophy research paper I've been putting off, or cleaning out the rotting vegetables in the refrigerator, for instance. But I just don't feel like it. Not right now at least. Right now I'd prefer for things to move around me rather than for me to move at all. Ah, yes, college laziness rears its ugly head. Why do I enjoy watching reality TV so much? Well, it's effortlessly interactive (a platform supported by many college seniors). By this, I mean that I don't need to have a conversation in order to be involved in or listening to someone else's. Also, in this effortless interaction I find myself comparing my reality to the reality presented on TV. How I see myself is somewhat determined by who I see on TV. For instance, Jessica Simpson's ignorant acts and thoughts make my acts and thoughts seem far more intelligent.

Jessica Simpson. A woman who thinks that buffalo wings are, in fact, made from buffalo. Dayna Hill. A woman who not only knows that buffalo wings are made from chicken, but has actually been to the Anchor Bar in Buffalo, NY (her hometown) where they were invented. Dayna also knows that a can of tuna fish labeled "Chicken of the Sea" is not chicken cutlets. Jessica believes that being 25 years old is almost halfway

between 20 and 30. Dayna thinks being 25 is precisely halfway between 20 and 30! In the race for common sense, I, Dayna Hill, beat Jessica Simpson on all counts. Yes, I do feel better about myself, and about my victory of common sense. Reality T.V. boosts my self-esteem.

In correlation with my "experience" with Jessica Simpson, psychologists support the idea that we watch reality TV in order to feel better about ourselves. In the case of Jessica Simpson this is quite obvious. She may have a higher limit on her credit cards, but I am sure I have a higher IQ. But it's not just Jessica Simpson that makes me feel better about myself. As I sit and watch the girls on The Bachelor cattily fawn over one man they don't even know, I suddenly feel like the most ethical being on the Earth. I would never cry over getting kicked off a TV show as though I've won Second Runner-Up in a beauty pageant! In fact, I wouldn't mind being the girl left standing behind with only a satin sash. While I may think of stealing from the thick pile of twenties in the cash registers at work from time to time, at least I'm ethical enough not to think of selling my body or purchasing the body of another. And I doubt I'm the only one; watching reality TV has suddenly taken over the role of making us feel good about who we are, a role previously limited to mothers, Girl Scout Leaders, and therapists. Reality TV has become the new therapy.

I was in Newcastle, England last year and enjoying some of this new therapy, British-style. I was flipping through the four channels of television when my mom called. I left the television running, with the sound turned down low so I could still enjoy the visual stimulation of a clearly homosexual man from The Salon (a British reality TV show that tapes hair salon employees) fight with a client whose hair he'd dyed blue (extravagant even for British style). Did I know that Fraternity Life was being filmed at the University of Buffalo this year? Yeah, mom, of course I knew. That's all my friends at UB can talk about, "I saw so-and-so walking around campus this morning" or "Can you believe that so-and-so is in my calculus class and I never noticed him before?" What? They did what? Broke into the Buffalo Zoo? Are you kidding me?

College-aged students jumped a fence at the Buffalo Zoo and camera men from MTV thoughtlessly followed them. The boys planned "on stealing an animal from our zoo. They were drunk, of course, and when the episode aired, the Buffalo Zoo decided to press charges. The three boys are now facing a five-hundred dollar fine and a ninety-day prison sentence.

I never saw any of the episodes of Fraternity Life or Sorority Life that were filmed on the UB campus because I was in England at the time. But

when my mother told me about the boys breaking into the zoo I envisioned the drunk college students attempting to deface my city. Yes, my city. I love being from Buffalo. And here's the secret that no one outside of the city knows: so does everyone else who lives there. The citizens of Buffalo are survivors. We wade through feet of snow during our five-month winters. We get out our snow blowers out daily and make our children stand at bus stops in negative degree temperatures on school days. We berate the National Weather men who put us down. There is a real sense of pride in being a Buffalonian because we do survive. But here were three boys that attempted to destroy, albeit in a small way, this city that I, and we, love.

Suddenly the idea that reality TV can be about more than frivolous singers making fools of themselves scared me. The Buffalo Zoo scandal was about more than just the defacement and embarrassment of the city. Those kids could've died. The last time something like this happened at the zoo a polar bear was killed. A teenager decided to sneak in to the polar bear exhibit to "see" them. Only when the polar bear began to attack attacking him did anyone notice. The polar bear had to be shot because of the teenager's stupidity. Reality TV can be serious, I thought, as I remembered this story and how it related to the fraternity boys. I yearned for the glorious genre of situation comedy where if people died, they didn't really die. They were just standing on the wings of the set watching the rest of the cast mourn for them. It was not real.

After this Buffalo Zoo incident, I still watched reality TV. But something had changed. Looking back on it, I think it was my perception of the whole trend. When the reality TV phenomenon first began I think we, as a society, assumed it would be funny and superficial like the sitcoms and soap operas we were used to. And at first it was funny and superficial, just like our regular television. There were special houses built for the casts and twists and challenges were written into the show, similar to the standard television screenwriting. But then, real people were thrown into this formula, and the shows took odd turns. I began to have mixed feelings about just sitting on the couch while kids were ravaging Buffalo. But I still did sit on that couch.

This year I was once again sitting on the couch, enjoying the first episode of The Bachelor. The preview came on for what was going to happen over the course of the whole season. Quick clips and dialogue flashed in front of me. The bachelor and some girl in the hot tub making out. Two girls throwing clothes at each other, screaming, "He loves me more!" A girl being rushed to the hospital after attempting suicide. An

ambulance. People crying. Wait, what?

I turned the TV off. But just because the image goes away doesn't mean that someone didn't try to kill herself on The Bachelor, a truth I tried to put out of my mind. This was far worse than kids breaking into the zoo. That was vandalizing a city. This was destroying a body. This was death. I've never known anyone who tried to commit suicide. But I suppose now I did. Through the television, I felt oddly close to these people. I mean, they were real, and they were real to me. Suddenly, I had problems distinguishing the difference between real people in my life and real people on TV.

I had been watching reality TV all along because it was making me feel better about myself. I felt smarter, more ethical. But I don't feel better about myself if I watch someone attempt to commit suicide. Actually, I have an odd desire to run out of the room, get off the couch and attempt to comfort our human condition. Yes, humanity in its entirety. Televised suicide makes me realize that there are real problems in this world, problems that I was trying to ignore through watching TV, just like throwing out a newspaper at the end of the day. Even if I knew a problem existed I wasn't doing anything about it.

Of course, these days I still watch reality TV. I didn't go out and save the world (you may have noticed). I am, after all, only human. But I don't watch television with the same kind of mentality that I used to. I am more wary of what I see. I am not as accepting of every image that is handed to me. I am determined to think about the situation, and the people. Because, after all, they are real. Just like me. And I can't just watch their lives without having an urge to comfort the depressed woman or talk some sense into the drunken boys before breaking into a beloved zoo. Reality TV very subtly, or perhaps unintentionally, exposes the conditions of our society. Conditions that I always knew the statistics of, but never saw on a personal level. I still watch TV. But I don't watch it mindlessly, and there's the difference.

Dayna Hill

Tears of Joy

The first time I saw my mother cry, I was four years old. She was siting in a rocking chair, tears on her cheeks, waiting for me to wake up. Sometimes, in my memory, there is another woman standing behind her, our neighbor from across the street. Sometimes the neighbor is not there. In my memory this woman is all transparency, only shadow. But I have an overwhelming feeling that at this moment my mother was not alone.

I was having my afternoon nap on the floor. I always slept on the floor, next to my crib. I hated the crib. And after one too many successful attempts on my part to vault myself over its bars, my parents decided that perhaps it was best I slept on the floor. If I was already on the ground, there would be nowhere left for me to fall.

I woke up from the nap to find my mother crying. I can remember a great brightness in the room that hurt my eyes. It was lighting her tears and angling down to fall on me on the floor. I asked her why she was crying. I can remember feeling very uncomfortable by this turn of events, this reversal of roles. I wanted her to stop.

She smiled and told me that she was crying because she was happy. My unsettlement quickly turned to surprise. I was not able to fathom this! Crying meant sadness, pain, anger, frustration; feelings I was familiar with on a daily basis. Happiness was ice cream and balloons and my best friend, Stephen. I did not think I would ever cry out of joy, not even when I was a grown up.

My mother quickly sensed my incredulity. She explained that she was happy because my Pap Pap, her father, was going to be okay. He had had a big operation to fix his heart (how do you explain quintuple bypass to a four year old?) and the operation went really well. I should be happy too. *Well,* I thought to myself, *I am. But I'm not going to cry about it.*

My grandfather was always sick. I thought that to be a grandfather meant you had to be. To be a grandfather you had to be old (he was 59) and being old meant that you were always sick. His health was a worry I was born into. We were going to be moving from our home in New York all the way to Virginia to be closer to him. I was going to have to leave

my Big Wheel behind. My parents promised that our new house would have a tree swing. Because I believed that he always had to be sick, I did not believe that he would ever get better. Did it matter if he was better today? That we would move? Tears of joy left me impartial. Being sick was simply the way he would always be.

Once, my parents left my sister and me at my grandparents' house in the Shenandoah Valley, so they could take a brief "grown up vacation." My sister and I were inconsolable. Certainly, we were thrilled to be at Mum Mum and Pap Pap's, and to be a block away from my cousins, who lived down the street. We were excited to be out in the country air, it made us feel crazy and free. But we did not understand why our parents had wanted to leave us.

The first night, which had the potential of being a real tear fest, my grandmother put us in the bathtub. She used pink bubble bath, which my mother never let us use. Then she put us in our matching white cotton night gowns and combed out our wet hair, leaving it down to dry in the summer air. I remember that the shampoo she used made our hair smell like flowers.

She took us outside on the front porch, which looked out to farmland and then the mountains. My grandfather gave us each a can of Coca Cola, something else my mother never ever let us have. On the porch were two chairs that would rock forwards and backwards, not like traditional rocking chairs up and down, but on one smooth plane. We loved these chairs. It was nighttime and they let us run around in our bare feet in the grass and chase after lightening bugs. When we finally tired ourselves out, we each sat on a grandparent's lap and watched the moon rise over the dark, even mass that was the Blue Ridge Mountains. I had only heard of sunrises, never moonrises. But it was one of the most calming, most beautiful things I have ever seen, even now. We fell asleep out then on the porch, my grandparents rocking us in time to the breeze and the drifting stars.

Now that I am older, I wonder what my grandparents must have felt then; my grandfather, watching us run in the grass and laughing, drinking in the air, knowing that he was dying. I wonder what my grandmother felt, watching him see the moonlight on our faces, knowing he was dying. I wonder if it hurt him to know he was leaving us, had to leave this behind. I wonder if it brought him joy, to know we were that happy, that free.

As a child I liked to play alone. I was by no means an antisocial child I liked other children very much. I had a best friend and even a foray into

summer camp, and I enjoyed preschool. But I think that I enjoyed playing most when I was alone. I wanted to tell my own stories, in the way I wanted to tell them. I did not want anyone seeing characters differently than the way I saw them. I did not want someone else to make something happen that I did not see coming. This was cruciall to me because playing was not really playing at all. It was really storytelling.

However much I liked playing alone, I liked knowing that someone else was nearby. This was evidenced by the fact my parents converted our basement (complete with green shag carpet) into a playroom I refused to play in. Instead I took all of my toys and placed them under the kitchen table (my parents must have just loved this). My mother even made the bread drawer into extra storage space for my toys. I would sit there for hours playing contentedly by myself.

When I was bit older I felt comfortable moving out from under the kitchen table and expanding my play space out into the living room. One day, shortly after the "tears of happiness" incident, which I was still unable to completely comprehend, I was playing on the living room floor. My mother, unsurprisingly, was nearby in the kitchen.

