



The Summerset Review

Spring 2005

# The Somerset Review

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Spring 2005

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# The Somerset Review

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## Editors' Notes

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Something we take pride in, at *The Somerset Review*, is our effort to bring out new voices, selecting material for publication in an unbiased manner. We continually encourage unheard writers to submit to us. This includes students and those who, thus far, have kept their manuscripts in a hidden drawer of their bureau. If you believe in your work and are passionate about the craft, we want to hear from you.

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Our thanks goes out, once again, to Jason Sanford and all those involved in the decision process of *storySouth's* annual Million Writers Award. We're very appreciative of having four stories which originally appeared in our journal selected as Notable Online Stories of 2004: Julie Ann Castro's "Morning on Carrer Quintana," William Starr Moake's "At Home in the Antipodes," Michael F. Smith's "Anywhere," and Mark Vender's "El Paraiso." Congratulations to these writers.

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It's possible our Lit Pick of the Quarter will be interpreted as a plug for a memoir, although we'll admit with regret that we haven't read the entire book yet. "Vectors: Arrows of Discontent," by Amy Benson, is a wonderful piece in Issue 29.2 of *New Orleans Review* and is part of her first book, *The Sparkling-Eyed Boy: A Memoir of Love, Grown Up*, published in 2004 by Houghton Mifflin. It won Bread Loaf's 2003 Bakeless Prize in Creative Nonfiction. Speaking for the short piece we read and adored all on its own, here is an excerpt:

"Summers are people who spend summers in the same place away from home every year. Summers are a special flavor—like cotton candy back when you could only get it at fairs or the circus. You know the fair will happen every year, and every year the taste is at once familiar and brand new. Away from home, summers have an opportunity to be lighter than air, to shrink away when you try to touch them. We squandered our spun sugar."

There's a great lineup of stories for you in this Spring 2005 issue, and we hope you'll give them a try.

We start off with an American woman in Northern Moravia and Kazakhstan. Erin Anderson's essay, "Cross-Cultural Cohabitation," visits the differences in cultures experienced at first through thrift, and then through Peace Corps assignment. For those of us with digital television in our bedrooms and databases of dinner recipes in our kitchens, you'll learn of another world out there sharing the same planet.

The writer in each of us might appreciate "Eddie," by Shellie Zacharia, a short short that eloquently explores the writing process, bringing out that special relationship between a writer and her characters, so special that by the end we find her calling to them for strength.

You might find a Holden Caulfield—type feel to Mark X. Cronin's "My Father of Geometry," a short story where a young man struggles for meaning and independence through the admissions and over-protectiveness of his parents. His father's past unravels as the boy reads poetry from a storage room, a rearrangement of the past changing the present before his eyes.

We're off to Germany in Elise Davis' short story, "Typical American," where we see some business, local life, flirting, and self-doubt. "Having an affair would be very cosmopolitan. Everybody had affairs. Only Americans got worked up about it," says Helena—the protagonist, who affectionately takes on a different name in the end: Sauerkraut.

Last but not least is a short short by Carl R. Brush with some crafty styling. His story, "Following Barry Bonds," puts us on the road headed to Arizona for baseball's spring training, but every trip may have its detours, and every fan's quest to track a new home run record-in-the-making may have its distractions.

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Once again we'll be participating in the CLMP Book Fair in Soho in June. Stop by and receive your free *Summerset Review* bookmark. Visit the [CLMP web site](#) for date, time, and place. As we said last year, anyone in the New York area with a love of all things literary should make an effort to attend; many quality literary magazines and staff members are on hand, and most issues are available for purchase at ridiculously-reduced rates. Bring a large backpack!