I had a set of Fisher Price people. They had little, cylindrical bodies made of painted wood. Their small heads were made with plastic, complete with plastic hair on top. They had no arms or legs, but this did not seem to bother me much.

I was playing with my Fisher Price people and a light brown plastic horse. I loved horses. They had fascinated me ever since I had seen a special on Reading Rainbow. I thought they were beautiful. My grandparents were helping me build a collection of them, miniature prancing colts and stallions of china and porcelain.

The Fisher Price people all gathered around the horse, who was feeling very ill. They were all concerned and wanting to help. But then, all of a sudden, I made the horse die.

The Fisher Price people stood in shock. I laid the horse down on its side slowly. In my mind, I must have suspected I had done something final and irrevocable, because I yelled out to my mother, "Mommy, things can come back after they die, right?" But I must have known, already, in some little place, the answer. "No, Anna Maria," was all she called out, "they can't."

"Well," I thought to myself, "I'll just pretend the horse didn't die." But something had changed. I reached to pick up the horse, to stand him upright. But I knew that it was too late. The soul had already left him, gone away for good, and there was nothing I could do to bring him back.

At that moment I realized that I too, had a soul. That someday I would have to leave this earth. That I would stop, end, cease to be. At that moment I doubted heaven. I saw life on one side, and death on another. *This* was life: falling light and moons rising. And there, way over there, was death. It was nothing I could touch, nothing anyone could. What separated us at all?

I knew, then, that I was living. And I began to understand for the first time what it meant to cry tears of joy.

Anna Maria Gualtieri

Collectors Edition

It's the week before Thanksgiving and I'm driving north on Interstate 83 to see a man whose lips have not uttered my name aloud in over seven years. My father's father moved from Denver, Colorado to Dallas, Pennsylvania nearly three years ago. According to MapQuest.com it takes approximately three hours and forty-five minutes to travel the distance, by car, between my doorstep and his. I have never been invited to his home. This trip makes no exception. Mel has not set foot in my home since 1988, two years prior to my father's final departure. Let's face it-- I am scared to death.

After traveling through Harrisburg, I make the merge onto Route 81, northbound. As familiar scenery began to grow sparse, and my destination grows nearer and nearer, my stomach begins to ache. I keep telling myself, "Just keep driving. You have to go. You have to go." A road sign ahead reads-- **Dallas 73 Miles.** Standing behind it, a large Billboard advertises *The Antiques Road Show, Coming to a town near you!* I have come a long way to turn around now. I'll take the message as a sign I'm doing the right thing.

"Stashes", my Grandfather called them. Sets of precious objects that came in all sizes, all shapes, were hidden in the least obvious of places. Mel is a collector, a keeper of things, a finder of collectibles, a measurer of collect-ability.

On a recent visit to New Mexico to see my father and his mother's family, I had dinner with my Grandmother and Aunt. We ate with the sun setting on the mountain landscape to our backs. My Grandmother had just come out of the front door with a new batch of homemade tortillas when the phone rang. My uncle was calling from Seattle just to say hi. I hadn't spoken to him in a while so my grandmother allowed me to remain on the phone while I ate. We talked about my six cousins, my college graduation-- all the usual Uncle/Niece small talk-- until he sighed and nonchalantly added, "And Grandpa's just preparing for Chemotherapy, but still no one seems to know what kind of cancer it is or how to treat it." "What?" I responded. "Grandpa has cancer?" I looked to

my Grandmother, horrified. She quickly looked away and said nothing. My aunt excused herself from the table. I didn't know what to do with this news. I knew inside that I was supposed to be sad, but the only emotion I could grasp was disbelief.

Throughout my adolescent years, Mel and I had lost touch. In the grand tradition of our family heritage, neither of us can explain the long, cold distance between us. I saw him last in the kitchen of his home in Boulder, Colorado. My father and I had stopped in on the way to the airport. He handed me a vintage Strawberry Short Cake lunch box, a mint Sacagawea golden dollar coin, and a frozen *Reese's Peanut Butter Cup* from his freezer stash. We exchanged brief small talk until he asked if there was anything he could "do for me." I would have stubbornly replied "no," but my father interjected, "Just keep in touch Dad." Mel handed me fifty dollars and showed us to the door.

He never called. I never wrote. My memories of him faded in the fiery light of my anger. He regularly changed the subject when my father mentioned my name. Yet, now, I couldn't help but feel that I was somehow to blame for his recent illness. I had cursed him continually over the years for the time he'd wasted in anger and now time was teaching him a lesson. "Serves him right," I wanted to say, but what good would it have done to speak and act in anger as he had done for so long?

Time heals all wounds. Sitting in my father's living room the following day, the phone rang. I answered and a familiar voice quickly asked, "Who am I speaking with?" though I sensed he already knew. When I said my name, I could feel him smile through the phone. I don't think he was expecting to hear the voice of a woman. He only knew me as a child. A few brief moments of awkward silence passed. "Life is too short for us to be like this," he blurted. "And baby I'm on the short end of that stick now. So I love you... Is your Dad around?"

Just then, reality hit. Mel, Grandpa, Gramps was apologizing to me, and with ease. He called me baby. He said I love you. It was then I knew. This man, this collector, was tying up loose ends, bringing his collection to a close.

Collectibles are measured by time, time passed, time period when it was made, length of time produced. Time is everything. Supply. Demand. Then comes quantity. One collectible is good to have. A number of collectibles is better. A number of collections are better still. There is something to be said for this hobby, something to be said for this art of picking and choosing things with a *one man's trash is another man's treasure* kind of security.

PBS airs *Antiques Road Show* on Monday nights at 8pm Eastern Time. You've seen it. I've seen it. A large group of appraisers goes on tour to different cities around the country, giving America the chance to share their unique antique finds with the nation. It can be quite comical. I stopped channel surfing one night to listen. A very sweet owner was delivering a beautiful story of his treasured item, immaculately cared for, undoubtedly worth a great sum of money, only to find out, after appraisal, that it was valued at a mere $5.

Mel kept a room for private show and tell in the back of the basement. Inside hung mostly what the antiquing world often refers to as *Arms and Militaria.* He kept it locked, opening its door only for those he felt worthy, mainly using the space for personal enjoyment. I can remember my grandmother opening its door for my father shortly after my grandparents divorced. While she and my father stood with their backs to me in the doorway, I took advantage of this golden opportunity to inspect the basement for stashes. Paying close attention to their conversation, I knew my father wouldn't appreciate me climbing the shelves or squeezing into the crawl space. My grandmother let out a long sigh, and whispered, "See. This is where all of the family's jewels went." She always said that, though I didn't understand what she meant until several years had passed and countless attempts to find this well hidden treasure had failed.

Jewels or not, Mel taught me to believe that all collectibles should be "treated as treasure." Standing in front of the closet in my father's old bedroom on East Oxford drive, he towered over me. We unfailingly stood in this spot during every trip we spent as a full set of family (two Grandparents, two parents, two Aunts, one Uncle, and one child) in that house. The first time he opened it, I felt as though he'd opened the doors to *FAO Schwartz.* The dolls were aligned perfectly on five shelves. They were all there: Strawberry, Apricot, Lem and Ada, the twins, Blueberry, Peach Cobbler, Angel Cake, over thirty of them. He said the same thing each time he showed them to me: I was not to open the boxes. EVER. I wasn't to remove the price tags. EVER. He would let me take them home when I was sixteen, but not a day sooner. These were my collectibles, my treasure: a plethora of Strawberry Shortcake Dolls by **Kenner,** pals included, $4.99 each.

Mel was on to something. According to *The Antiques Road Show* website, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/roadshow/series/, "One of the most important factors in establishing the value of a vintage item is its condition. The better the condition, the higher the price. Collectors and

appraisers of vintage items use the following categories in designating condition: Mint, Excellent, Very Good, Fair, and Poor. The dolls, unopened, price tags still attached, fall under the Mint category, as they "have never been worn or used and are entirely without flaws." I tested the theory.

WWW.Ebay.com, a well respected auctioning website, lists several boxed and unboxed sets of Strawberry Shortcake dolls up for auction. What I stumbled upon was mind-blowing. I found a set comparable to my own, including:

> "19 mint in box vintage Strawberry Shortcake dolls. They include all of the original 12 dolls with their pets as well as all 5 sets of International dolls. Also included is the Purple Pieman and Sour Grapes with their pets. Each doll is in excellent or mint condition. They are pristine, never played with, absolutely 100% original, complete and mint. The pets are also included... and are mint also. All dolls have original shoes, hats, clothes, ribbons, berry emblems, and tights. All of the hats are factory attached. The boxes are in good condition and include their inserts. 11 of them still have their berry points. Each hat, outfit, pair of shoes, and tights are original and in mint or excellent condition. It could take you years to put together a set like this, and cost much more to buy them separately."

The highest bid for this set is 1200 U.S Dollars. On the other hand, a similar set, including "twenty-three, immaculately cared for, dolls, plus pets, combs and extra outfits," minus the boxes, has a highest bid of 250 U.S dollars, plus shipping and handling.

My mother says Mel bought the first doll at *Target* on the day she told him she was pregnant. My collections began with Strawberry, but certainly did not end there. I was the only three-year-old on my block that periodically received huge packages, bigger than me, bigger than my father, on her doorstep. Inside could be any number of things, but surely a number of them. I never got just one Cabbage Patch Doll; I got three. In fact, I never got just one of anything. He wanted to encourage me to be a collector, and the noun "collection," requires "an accumulation of objects gathered for study, comparison, exhibition or as a hobby."

My mother hated those boxes. The stuffing he'd added to cushion the contents inevitably ended up all over the kitchen floor, making an explosive mess. I loved it. As I grew older, I came to the conclusion that big presentations and explosive messes were a Nimon trait. We are character

istically big people, with big ideas, who usually make a big mess. I am like this. My father is like this. No surprise Mel's the same way. "Big guys do things big," Grams used to say.

Mel is long and broad, standing almost 6'3 inches tall. His hair is gray and thick, hairline unreceding. His eyes are deep, dark, and charming like my father's. He walks heavily with his size 13 feet. His voice is deep and booming, yet very nasal, and he smells of dust and aftershave with the occasional hint of bug spray.

His jeans are almost always faded, three days worn no doubt and his t-shirts are almost always stained in one place or another. He strongly resembles Walter Mathau, especially in the *Grumpy Old Men* movies, complete with TV dinners, chocolate hidden in the back of the freezer, and *pull my finger jokes.* It's clear to anyone who meets him that my grandfather has his own sense of style, humor, and of course, value. Mel has even named the "samurai" sounds his body produces when he exits a car. For years his Pest Control Company truck had tags that read, NOBUGS. He still gets a chuckle over that.

Mel's always had a two-car garage, though the doors rarely opened and it never really contained any cars. If you peered through the dusty glass windows, all you would be able to see is stuff, tons of stuff. As a child I inspected this museum regularly. Sometimes, if I was good, he would give me the grand tour. You could find records, tools, trashcans full of rolled up Rock and Roll posters, hardly any space to move. He'd gracefully move about them, reciting the history of each collected thing with a glowing grin on his face.

He collected memories along with memorabilia. He used to own a record store called Big Apple Records. He wrote a book about it once entitled *All I Learned from Being in the Record Business.* Bound in red, containing nothing but blank pages, copies of it are now stacked in the corner, layered in dust.

Behind the black toolbox with a broken clasp, third shelf, right hand side, he stashed a velvet board covered in vintage pins. A child of the 80's, I nearly stopped breathing when I saw Michael Jackson's face on one of those pins. I still have it. From then on I was hooked, wanting to see every stash he had. His response: "In due time." I soon learned that the best collectors of the best collections keep things hidden until the time is right.

Grandpa always stressed the importance of time and circumstance. He instilled these values in his own children, especially my father, who in turn passed them on to me. For my second birthday, my father bought me

my first pieces of Disney memorabilia, Mickey and Minnie Mouse dolls with hard plastic hands, feet, and faces. I adored them. The collection continued. Every once in a while, my father would open the private treasure chest in the foot of his closet, and take out his full collection of Original Disney miniatures. He'd someday have them mounted in a shadow box for me, he assured me, but not until I was old enough to handle them responsibly, and even then, they were not to be played with. I awoke on my eighth birthday to find the promised shadow box leaning up against my bedpost, with a long red ribbon tied around the center, and a card that said, "Happy Birthday to my Little Girl! Love, Daddy." I felt such a sense of pride that day. I was a collector.

Gramps carries a laminated copy of his family birthday list on a small card in his wallet. Oddly enough, I don't recall the last time he used it to remember my birthday. The card is the size of a credit card. The dates are typed neatly on both sides. As a child I found this particular item very intriguing. Why did he need to make the memory into an item, a collected thing? Didn't he have enough *things?* Then again, for a collector it makes perfect sense. Collections serve no purpose other than to be admired occasionally. Of course, they may have worth as a whole, but is money really the reason for collecting? Or perhaps the joy is in the simple accumulation and the satisfaction of completion.

After our phone conversation, I found a picture of Grandpa and me. Very few exist. Our figures look strangely similar, the both of us wearing dirty white t-shirts, our hair in our eyes, smiles glowing at the camera. I discreetly removed the photo from the album and took it to *Wal-Mart's Photo Center.* I enlarged the print, bringing the frame in as tightly around our faces as I could manage without sacrificing the clarity of the image.

The photograph now lies beside me on the passenger seat. Behind me, a large black traveling trunk, holding my collectibles, is stretched across the back seat. Taped inside the lid are a note from Mel, again explaining that the dolls are NEVER to be opened and that the price tags are NEVER to be taken off, and an inventory, entitled Collectors' Items, of Melvin Lee Nimon Memorabilia. The contents:

1. One original Big Apple Records trucker cap—Red. (Fair Condition)
2. 30+ Original Strawberry Shortcake Dolls, boxes sealed, price tags affixed to each box top, pals included. (Mint Condition)
3. One small wooden parakeet, whittled by Melvin himself for his Granddaughter, age 7. (Fair Condition)
4. One 3-inch Bambi statue, formerly belonging to Melvin between

the ages of two and fifty-seven, at which time it was handed down to his oldest granddaughter. (Very Good Condition)

5. Two pieces of Scrimshaw jewelry: one necklace, one small ring. (Fair Condition)
6. One 1977 Vivitar 35mm Camera—manual. Owned and given by Melvin Nimon to his oldest son, Mark Nimon, and later given to Mark's daughter, Marisa. (Very Good Condition)
7. One vintage Michael Jackson pin, circular. (Poor Condition)

All of these items are usually kept out reach, stashed away in secret. However, in these circumstances, it is only fitting to share them with the man who has made them collectables. If it is time that gives a collectable worth, these are worthy. If it is the discontinuation of production of a collectable that makes it collectable, then Mel Memorabilia may soon fit the bill. I may have forgotten him along the weary roads of my adolescence, but now, faced with his death, I find myself fully immersed in all of the things I consider most valuable about him. Nearing the final exit to Dallas, Pennsylvania, I glance back at my chest of treasures. My stomach is still doing somersaults, my palms beginning to sweat. I wonder what he'll think of me, what I'll think of him.

Upon arrival, I take a few extra moments to collect my thoughts. I keep telling myself: "You have to go. You have to go. Life's too short. *Life's too short to stay like this.* There's a collectable waiting for you on the other side of that door, and he's one of a kind."

Marisa Nimon

Road Map

I'd always wanted to write about witches. Good witches, crafty witches, all-powerful witches. I wanted to find the kind of witches who could teach me some magic. I used to search for them in trees, in bushes, in alleys, and in parks. I hadn't ever had a glimpse, but they had to be out there somewhere. *Indeed, by the late fifteenth century, the Church had officially declared war on witches. The two Dominican theologians who were put in charge of routing out and prosecuting the witches, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, actively promoted the notion of witchcraft as a Satanic cult. They maintained that women were more attracted to witchcraft because they were less intelligent, more impressionable, and more lascivious than men. Tragically . . . authorities tortured and killed between one half million and 9 million people . . . about 80 percent of whom were women* (Claire M. Renzetti). I wanted to write about witches, I wanted to be one. I dreamed of them, of witches in black crashing through my window on broomsticks. For years, I fell asleep facing that window- if I turned my back, who knows what I would have missed.

I wanted power, because what kind of power does an eight year-old girl really have? As far as I could see, being a mother meant cleaning, helping my father with his work, and instructing me with my spelling words. Being a grandmother didn't look so good either- overweight, crazy, and collecting old magazines like stamps. I was clearly at the mercy of the powerless; I was left to be molded by the powerless. The only way to get power was to imagine, to pretend, and hope. And to just keep on looking.

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Throughout the Vagina Monologues performance, all I could see was a blur of cadmium red, glasses abandoned on my bedroom dresser. I remember thinking that I would rather be dead than hit puberty. A new razor and a box of baby pink tampons- all sorts of new and exciting violations. *(I'm happy and bleeding for you.* PJ Harvey.) Insert it. . . where? EW. Only later did I discover that the rest had been hidden, and that the hippies had failed us. Failed. Our long-haired, protest-marching,

acid- tripping, peace-symbol flashing, "liberated" parents forgot to mention what *it* was. Oh yeah. Sex. We were never told why people enjoyed it, that an orgasm was the goal, where the clitoris was, what the hell a hymen had to do with anything, and why it was all forbidden. And why it was so important- sex, *being* a sex. Because *it* matters. Thanks for being open to questions, but what questions could we have asked if we were ignorant of our ignorance? *No doubt young girls are better informed now than formerly, but some psychiatrists hold that not a few adolescent girls are still unaware that the genitals have other than a urinary function. At any rate, they see little relation between their sexual emotions and the existence of their genital organs, because there is no clear sign as clear as the masculine erection to indicate this correlation . . . She does not dream of taking, shaping, violating: her part is to await, to want; she feels dependent; she senses danger in her alienated flesh* (De Beauvoir). Stumbling in the blackened cave, feeling our way to the light- an impure shade. There was simply no turning back, but also no one to lead.

*****

Bitch. *Slut.* Whore. I *hit* that. I *banged* her.

If 75% of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows; if almost half of young girl's abuses are incestuous; if up to 30% of women enter hospitals due to ongoing abuse; if 20% of murdered women are killed by their husbands or boyfriends; if 75% of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows; if 95% of rapes do not get reported to the police; if for every 1,000 rapes, between zero and seventeen perpetrators are convicted; if the average sentence for rape is fifteen years; if the average time served is seven years or less; if 76% of rapists are repeat offenders; if I consider myself lucky to never have been assaulted- yet. Heartbroken, I have no answers. It was me and a gun and a man at my back. *And I sang "holy, holy" as he buttoned down his pants. Yes I wore a slinky red thing. Does that mean that I should spread for you, your friends?*'(Tori Amos)

For years I wrote nothing but confusion. Visions of bubbles bursting, red and black, thorns, trees, fiery stars, explosions. . . nothing tangible, nothing I could define. I used words like *bitch, kiss,* and *demon* over and over. . . I wrote the way I painted, and I painted pain with my bare, flat fingertips. They released deranged creatures, and captured in lucid, empty stares. I let the paint and the words leak out on to paper without care,

without control, and with nothing else to do but listen to Courtney Love scream into my walkman: *I made my bed I'm dying in. Burn the witch, the witch is dead.* I wasn't really dying, but it was comforting to believe it anyway. *Why did I live . . . I know not; despair had not yet taken possession of me; my feelings were those of rage and revenge, and ultimately my mind turned. . . I could with pleasure . . . have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery* (Megan Foss). I looked forward to my inevitable explosion. Either it'd be all over forever, or things would change, and either one was fine with me.

As Adrienne Rich writes, *the sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one s eyes.* I believe that we're together, joined in silence. In fear. It's still rude to have a big mouth. It's still lonely to be a feminist.

The first time a guy who I was dating hit me I shoved him back, my mother said. *Never again.* It was as simple as that, and I had to agree. Her eyes glimmered like lightening bolts. She stood up a little taller. After growing up the way she did, it must have felt good to be able to strike back, even if it was just once. It takes strength to break a cycle, to break a nose.

The first time the guy I was dating hit *himself* I was powerless to hold down his fists. The picture flutters through my mind like a photograph. It's stuck in the album and I can't ever rip it out. The bruises appeared like little purple freckles, as tender as violets, speckling his forehead, his temples, his skull. Before I could drive my parent's minivan, we had to walk everywhere together, and everywhere we went he'd pick a flower for me. *Something to hold onto,* he'd say, *just in case I am not here tomorrow. . .*

He can't take it, but he takes it. In such quiet surrenders do we American men call it quits with our diseases (Leonard Kriegel). Women may try to kill themselves more often than men, but it's men who are more successful. And I realized I was the lucky one, because I had the ability to cry. Faggot. *Pussy.*

*****

Maxim magazine reports: "Right now, in her life, she is looking for...

A relationship focused on compatibility: 76%

A relationship focused on sex: 4%

(Aren 't these the same thing? I am asked. We laugh.)

No relationship at all: 20%

*****

At my mother's fiftieth birthday party, we found ourselves surrounded by her sisters and girlfriends in the living room, eating crackers and cheese. *So,* they asked her. *When are you going to cut that hair?* It hangs light and loose down the middle of her back, a soft brown tinged with a little gray. Her eyebrows furrow and her voice takes that hard tone. *Never,* she replied flatly. They looked shocked, even appalled. But, why?

Mom was always the one to trim our hair. I would ask for three inches and she'd take one. *People expect older women to cut their hair,* she had told me once. *And I'm not gonna do it.* I had never thought to ask why. Forced to relinquish sexuality? Pressured to admit some sort of responsibility? Eliminating hair does not eliminate vanity, no matter what you do with it. This I know. Mom used to cry when I would emerge from the bathroom, hair hacked away by a pair of safety scissors, now clogging the sink. Blue dye still stains our bathtub. I can still hear the jocks jeering, *it s not Halloween, freak,* in the high school hallways. G. I. Me. I got asked if I was a boy or a girl once, and it hurt. *No offense, but are you . . . ?* She had her hair done in braided extensions. Now mine is long, and I'm locking it. It's a brown, tangled nest. It's a way to keep it and respect it. I love to whip it around in circles and feel it hit my face- to have hair that sticks out higher and wider than I ever thought it could. Maybe, it's just about being a little different.

When I grow up, if I can't be a witch, I want to be a ninja. Or, master archer. Cave-dwelling recluse. Renowned artist. Zen master. Armed revolutionary. Horse whisperer. Nobel prize winner. Savior of the Redwood Forests. Priestess. Free.

*****

"When I retire, I'm going to pull out my paints and start doing oils." She was cleaning out the art chest again- a big, broken red chest full of odds and ends. Her old materials lie in a pile. She stopped, rubbing her worn paintbrushes thoughtfully. Mom liked to paint her dreams. Concrete visions of the surreal.

One week later, I found her crouched over a small canvas, the smell of turpentine staining the air. "You know, actually . . .there isn't any

good reason not to start now.

For my birthday, she painted me clouds. Billowing clouds of white, purple, gold and gray. The kind of clouds that castles are made of.

Maxim magazine says: *Change Her Ways. Love your girlfriend's feminine mystique but wish she could be more like one of the guys sometimes?*

Tell me, how may I be respected?

The shampoo advertisement says: *Want to go out, but haven't washed your hair since the morning? Now you don't have to worry. .*

How may I fix these problems that do not exist?

Cosmopolitan says: Want to be independent and successful? Try our tips for improving your looks. *Summer fashions for under fifty, one-hundred, and three-hundred dollars. Try our new pound-shedding plan.*

How much will it cost? I'll pay anything-I would do anything.

*****

I envision a new, revised issue (Adrienne Rich: *revision ... is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival) of Rolling Stone's* "Women In Rock" from several years ago. There are business women on the cover- women who have cleaned up their act. I see singers/guitar players (Sheryl Crow), singers/pianists (Fiona Apple), singers (Madonna), singers (Tina Turner), singers (Jewel). It's obviously a vocal business, just another beauty contest. Good for them. But what's a girl like me to do? Without a voice to give away, to sell? "Oh, you're in a band?" my parents' friends ask, surprised. "Do you sing?"

I see myself on the cover the way I saw myself in the mirror today- pale faced from winter weather, purple circles swooping under my eyes, my hair in a permanent tangle. I do not have my finger in my mouth, I am not licking an object, I do not look blankly confused, and my lips are not sealed with red paint. My teeth are clenched, but I'm smiling. To Janet, Madonna, and Britney: I'm glad you're beautiful. I don't hold it against you. But I don't sing. And since I can hit the drums hard, like a man, I want to be on the cover of a magazine looking as ugly as I want to be. I was once content not to be your competition. It was so safe. I was

adored in this musical brotherhood of sugar-coated competition. But if men can be on the cover of magazines looking unclean, unfashion

able, dorky, geeky, fierce, violent, or ridiculous, then I can and will be all of those things. Because I am. It's not me who has to change-it's you, viewer, who has no choice. *(When you starve, cool thing, I know you will fix everything.* Kim Gordon.)

*****

The collage is designed like a window. Body parts- mutilated, starved, abused— body parts wallpaper the frame. Models with their legs open, models with dog collars on, models sucking on their fingers. Beautiful American models. Anorexic, surgically altered body parts. Their faces have been erased; I see only breasts, stomachs, ass. Words cut out of magazines have been painstakingly arranged on top of the killing field. The inside is blank, unfinished. I can hardly find the word to fill the hole. I know that the background will be sky, clear blue sky. But the words are still coming. My passivity is pleading for peace, but my anger is demanding action-for the voice in which to scream. No. *No.*

Dana Moss

1475 SW Sea Turtles Court *Clearwater, Florida*

U-Haul trucks are funny things. See, when I first came to Tampa after my freshman year of college, my girlfriend and I needed a U-Haul 17' Mover to move all of our stuff from New Jersey to Tampa. Her family was from the area, and I was planning to spend some time with her. Things were...uncertain. I wasn't sure I was going to return for my sophomore year of college in Baltimore. She already made the decision that Rutgers University was not the place for her and she was going home to Florida. I was going with her. But first, we needed a U-Haul. But a 17' Mover? That's 849 cubic feet of space. After loading up all of our worldly possessions (my checklist: clothes, stereo, television, Playstation, laptop. Her checklist: 832 cubic feet of furniture, clothes, and random accessories), I realized that we had made the correct choice. When we arrived in Tampa, I had to unload the 849 cubic feet of space onto the sidewalk in front of her parents' guesthouse. All by myself. Her parents watched.

They didn't exactly help me with the move back to New Jersey either. Sure, they were happy to see me go, but they sure weren't going to help me load the truck. They should have helped me a little bit. All throughout the summer, I'd run out to Publix Grocery, pick up some cold cuts and rye bread and make sure everyone was content. Jen's father loved pastrami. It ran for $3.99 a half-pound, and he was the only one who would eat it, so it would sit in the refrigerator for a week until it'd get thrown out and I'd spend another four bucks. I'd even make sure that there was plenty of Diet Coke available for the females in the group. That was three months ago. Now that I was leaving their lives forever, the least they could do was help me lift the television up on the truck bed. Yet even after I loaded the U-Haul all by myself, all I got from Jen's parents was a wave goodbye. Jen gave me a hug, said "sorry," and watched me pull away. So there I was, back on the road heading north towards the Georgia border. One less passenger, one hell of a lot less

weight in the truck bed, and one long drive ahead of me. The 10' Mini-Mover was a good move.

I-75 North *Gainesville, Florida.*

Farewell, Tampa. A city with a spark when I first got there, but it was quickly extinguished. What was a kid from Trenton doing in a place like Tampa? An awful sports-town. Humidity in the 90th percentile. 80 degrees at 6 a.m. Not my cup of tea. No wonder Jen and I never left the house. The comfort of climate-control was too tempting and too dangerous to give up. I had always thought that summers were supposed to be lazy, but our summer together bordered on comatose. Luckily, the Blockbuster Corporation owns the entire state of Florida. That summer, Jen and I accumulated enough Blockbuster Rewards Points that we probably could have purchased Milk Duds for the Greater Tampa Area. We'd always rent movies like The Cutting Edge and Return To Me. I read once in one of Jen's "women's magazines" that she kept in a little wicker basket on the side of the toilet that "going to the movies on a first date is a major faux-pas; the movies leave no room for interaction or getting to know a person. If you do go to the movies, make sure you grab a bite to eat afterwards so you have something to talk about!" Well, what about renting movies for our 600th date? Not to mention dates 601 through 680? Chances were she'd leave in the middle of the movie anyway so that she could wake up and go to work at Fioretella's Grille in the morning, and I'd inevitably stay up so I could see if Minnie Driver would get David Duchovny's dead wife's heart. Our lives were beyond boring. I thought that this was how life was supposed to be, and for a while I was pleasantly content with letting our bodies sink into our oversized leather couch and watching romantic comedies. At least I thought I was. Things change.

I-95 North *Brunswick, GA*

According to the "Triple A Road Guide" located in the glove compartment of my now vacant passenger-side seat, Shorty's BBQ, located in Brunswick, Georgia, is considered to have the "best barbeque pork sandwiches in Georgia," and "while other places might have the notoriety, this is the real deal." Jen was a vegetarian. I was a vegetarian too. Peer pressure from friends, mostly. And from her, of course. I had moved to Florida for her, so giving up trips to that meat mecca of Philadelphia,

Pat's Cheesesteaks, wasn't too much of a sacrifice. I ate the hummus, the seitan, the bean curd, the tofurkey, and I have to admit, I did enjoy it for a time. But now, I wanted the best barbeque pork sandwich in Georgia and dammit, I was going to have it. I could imagine myself walking up to Shorty, (who I imagined to be about 6'4 and 340 pounds), requesting "the best barbeque pork sandwich in Georgia," slapping my five-spot on the barbeque sauce splattered counter, and gorging myself. Besides, Jen's new love interest, a cook at Fioretella's Grille, was training to be a Florida State Policeman and the irony of devouring pig was just too good to pass up. However, I had heard rumors from fellow vegetarians that if you ate meat after not eating it for a while, your stomach would reject "the poison of dead carcasses" and your digestive system would be a mess. I decided not to risk it, considering I wasn't really that far from Tampa yet. Besides, I had gotten a bag of Doritos back in Clearwater. Maybe I'd stop for a cheese steak in Philly.

I-95 North *Fayetteville, North Carolina*

One of the benefits of renting a U-Haul is an AM/FM Radio. While I consider a radio to be a standard feature in most automobiles, U-Haul actually listed an AM/FM Radio as one of the extras. In any case, I was grateful for it. I needed some music to keep my mind off of the three months that I'd just spent in Tampa. Perhaps music wasn't the best way to do this; Jen and I had met in New Brunswick through music. A hard core show. I was therefore a bit hesitant to turn on the radio, but I doubt hardcore music had much of a following on the South Carolinian FM radio, so for the time being I was safe from nostalgia over mosh pits.

By this time, I had been driving for over ten hours and it was getting rather late at night. I had pulled into a 24-hour truck stop and parked my UHaul in a part of the parking lot where the white parking lines had faded and fiddled with the dial of the radio. For the majority of the trip I had listened to whatever pop music station was popular in the area. The radio signals of Top 40 stations are always the strongest, and I was just looking for something that wouldn't turn to static after thirty minutes. 100.7. Raleigh's Oldies Station. I lay back in the driver's seat, hoping for the sweet sounds of Motown to lull me into sleep.

As the O'Jays mixed into the Platters, who melded into the Drifters, slowly felt myself give into exhaustion. However, I was quickly brought back to consciousness by a familiar snare drum beat leading to a conglomerate of horns and saxophones. Ah. Midnight Train To Georgia. A

classic.

Delaware Memorial Bridge *Delaware/New Jersey Border*

Gladys Knight's sweet alto sang to me in my sleep. It remained a melody of my subconscious even after I woke up groggily to buy a day-old cinnamon bun at the truck stop. It soon became all I could think about as I drove up through North Carolina and Virginia. It haunted me through the Fort McHenry Tunnel as I drove around Washington and Baltimore. And even now, an hour from home, it haunts me still. Why? Because Gladys made the same mistake I made. She took a midnight train to Georgia to be with her love, who was feeling homesick, because "she'd rather live in his world than live without him in hers."

Hey Gladys...wherever you are...are you listening? Because I thought the same thing, Gladys. Believe me, I did. New Jersey was nothing without Jen. So, I decided I'd live in Tampa. I thought things would be better there; she'd be more comfortable, and I'd adapt. But you know what? I never did. Instead, I became a lazy loiterer who watched sappy movies while she went on with "the life she once knew." So, Gladys, I've gotta ask you.. .what happened with your man? What happened after the song ended? Did he move on with his life and leave you, a big city girl from Los Angeles, rotting like a spoiled peach in the Georgia sun? Is he spending all his time eating at Shorty's BBQ and ignoring you? Did he run off with a short-order cook/junior police deputy at a hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant? I don't know, Gladys. Maybe we had it all wrong. I was doing pretty well for myself back in New Jersey. Life was good, school was alright, but just like that I left it all because the girl that I think I'm in love with wanted to. Does it sound similar, Gladys? Your man moves out to Los Angeles from Georgia because he has big dreams in show business. He meets you, a relatively successful musician, falls in love, can't get his career off the ground, gives up, heads back home, and drags you with him. Well, he's not actually dragging you. You went of your own accord, just as I did. But like I said, things change. There's something odd that happens when people that you think you know and you think you love are from somewhere that will never be home to you. It's their "element;" it's the place that both defines and grounds them. I guess that's the danger of leaving home at all. You might meet someone from a different world, and they'll want you to join it. But you might reject it, and in a sense, reject them. I mean, come on, remember the first line of the song, Gladys: "L.A.

proved too much for the man." What makes you think that GA won't prove too much for the lady? Or that a suburb of Tampa will prove too much for a kid from Jersey? What would the Pips think of us?

My thoughts raced as I flew past mini-vans and SUVs in the lanes next to me. I tried identifying cars to get my mind off of Gladys' song and Jen. Ford Windstar. Nissan Maxima. Dodge Ram. Never mind. Jen ran away with an old boyfriend. That's all there is to it. She never grew up in our relationship; she listens to the same music she always listened to, does the same things she always did, and simply refused to change. Running back into the arms of someone from her past shouldn't be that surprising.

But what about you, Gladys? Your love was a lousy entertainer, a quitter, a car salesman (and obviously an awful one if he couldn't even purchase a plane ticket with the cash he made), and he's going home to attempt to take back a life he once knew. What makes this guy so great that you'd leave your family, your friends, the City of Angels, your Grammys, the Pips, and God knows what else behind? Come on, Gladys. You're better than that. I guess I should've known that I was too. But there I was, packing the 17' U-Haul full of chess sets, bookcases, an ugly glass-top table, her sundresses, and my life. And here I am, driving a 10' U-Haul across the Delaware Memorial Bridge, filled with some ratty pieces of luggage, an old Samsung television set, and a particle-board desk I was too lazy to dismantle. But hey, that's what I get for following my heart rather than my reason. Then again, that's what love is all about, isn't it? Doing things that don't make any sense rationally. Like leaving your successful career behind. And rejecting 70- degree weather. And taking a train cross-country. And standing in line at the deli counter of Publix Grocery waiting to buy a pound of pastrami. Didn't you sing, "My love would rule over my sense, and I'd call you back for more?" Look how far that got us, Gladys. You made me miss my exit.

Route 202 North *Flemington, New Jersey*

It's raining. Welcome home. I'm upset, but calm. I'm looking forward to spending some time with my own family, who will help me unload my stuff from the back of the U-Haul. I'm looking forward to going back to Baltimore. I'm planning to never hear the screams of a New Brunswick hardcore band again for the rest of my life. Sometimes things just don't work out. I wish I'd realized this earlier, but sometimes

it takes an irrational sacrifice, an absurd amount of really bad movies from Blockbuster, a great deal of pain, and a 1960s love ballad to help you understand who you are, what you want from life, and who is going to be the one that will help you learn and achieve those things. The bottom line is, "Tampa proved too much for the man," and "I'd rather live in my world than live with her in hers." Sad and unromantic, certainly, but the truth. I believe Ms. Knight said it best: "Neither one of us wants to be the first to say goodbye. So, we just go on hurting and pretending convincing ourselves to give it one more try. Farewell. Goodbye."

Brian Oliu

Star-Spangled Silhouette

Patriotism at its finest: there's a tiny child, straight brown hair, captivating blue eyes, marching in place atop a sturdy brown suitcase. She's front and center in a large, sparse room with oatmeal gray carpet and mostly white walls, one of which has acquired a blue-crayoned scribble at a height comparable to that of a child. She twirls a six-inch flag, waving it wildly above her head. Her high voice squeaks, acapella, You're A Grand Old Flag, over and over, her small, bare feet stomping out a drumbeat. This is me, at six.

You know, I don't really know what happened. Still. There's a report, dark in my memory, that I've seen and held, yet never read. And since I've begun talking about the incident, I've been corrected several times. It seems that facts I considered fairly reliable could not have occurred the way I believe they did. He was under fire. There was an explosion. His plane, a C-130, one of the few firm facts I do have, went down over enemy lines, in a place where it could not be recovered. It wasn't. He was a navigator KIA. That was June 23, 1969.

My brother and I played G.I. Joe before we could understand what happened to the G.I. Joes that fall off of castles built from heavy, wooden blocks. There are simply lots of rapid buh-buh-buh-buh-buh tongue clicks, and then the action figure performs a dramatically beautiful dive off the side of the wall and lands in a flat bounce at the bottom.

So. My Daddy may go to War. He could be shipped off to that scary word with its capital W. My 45-year-old father, a man who has had children for almost half of his life, a man who is commanding and respected and deeply good, may be sent across the world to a place without comfort, without love, and without safety. He may go to War: that short word, too small a word to hold its meaning, a word like a gunshot. And what if he dives off, too? Puff of smoke, blaze of glory, is there really so much of a difference? His own father left once, to the beyond concealed in that short word, and never came back.

It glows there. A long black wall, nothing like the wooden-block

walls we built at home, taller than Daddy. It shines. And at 22W (on the 22nd slab, West side), three lines up from the bottom, so that even our tiny legs bend to see his name, Jean A. Kearby. Cut into stone that shone bright the way Daddy's eyes are right now. Hundreds of people genuflect at the wall, waiting, wailing, with roses and letters, quiet and sad. That time we looked up his name in a big book under glass, the thick book of the dead, to find his memorial mark, that sad excuse for a gravestone in a sobering cemetery of thousands.

Einstein lives two blocks past the wall. We always went to visit him afterwards. A giant bronze figure, lounging in sandals with mussed hair, wrinkled slacks, and holding a book, he smiles into the cosmos at his feet. Thousands of pinpoint stars glitter back at him, like memorials to the universes that could be. In my mind, I've adopted him. He is the grandfather I wanted, the lap I could climb into, the person who could explain, the person with all the answers. Einstein, with his brilliant scientific mind, encouraged the development of sudden destruction. He fostered the belief that we were invincible, he somehow allowed my grandfather to die.

I own three thick gray hoodies. Well-worn sweatshirts have the texture of love, if love should ever be tangible enough to transform into an article of clothing. Proper hoodies should be faded, imbued with some sort of sentimental value, and leave soft fuzzies that hang on to your skin long after you've removed the warmth of the early morning hug of a sweatshirt. My hoodies are titled, in chronological order of ownership, Patriots, NAVY, and USMA. Even in the most comfortable pieces of clothing I own, there is a mixture of the admiration I hold for the military and the apprehensive anticipation of the chill that will come with a conflict.

My little brother celebrates football every autumn afternoon, amidst falling leaves and damp grass. He's a noseguard, and built like a mountain. He plays because he loves his coach, the assistant athletic director, who graduated from a small school in the Midwest like my father, who wept to a little college on the Hudson. On my brother's desk, a black and white photo of my grandfather stands framed. In the picture, he is crouching at the line of scrimmage before a play, at the height his athletic, youthful glory. My grandfather played football post World War II, pre-Vietnam, just like so many other American boys. He held the world in his hands then, in an oval pigskin with grimy stitches, just as he would

years later with a compass, giving directions to a pilot. He had it all under control on the field. What happened in the air, then, to leave him so far from safety? Three generations later, my brother fondles a football.

Star-spangled strains silhouette my proud father as he stands at attention, eyes transfixed on the red, white, and blue. I stand next to him, as tall as I can be at twelve, as proud as I can be in a bathing suit, as respectful as might be hoped for a pre-adolescent. Every swim meet and competitive game of my childhood began this way. I was serious for one stolen second of childhood, standing still like a statue for my country.

Annapolis is the perfect port environment, home to the Naval Academy and a few thousand officers-in-training. They have ships and jagged sea wall and a pretty wooden pier. It seems simple and quaint compared to the austere grey stone castles set into cliffs along the sparkling Hudson River where my father attended West Point for four years in the mid-seventies. My family is trespassing on enemy territory while touring Annapolis, but it's a fun enemy, one who has at least played by the same rules as we do. My father hums the Army fight song through the cobblestone town; my siblings and I ice skate on the Yard, and sail out on the Chesapeake. One day I get lost and meet a boy who doesn't shake my hand, but grabs at my heart instead. I didn't see the uniform and I ignored the rules ("date outside the military") and he got me. A Navy boy in my West Point family.

My grandfather had a hero's death, the story of a legend, the bursting end in a blaze of glory... and he disappeared into a military haze, leaving my grandmother to wonder and my father in tears. It's the only thing my father cries about. Standing in the center of Arlington Cemetery, at his father's military ceremony—they buried the charred remains of his plane and the random belongings they could find and identify thirty years after the fact, melted pennies and bent dog tags and dirty scraps of leather—my own father weeps, his shoulders actually shaking.

My brother's applying. To the big WP. The castle balanced on a river against the chill of New York winters. He doesn't know why. Tradition is my guess. His name, John Andrew Kearby, bears the same initials as my grandfather's, and we call him by the same nickname my grandfather used before he ever knew he'd have a grandson. JAK. The heavy reality of being the last son in a line of Kearbys has set in; he feels responsible to continue our military history. And it lets him play football in real life,

with a grenade and not a ball, with an actual strategy against fatal enemies. He gets to keep his team. And since he's built like a mountain with enough of a brain to match that strength, he may walk right into his wish.

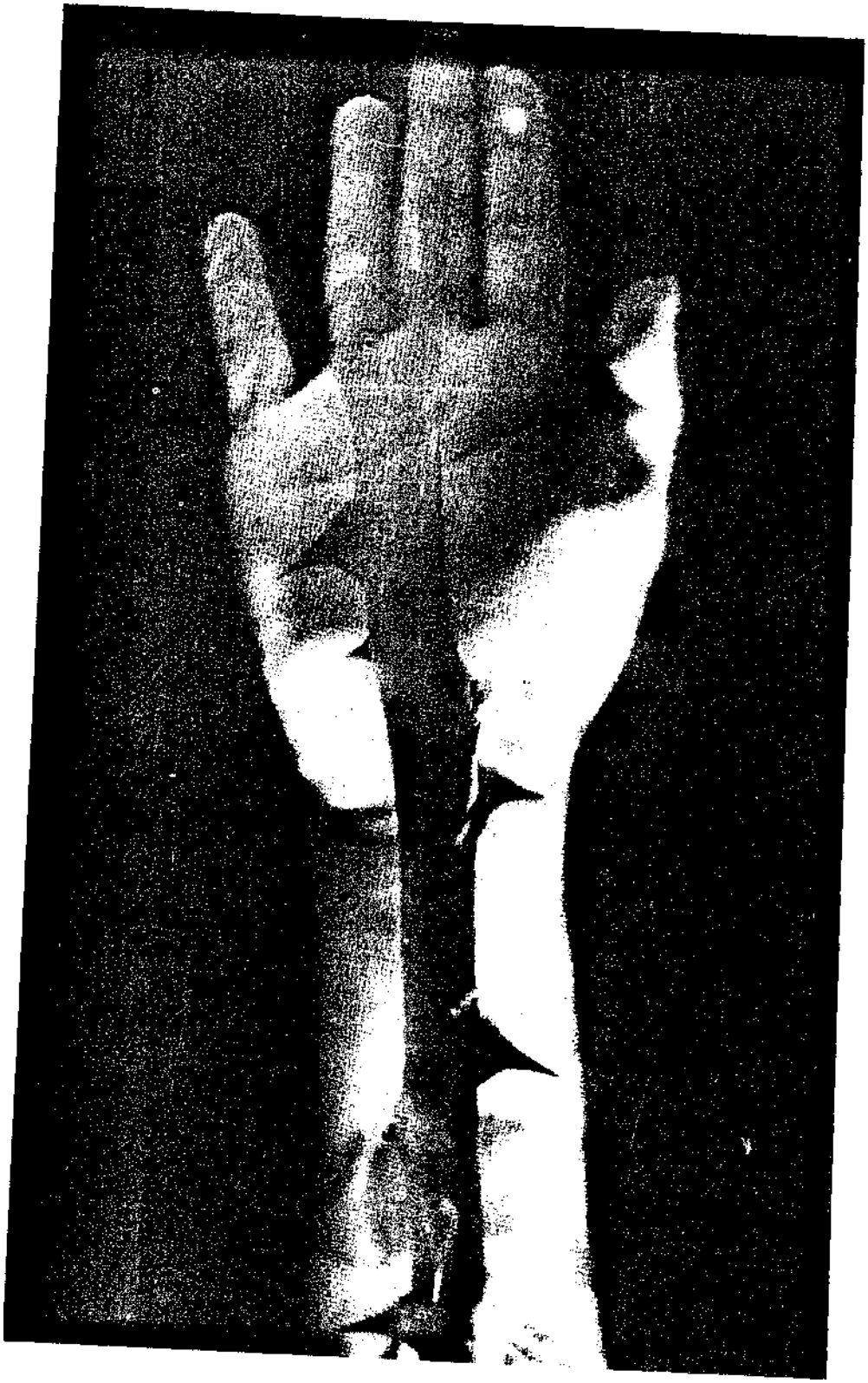
My father went to his twenty-fifth reunion last week. Twenty-five years is a long time to do anything. I haven't yet lived for twenty-five. But my father has served his country, has answered a powerful call and is willing to sacrifice not only his life, but also the hearts of his family for this country. He said it was fun to return to The Academy, to run around the place, to see his friends, and to reminisce about their pranks. My mother loved it too, to be back among the castles, to be a part of the dream.

Her father-in-law is the first person my mother wants to meet once she gets to Heaven. "Because he's just like me," she claims, though she never knew him either. All I have of him is even less, barely stories, just a bullet shot off at a twenty-one gun salute, a rubbing of the etches in the Wall, and a fear of losing the war, any war. The fear of losing my men.

"What do you want from me?" My response is devoid of gratitude after eight months of gentle acceptance. I'm giving it to him this way because he's in California, training for something. A long couple of months apart leave my pleading voice as only an expression of my deeper sadness. "Quit the Navy." I only say it because he won't, he wouldn't dream of it. Together we're perfect, the best of friends, incredible lovers, joined-at-the-hip happy, but life will always separate us—we may be meant for each other, but not meant to be there for each other. I can't be a perfect little Navy wife. I want more than that. I don't want to be replaced for the damn U.S. of A.

How do you release a memory you've never had? How can you exonerate a ghost that's killing your entire family? In D.C. one summer for bright Fourth of July fireworks, I tried to photograph my grandfather's name on the Wall. Somehow my hand slipped and the shot I took cut off most of the letters, cut it off the way his life was fractured. The photo, black water in brick form, only shows Kearby of 22W because I snapped too quickly and condemned my entire family to death. The haunting legacy of my grandfather lives on.

Kristen Kearby



Remnants

I grew up at summer camp. Someone else pointed that out to me recently; I thought it was normal, that every child perused the camp brochures each spring to choose that year's escape. Sailing camp, Volleyball camp, Church camp, Spy camp, Pony camp. I never thought much about it. I'd been spending my summer nights in the Allegheny Mountains since I was two. I would go into the woods for four days or a week and come out with a new appreciation for the simple life of bonfires and mud hikes.

Fossil camp, however, was somehow different than the others, unique because of its focus on the presence and discovery of something other than myself. Instead of developing my physical abilities or spiritual understanding, fossil camp provided a place to find the ancient wonders of our modern world. Much like climbing the crumbling stone steps of the Cambodian Angkor Wat, sifting through sand for buried shark teeth creates a sense of uncovering a secret past. The physical forms are still outlined and defined, but the lives that were once a part of the teeth or sanctuary are now a mystery.

As I sat in the fossil camp's classroom after my parents dropped me off for the summer day, an actual fossil was placed into my hands. The past and present were fused together with a simple and basic exchange. The near-black figure fit perfectly in the palm of the undeveloped hand of a small child. It was as hard as stone. My fingers fluttered in and out of the irregular creases and over the uneven humps. The randomly-patterned surface of the whole thing suggested natural, and ancient origins; origins that I felt I could imagine. And then the camp instructor announced just what it was that I was caressing: petrified feces. Giggles echoed off the walls from the twenty or so fifth-graders. I could only think one thing, namely, "Oh my God. I just touched poop."

I knew it was harmless. It had no smell, no warmth. And it really wasn't gross; it was beautiful. This one piece of hardened dung came from an actual animal that lived thousands of years ago. I held something as natural as a pearl and yet as foreign as a dinosaur. It seemed

almost underwhelming, though. Of course something this common would eventually be fossilized. Of course this came from a creature that actually lived many years ago. But then why was it so unique? Why was it so incredible? How could something so insignificant be so important?

Out of two full sets of grandparents and a full set of great grandparents alive during my childhood, I have only one grandmother left. My family was blessed with genes of youth, but even the young must eventually die. They say that there are only two things certain in life: taxes and death.

Even the ones that are still alive at 93—as my great-grandpa was—remind us of this inevitability of life. My great-grandfather lived through the two World Wars, the Roaring Twenties, sock hops, Woodstock, two wives, three children, computers and the Space Race. He seemed to be living, breathing account of history.

Now that only my grandmother left (Grandma Pittsburgh, as my sister and I used to call her) I find that I appreciate her much more than I did all of the others combined. She is the one connection I have left to that not-so-distant past. She knows what it was like to grow up during the Depression and what it means to devoutly practice religion. She's dealt with life, through raising three children of her own, but she's also dealt with death.. She helped bury her parents, her mother and father-in-law, her sister, her sister-in-law and most recently, her husband.

Grandma Pittsburgh says that it's good to have children at a funeral because it reminds the mourners of life, even as they pay their respects to the dead. Children are the evidence that death doesn't mean that the person is lost forever; they can leave an imprint on the people that loved them, those who will carry their deeds and their presence into the future. It's the living who bring the past forward by remembering what the world was once like or who once lived. The movie stars that rode in my grandfather's cab, the joy of my great-grandmother's face, my grandmother's stubbornness and horrible southern cooking: these are the things that will stay with us, rather than their bodies or even their skeletons, like the dinosaur remains we uncover each day. Ultimately, the earth will absorb the wood of the casket and the water will erode the bone. But the way that we as carriers remember the lives of those before us will last eternally. We only need someone to keep telling our tale.

We may call the people of this older generation "fossils," but it is the younger people who truly hold the past. My grandmother lived her life,

but it is I who will bring its most important parts into the future. I'll bring with me my grandmother's colloquial language, the way she says, "sweep the floor" when she means vacuum, or "warsh" the clothes; the way she says, "how do you like them apples?" when she's excited or "that's the price you pay for living in a democracy" when she's not. I'll remember these idioms, I'll say them, and I will send them forward with my children.

The Blue Heron of the Chesapeake Bay reaches far into the past. The Native Americans of the Watershed region named the bird "fishing long neck," which immediately imparts an aura of grace and dignity. The heron is a living fossil, dedicated to the people who named and truly appreciated it. What we view now is a beautiful bird that scares easily, but the people who lived during Potomac times looked to it with great reverence. They watched the bird for clues about the water and learned from it methods to trap prey. Their existence, in a sense, was intertwined with the Blue Heron's. The same long, storm-colored feathers and gray stilts, the same silent predator with an amazing wingspan is the one that we see today. The difference is not in the bird itself, but instead in the changes of the people that share its habitat. We no longer look towards the Blue Heron for guidance, but we do look towards it to remember the watermen that came before us. This is how we will understand life before Global Positioning Satellite instruments. We'll recognize that which we take for granted, those conveniences that these watermen could probably never fathom. We will appreciate what people of the past went through so many years ago. The Heron may still exist today, but it carries a past that deserves our respect.

I visited a shell cemetery this past year. On the very edge of the Krabi Province in the Andaman Sea, a graveyard rests above the splash of the waves. The locals of southern Thailand who preserve this corner of land call the area Su-San Hoi, which translates to "shell fossil cemetery." The slabs of red soil serve as a concrete path for visitors to make their way around the shore. The slabs are broken and have shifted from their original flat position. They are no longer level with the land, but their surfaces are a reminder of their once-even past.

I spent more time at the cemetery peering into the slabs than walking along them, as my friends did. I didn't search for shells to take home with me or explore the length of the beach. Instead, I crouched on top of a slab and inspected it with the eye of a scientist, much as I had years ago

at fossil camp. Each was made of layers compacted into one thin slab. The actual shells, laid precisely enough that one would think a bricklayer had been at work, would have been forever hidden if the earth had not moved and broken the sand apart. These uneven slabs are miniature testaments to the growth of the earth; the swirls and cups called shells indebt the modern Thailand shoreline to a nature of 75 million years ago. They are the evidence that the world was once a different shape and that it will be a different shape in the future.

Our lives are not permanent. One day, people will look at the gleaming circle of our CDs and marvel at our primitiveness. The specifics of one person or place—how many shells are packed into the slabs or how many camps I attended— are not the lasting merit of these people or places. We may only discover that by realizing the impressions that their hard work has left upon us.

Yet these slabs do leave an impression of permanence. They have become concrete fixtures of the landscape, proving that the earth has evolved over time. These fossilized blocks are like scars on a human body. They stretch and bend to fit the times, but they will last at this site, to claim that they lived not so long ago, and that nature is still thriving despite the changes that have both ravaged and preserved her lands. Our earth will outlast humans, but it is humans who will make it last.

Stephanie Chizik

Red, Green, & Serene

The city skyline, flooded with light, outlines the afternoon sky. At one end stands the Empire State Building, glowing red and green at its top; at the other, the void where the towers once rose leaves me with a deep sense of loss. Still, nothing can detract from the entrancing, wondrous aura of Manhattan in December: a calm peacefulness that embodies serenity.

Serenity: tranquility, peacefulness. The word "serene" comes from the Latin word serenus, meaning clear, cloudless, or untroubled. When we think of serenity, or what characterizes a peaceful retreat, we may imagine ourselves in an isolated, removed place of silence, absent of crowds and noise. However, the search for serenity will not always be fulfilled with a weekend getaway to the Florida Keys, or a journey to the steep and thickly-wooded mountains of New England. Surprisingly, a day-trip to New York City in December can actually be an unexpected, serene escape.

I am spoiled by my ability to frequent this world-renowned city with relative ease. A forty-minute train ride takes me to the center of Penn Station, the transportation hub of the metropolis. The station is seasonally decorated, but the aesthetics of the lower level never change, a comforting continuity for my many trips through this portal. The warmth of the subterranean structure is inviting not only for me, a regular visitor, but also for all who wish to come in from the cold and experience peaceful Manhattan during this hectic time of year. The waiting area near the bathrooms holds a handful of travelers awaiting their trains. My eyes glance over the seats where I slept for two hours the previous winter after missing my own train. I'd been caught in the interim period after midnight, when the time lapse between arrivals gradually gets larger until there are only a few trains still running. Someone else might have thought of such an experience with distaste, but I remembered my nap on those seats to be a pleasing alternative to wandering the cold streets.

Outside, the cacophony of car horns and screeching brakes echoes on the pavement, and a school of yellow taxis is rushing by. There's an

approaching clip-clop sound in the distance, announcing the arrival of an ornate horse-drawn carriage escorting two young lovers. These sounds are not aggravating; rather, they serve as a fitting accompaniment to the rush of the city's commercial crescendo.

The crisp, gentle breeze moves me along the streets. There is something about the Manhattan cold seems to swallow you. But a brisk walk keeps the blood flowing, and warms my otherwise shivering body. Masses of people moving in opposite directions charge across the sidewalks. To some this might seem stressful, but knowing that I can never be lonely in Manhattan in December is simply satisfying. A combination of smells— pretzels, roasted nuts and a meaty smoke—floods my nostrils. Navigating Manhattan in December is unique; it is more relaxing than a summer stroll through the rolling hills of Central Park, more exhilarating reaching the top of the Statue of Liberty, and more stimulating than the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a rainy day in April.

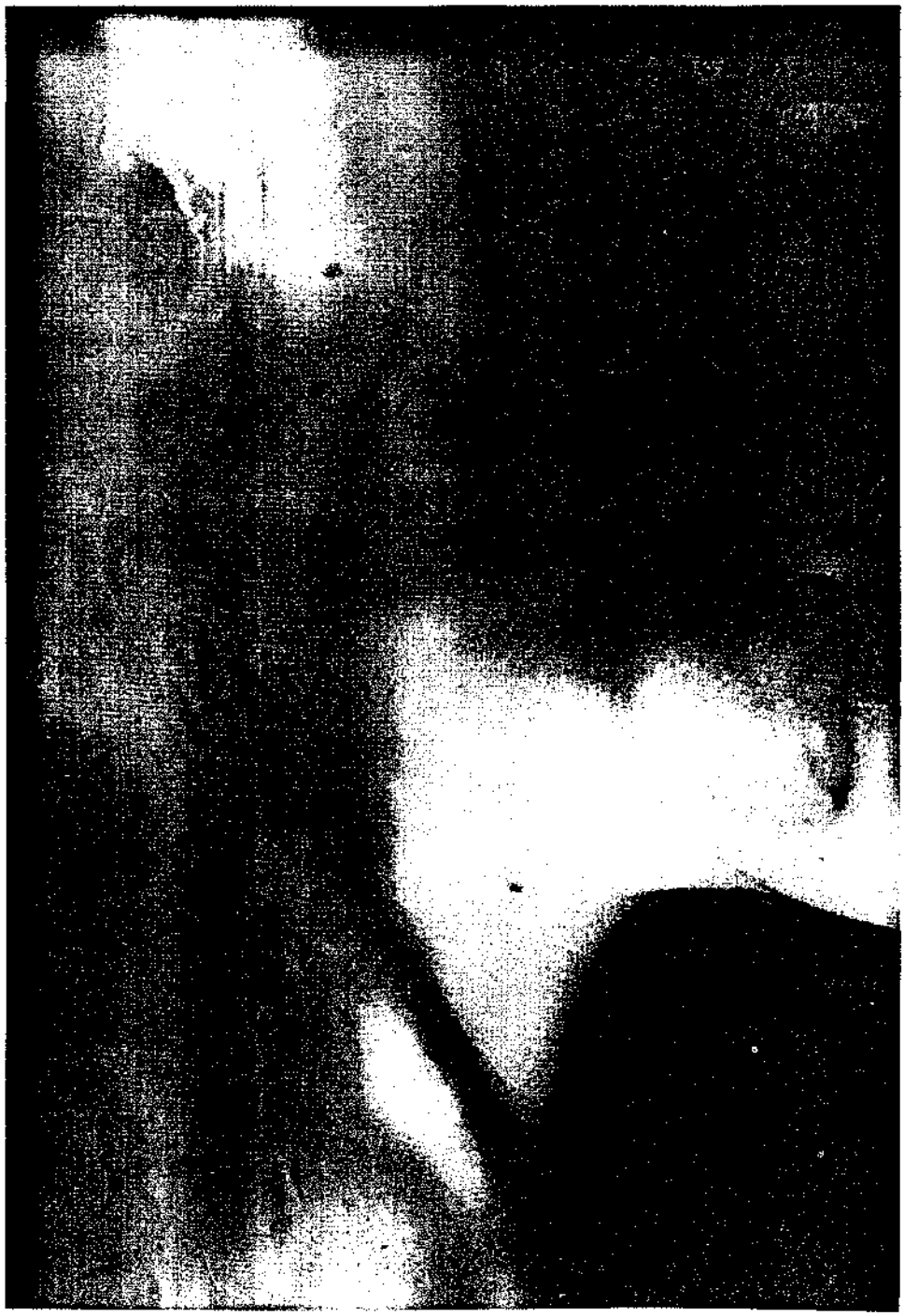
Underground once more, I can hear the drumming of plastic buckets through the subway, the clanging of shopping carts, and voices of impoverished musicians hoping that their talents will draw a crowd. The time spent waiting for the subway car to arrive passes by unnoticeably, as the tune of "White Christmas" plays through these platforms like a lullaby. Serenity.

Each year just before Christmas, my family used to rent condominiums in Pennsylvania and cram four families into three complexes for a snow-filled escape to the mountains. I'm sure my parents, aunts and uncles planned these trips with the intention of relaxing just before the rush of the holidays. However, between bickering among the younger children, crying atop a windy mountain, trying to locate lost snow boots, and listening to the constant banging of poles and skis through the living room, seemed to take the trip's original purpose was often turned into a project. These annual trips were nevertheless always fun and exciting, but not quite serene.

In downtown Manhattan, vibrant lights tangled through each tree lining the sidewalks. They are decorative necklaces for the skyscrapers that rise above them, imposing but dignified. Most trees radiate the traditional white light, but those surrounding the Central Park Cafe create a particularly spectacular sight. There are two large trees, brilliantly wrapped with lights as though their bark had disappeared. One is red, the other blue, symbolically reminding passersby of the patriotic spirit of the city. I cannot help feeling in harmony with the entire, enchanting city right there, full of tourists, locals, foreigners, and commuters.

Manhattan in December would not be complete without the famed Rockefeller Center. Although only one aspect of the whole, calming spirit, it is the cherry that tops the city's sundae of vibrancy. The extraordinary tree, imported each year from the west, towers over the skating rink. Its smooth, sleek surface is constantly filled with people of all ages who want their New York City holiday experience to culminate in a peaceful glide across the ice. Restaurants line the outskirts of the rink, and the children inside gaze through the steamy glass to watch others gracefully pass on their skates. Seeing their glowing red faces reflected against the pool of crystal white ice, I wish more than anything to project this image up to the skyline, and allow it to hover over this magical city at the height of a magical season.

Philip Giambuco



The Avalanche Effect

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Many years ago, my father built a mountain next to his bed.

Oscar Romero's The Violence of Love and James Agee's A Death in the Family form the base, upon which Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, Bill Bryson's A Short History of Nearly Everything and Lonely Planet's Spanish Phrasebook rest unsteadily. Countless other titles tilt sideways, protruding from the mountain like agitated puzzle pieces in a life-size game of Jenga, threatening to quiver and shake and fall gracelessly to the floor, becoming the scattered remains of a literary avalanche.

I once asked my father how many books he read each month.
"I start about twenty, and I finish about five," he said.

***

I left my father and his books behind when I boarded a plane bound for Belgium in August. That sounds quite poetic and European, so I'm writing it down as we circle the ring around Dublin for the third time in three hours. It's October, and my father has come to visit. He's fifty years old, and he's never been to Europe.

He arrived yesterday, dragging two large duffle bags down the cobblestone streets of Leuven, Belgium, sweating profusely through the fleece lining of the winter coat my mother had bought him because -- unlike New York -- "it's cold in Europe." Never mind that it was sixty degrees in both Long Island and Leuven yesterday.

I was nervous as I pedaled my bike in the direction of his hotel, sporting a new haircut and a trendy sweater from the H&M in town. I was European, and I needed him to know it. Still, I thought, as I rode the elevator up to his room, it's strange to apply lipstick for your father, no matter how long it's been since you last saw him.

My father was in awe - of me, of Leuven -- of the entire European lifestyle. I gave him a tour of town, breezing through the sections that had become so familiar to me while my father took every opportunity to stop and gape at a gothic cathedral or take a picture of a person on a bike (people generally drive cars on Long Island). He had all the symptoms of a kid at Disney World for the first time, which both pleased and repulsed me.

I'm writing all this down, as my father drives on the left side of the road, stopping to ask which way from friendly Irishmen with thick brogues and no sense of direction. They all tell us to go "straight on, you can't miss it," lackluster instructions which my dad jots down on the yellow legal pad he keeps on him at all times, while I write more about my uneasiness having him here, on what I like to consider my territory.

Although I must admit that I've never been to Ireland either. My father wants to get in touch with our roots -- meet some strangers who claim to be our relatives -- and I'm more than willing to have a taste of true Guinness. But now I'm wondering if that will ever happen -- we just passed the hotel again. I notice that my dad's fleece-lined jacket is soaked and that I can almost see the River Liffy set in the reflection of his glasses.

After a few more wrong turns (one down a one-way street and almost into a pub), we reach the hotel and check into our room. My dad's eyes dart nervously from one empty corner to the next, as he realizes that there is no desk for him to sit and write at.

"What kind of hotel doesn't have a desk in the room?"

"That's Europe, Dad!" I want to yell.

Instead I step into the bathroom to brush my teeth. I don't feel like watching him touch his right hand to his neck to check his pulse. I know what's coming next. He's about to pick up the phone and call his answering service long distance. Ah, my father, the psychologist, whose patients frequently phone from rooftops. I wonder what he'll tell them from six thousand miles away - don't jump? I spit in the sink and open the door.

The phone is sitting neatly in its cradle, and my father is changing his socks. He looks up and smiles, a tense but familiar expression. I'll take it.

"Do you want to go get a drink?" he asks.

This is a big deal. Not only am I underage (at least according to the United States government, who can't stop me now), but I've only ever seen my father drink in isolated instances of Thanksgiving at my uncle's house in Boston -- and even then, it was non-alcoholic O'Doul's.

"I just need to change my sweater."

Five minutes later, we're walking "straight on" in the smoky, general direction of Temple Bar.

It becomes obvious that this is not my father's usual scene as we wind our way through the sea of human limbs wound tightly together on the top floor of Goggarty's, dodging trays of Guinness that float over our heads. He seems more concerned for me, however, protecting his daughter from the evil second-hand smoke that fogs his glasses and swirls through our lungs. I don't have the heart to tell him that I would be puffing away at the bar if he weren't here.

He finds us a place to sit next to the band that's setting up, but the tinny sound of the fiddle comes blaring over the speakers, and once again, my father's hand is soaring toward his neck to count the number of beats per second. I roll my eyes.

He reaches into the money belt that he insists on carrying ("New York is much more dangerous than Dublin, Dad!") and fumbles around for a wad of multicolored Euros. He admires the pastel shades of the tens and twenties — not for their aesthetic appeal, but rather for their ability to make great souvenirs.

"They're really so pretty. I'll have to keep a couple."

"Right, Dad."

I snatch a pink one and push my way toward the bar.

When I return, Guinness glasses in hand, my dad seems to have recovered from the initial shock of Irish pub life. His arms are folded, his head is cocked rather oddly to the left (like mine usually does when I'm content -- thank genetics), and he's tapping his foot rather forcefully, struggling to enjoy the screeching of the fiddle.

He sees me and suddenly, he's on his feet, smiling as he takes the beers and gestures rather wildly behind my head. I turn around to see the band smiling back, old men with ruddy, beer-glow cheeks and hardly any teeth, puffing smoke and nodding somewhat tiredly at my father. I sigh. Yes, I am the American's daughter.

One of my father's new friends in the band grabs the microphone and makes a muddled announcement over the crackling speakers and alcohol-affected crowd. I can't understand what he's saying, but my dad is

applauding and whistling — the happiest I've seem him all night. I begin to relax a little myself, cocking my head ever-so-slightly to the left.

But not for long. I look around and realize that every one in the pub is staring at me, including my father.

"I told them that you dance! They want you to dance!"

Nice work, Dad.

After financing fourteen years of Irish step dancing lessons -- suffering through every performance, from nursing homes to national competitions -- my father will finally get his money's worth. The problem is that I stopped those fourteen years of lessons five years ago and haven't strapped on a shoe or kicked up a heel since then.

The band members are growing impatient.

"Don't be shy! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a lovely lady from Long Island in America who wants to do a jig!"

The crowd cheers with unbridled enthusiasm, most of them dipping into their second or third pint, at least. I look at the band like they're crazy. This lovely lady's father wants her to do a jig -- she would rather drink her Guinness in the corner, thank you.

I grumble and grunt but eventually move to the small piece of dust-strewn floor the crowd has cleared for my "performance." The band wants to know what tempo I want, so I make up an arbitrary number ("120 sounds good"), and suddenly they're playing a triple-time jig at a speed of light I'm sure only Superman could tackle.

I start to move my feet, staring at the ground to make sure that they're still obeying my commands after all these years. For a while, I just feel like a mother cow in considerable pain, banging and stamping in some sort of interpretive dance before she gives birth. But I start to enjoy myself, remembering those nursing home days where the crowd was too old or too blind to care if I got all the steps right or kept time to the music. These people are the same way, I reason: too drunk to care.

So I improvise the dance, sweeping the dust across the floor as I move center stage. I kick my legs high, and the people whoop. I pause and stamp, and they whistle. This is the best (if not most out-of-breath) moment of my dancing career.

I turn and jump (the crowd goes wild) and start to skip over to another section of the bar when I notice my father staring at me from our corner spot. He has a hypnotized look on his face, which worries me (Too much smoke? Racing pulse?), but as I dance closer, I can see wet spots on his cheeks.

He's so proud of me, his American daughter, that he's crying.

I look down at the floor because I cannot look into his eyes. They're the same happy-but-sad green color of my own, and his pride stings me, rips my insides apart and makes me want to cry too — though I can't explain why.

The music finally ends. I'm sweating and shaking, looking for an exit; I mutter something to my dad about wanting to go home, which he can hardly hear above the applause. He looks so disappointed.

"But you looked terrific out there. I took some wonderful pictures. Why wouldn't you look up?"

I'm out the door. The night air feels cold and black, if you can feel color, but at least I can breathe again. My legs are throbbing as I stumble back toward the hotel. I'm trying to convince myself that if I just shower and go to sleep, everything will be all right the next morning, but I know it's just my muscles that will go back to feeling normal. And somehow I know that I'll cry in the shower -- side-splitting sobs for my fifty-year-old father who has read about the world his entire life but has never seen it until now. My father, who prefers O'Doul's to Guinness, who is happy to skip the Irish stew and chew on a greasy onion ring from Burger King. Who thinks Euros are "pretty."

In August, I left my father and his books behind...it doesn't sound poetic or European anymore. It just makes me want to cry.

I turn the water off and make sure my father is sleeping peacefully,

jetlagged and unaware of me or the world that he has entered, before I climb into bed and pull a pillow over my head.

There will be no more dancing on this trip.

Meg Ginnetty

My One-Eyed World

I cannot see. Or at least not the way others can. I can see this paper, these words, and these letters. But I know these things do not appear for me as they do for you. My world is a little more lopsided, a little less dimensional. But I don't mind. My blindness is something I've grown into because it's something I've grown up with. My blindness began as a joke. Not a cruel or funny joke, or one that I was even aware of. It began as an innocent joke, as when a child uses a curse word without knowing what it really means. I didn't know what the words astigmatism or bifocals really meant when I was seven. I didn't know what a hindrance glasses were to those who wore them. All I knew at seven years old was that I wanted glasses. I wanted to be an attention grabber, a conversation starter. I wanted my second grade teacher to say, "Look class, Dayna has new glasses. Don't they look nice?" And I wanted the class to smile at me and say, "Yeeesss Teacher."

This obsession began one day in what I'd like to consider my "B.G." period, that is, "before glasses." I was sitting in the noisy lunchroom eating by myself. I was an odd child without any friends. I preferred to watch people rather than interact with them. Later I would consider my love for watching to be my gift for observing details. But at that time, I frightened people, especially my parents. I used to sit at the dinner table and scoop peas into my mouth silently, just watching my mother and father. First they wanted to know why I wasn't trying to feed the dog peas (I liked peas so much as I child that I later developed hives from eating too many). And then they wanted to know why I didn't speak, why I only watched.

That fateful day in second grade began with more watching. I studied Heather Giglia eating lunch by herself. Heather did not only have glasses, but she had braces as well, an added bonus. Looking back on it, poor Heather obviously didn't have friends because those appendages made her a social outcast. But what did I care? I was alone already, and I actually enjoyed it! Yes, I enjoyed being alone as a child. I never felt lonely. I entertained myself with great thoughts and schemes. Schemes such as

how to trick my parents into buying me glasses. One look at Heather's frames (with a swirling pink and blue pattern) and I knew that was what I wanted, what I needed. I set out to deceive my parents into thinking I was near-sighted or far-sighted. At that age I didn't know about irony, about retinas that detach; I didn't know that I had surgery as a child because I had been born cross-eyed. I didn't know that what I saw as the world was not what everyone else saw. How ironic that I liked to watch the world when I could only watch it from one good eye. My one-eyed world.

My lack of friends was not solely caused by my habit of watching. My obsession with reading also contributed. In my mind, I had friends, they just happened to be fictional characters. I used to lock myself in my room and sit for hours going through the popular series of the time, "Babysitter's Club" and "Sweet Valley Twins". These books gave me great "how to" ideas: how to dye your little sister's hair green with food coloring, how to earn money selling lemonade, and how to trick your parents into thinking you need glasses. Through a careful study of the "Babysitter's" book entitled, "Mallory's New Glasses," I came to understand the divine secret behind poor vision: squinting.

I started squinting when I was reading, riding my bike, waiting for the bus, drying the dishes. It was as if I was about to become one of those children, the kind that are allergic to sunlight, the kind who can only come out to play at night. My mother, working against the fear that she would have to transform my bedroom into something like a dark-room and buy me a flashlight, responded to the squinting by saying, "Maybe we should go see the eye doctor. You might need glasses."

At least I thought my mother noticed my squinting. I thought that was why I was being sent to the optometrist. But in actuality, she hadn't noticed the squinting. Or at least she wasn't really concerned. Instead, she was worried about my falling. I fell all the time. Falling down the stairs at home had become routine for me. I was so accustomed to the act that I forgot to cry. This was not normal, this was worse than the watching, even worse than the squinting.

So I got glasses. My glasses seemed to be the largest pair of frames ever put on a young child. Light pink glasses that perched on the edge of my nose. Looking back, I'm fairly certain those were adult frames. But at the time, I just thought bigger glasses meant I was that much cooler. Yes, I thought I was cool. Just like Heather Giglia. While most kids do not want glasses, do not want to be called "four-eyes," I thought everything about glasses was fascinating. The glasses case. The glasses cleaner.

Pushing the glasses up on your nose. I adored my glasses, even though I wasn't far-sighted or near-sighted. I did need glasses, in a way. I needed one lens for my right eye, the good eye. It was my good eye even though I had astigmatism in it. I was blind in my left eye, legally blind for New York State. There was a pane of glass in the left lens of my glasses. Later I would think about getting one of those round glass pieces Englishmen used to hold up to their eye and put in their pockets attached to a chain. A monocle.

After I found out I was legally blind in one eye, I began to dread eye exams. I despised the physicals in gym and the eye charts in the little machines. Okay, honey, now close your right eye and tell me which line you can read. I'm sorry? None of them? That first letter? Come on, you know what it is. Of course I knew what it was. It was always an "E"! But if they ever decided to change it I wouldn't have known. I always wanted to lie, pretend I could see it. I knew it was there. But where would that get me? To a second line of unknown letters.

This blindness was something I got used to, something I learned how to master as I grew up. My years were marked by adapting to not seeing. Someone recently asked me why I just didn't get an operation to fix it. Well, there is no operation to reconnect your retina. But even if there was, I know I wouldn't want one. I would have to learn how to see again. I am afraid that the world would either pop out at me or sink back in, into a depth that is foreign, unknown to me. It has taken years of hard work and practice to adapt to my unbalanced vision. I am sure it would take years to adapt to balanced vision.

Most children at the age of two are learning and exploring language by stringing words together and exploring spatial relations by walking. At the age of two I was learning spatial relations by falling. My most significant fall was the "fish-tank" scare. Yes, I fell into a fish tank. Feet first. I remember opening the lid of the fish tank as I perched on our rail-less stairs. But I don't remember how I actually managed to fall into the aquarium. My father found me wading in the tank, crying. I could have drowned, something I wouldn't think about until later. Children don't think about death. For years the fish story was just a funny story to tell. There was the "fishy smell" that I gave off for weeks later, the bath my father gave me to try and rid me of it, and my mother's distrust of my father's care-taking abilities. I was only two, and I didn't know that other children hadn't fallen into fish tanks, and that their only encounters with fish and water generally involved baby pools and bathtubs. My falling experienced worsened as I grew up. As a toddler I used to fall down the

stairs two, three, sometimes seven times a day. I just got used to it. And while my parents would come running, as good parents should, when they heard my small body tumbling down the stairs, they would find me in a heap at the bottom, but not crying. Instead, I would be getting up off my knees and palms as if that was the way you should go down the stairs. I didn't know that other kids cried when they fell down the stairs. I became indifferent to falling. It was like doing somersaults in my backyard. When I was in middle school, however, I despised falling. I had gotten over my whole "I like to be alone" thing from elementary school and now all I wanted was be accepted. I wanted to be cool (I realized that glasses weren't cool by this time), but that was somewhat difficult since I was "that girl who fell a lot." I dreaded school field trips because they inevitably involved stairs. I would fall down those unexpected steps at the auditoriums, restaurants, or theaters while the other kids watched the movie or ate their dinner.

I began to calculate my stairs, formulate plans for how to manage them. Most people in the world cannot account for all of the steps that they have walked down. I can. It's strange that others don't notice the stairs the way I do, although I suppose most people don't have to. But still, I cannot imagine not wanting to see something that I could, even something as unexciting as stairs. I can even classify certain types of stairs: there are the narrow solid-colored stairs that appear like a ramp; there are the uneven and poorly constructed stairs that I need to figure out, crack the code to, find the pattern to their unevenness; and then there is the unanticipated single stair. Like a joke, like someone popping up from behind a corner. They are the lurking obstacles I can never quite outmaneuver.

There are obviously no stairs in the woods. And for most middle-schoolers, the most common things to fear about backpacking through woods include snakes, bears, ghosts, and your guide waking you up at six in the morning. However, when I was in middle school and went backpacking through the Allegheny National Park for eight days, I feared walking, particularly in complete darkness. My fear of darkness was rooted in not knowing what was out there, which of course, is quite common. But while for most kids my age that means supernatural forces, for me it meant divots in the ground. While I had learned how to deal with man-made booby-traps, such as stairs through classification and practice, I was inexperienced with the naturally formed booby-traps. I fell into holes created by various animals of various sizes. Just as there is no understandable pattern to the stars in the sky, such is there no pattern to the

varying hollows and mounds of the Earth. Is that what most people contemplate when looking at the stars? Their unpredictable pattern and symmetry with the holes of the Earth? No, I think most people are looking for a shooting star or Halley's comet. The Earth can be frightening for me because it is chaotic, like the stars. I came to think of that forest ground and the holes in the Earth like imprints from the sky, as if the stars and Earth had once, long ago, touched, and the holes were impressions left by the stars. Like children's hand impressions in clay.

I adapted to the forest, but only through reliance on others. I woke my friends up in the middle of the night if I needed to pee. I grabbed their shoulders and they led me around the holes, the holes they'd been blessed to see. I didn't want to wake them up. In fact, I would lay in my sleeping bag contemplating whether I should or not. But I came to accept the limitations of my blindness. I didn't care about being cool anymore. I understood that there would always be things that I couldn't do as well as anyone else. Driving is one of these things. I assume that for most people in their twenties, driving is not a terrifying experience. In fact, many of my friends actually say they "like driving," and miss their cars if they cannot drive for extended periods of time. But I cannot see the road the way they do. I am sure that if an employee at the DMV could take a glimpse at the world as I see it they would not allow me to drive. But in New York State a prospective driver is permitted to be legally blind in one eye. This might explain the troubling state of drivers on the roads these days. I include myself in this group, of course, but I must say, in defense of all those that are legally blind in one eye, that our driving makes sense in our one-sided worlds. Roads, interstates, and expressways were made for the two-eyed, not the one-eyed. Just as those "magic eye" pictures and red-and-blue paper glasses for 3D movies were not made for us.

In fact, if I were allowed to design roads I would make them a little more "handicap accessible." I would, for instance, eliminate medians. I have been lifted not once, but twice, onto a median because I miscalculated the distance between the left side of my car and that gigantic slab of concrete. At the time I thought I was in the middle of my own death, and that I was going to be taken to heaven by my car, a cruel and ironic joke. But once the left side of my car slammed back down to the ground, I realized that I had only driven up onto the median, that cursed invention for the one-eyed. There is nothing more frightening than not knowing where you are going, what turns or twists the road up ahead may have in store for you, and how your vehicle and yourself may be challenged. Driving in the dark is like navigating myself through that night forest in

Allegheny, except with a even more at stake. Instead of traveling at the speed of footsteps per hour, I am traveling at the speed of miles per hour, much faster than I want to be.

Most of the time that's how I feel just walking around, living. I feel like I am traveling faster than I want to be. I want to slow down and let other people pass me. I would rather be sitting in the passenger side, watching the world move past in colors mixing together like paint. Part of me is still that child that likes to watch things silently. These days I not only accept my blindness, but I challenge it. I challenge the limitations. I play field hockey, I don't inspect all of the staircases I go down, and sometimes I even drive in the dark. I've spent all of life adapting to my blindness, and now I feel as though I am realizing the benefits of this adapting. I still fall down stairs. But I don't worry about being cool and I don't worry about asking others for help. In fact, I enjoy telling my story. My blindness has made my world different from everyone else's and my perspective is unique. I may not see the world and these words on the page exactly the same way as you, but at least I see them. I don't know what your world looks like, but I'm not really jealous of it. My world is suited just fine for me.

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