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*The Summerset Review*

Joseph Levens – Editor  
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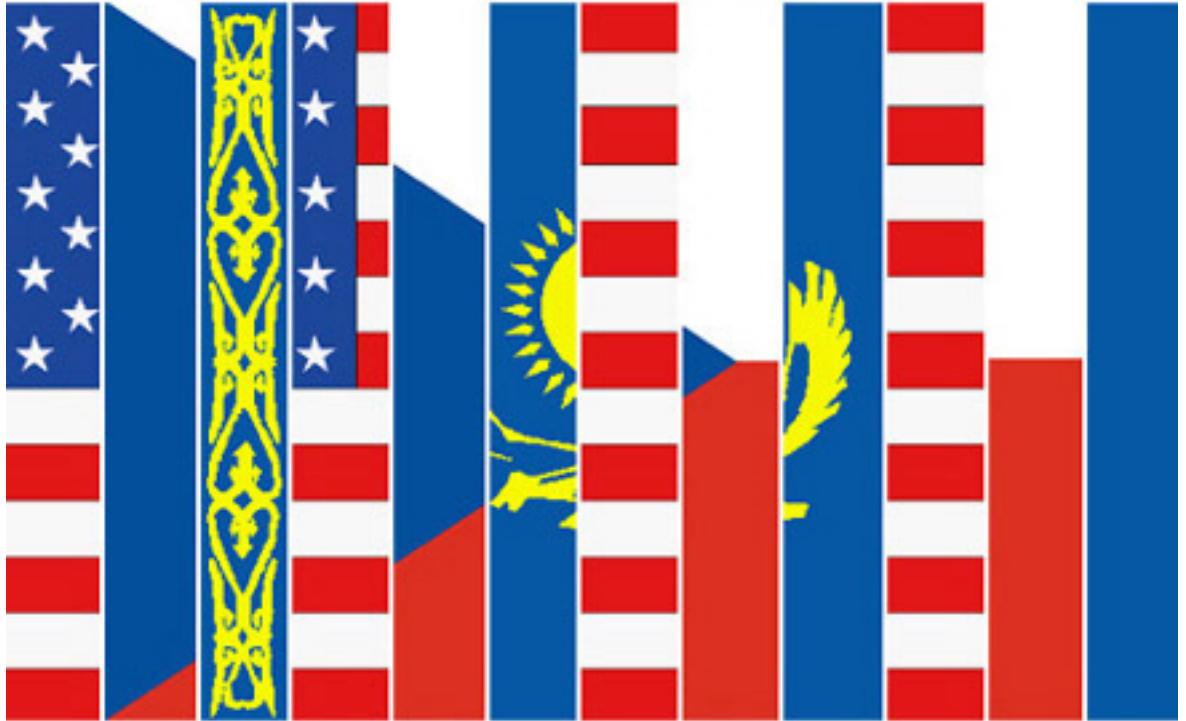
A literary journal released quarterly on the 15th of March, June, September, and December. Founded in 2002, the journal is a not-for-profit Internet magazine devoted to the review and publication of unsolicited short stories and essays. Member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP). All correspondence and submissions should be emailed to [editor@summersetreview.org](mailto:editor@summersetreview.org). Postal mailing address: 25 Summerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA.

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# The Summerset Review

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## Cross-Cultural Cohabitation



by Erin Anderson

II

"Did you get a job yet?" asked Mrs. Novakova, the Czech widow from whom I rented a room. My immediate response was to bristle, thinking her question implied I was a no-account lay-about and what was I doing without a job? But how could Mrs. Novakova, a sixty-something former communist, understand? I was a thirty-nine-year-old American woman who had never given birth, never supplied workers or soldiers for the state. I had no job because I was taking a break from teaching; therefore, I was not helping to mold future workers or soldiers. And I was spending money I had not "earned." If I had been a more secure capitalist, I would not have felt guilty about inheriting money, about my father's early heart attack, about his belief that red meat signified success.

When my landlady asked about my employment status, I was living in Northern Moravia in a town with a seventeenth-century clock tower. I liked this town. I liked that it was not completely ruled by the automobile. I liked the historic center with a pedestrian-only street; the green spaces, orchestrated nature; the long, curving park, a former moat, with its promenade of magnificent trees. I liked the fountain circled by petunias. I

liked the statue over this fountain—the strong, naked woman, her socialist thigh suspended in forward movement.

This was a perfect place for my late-thirties identity crisis, a career break, a fling of adolescent lounging. It was bargain-basement Eastern Europe after the fall of communism and before entry into the European Union. And it was decked with architecture spurred by classy one-upmanship, the greed and pride of the aristocracy, built by the sweat of unorganized, illiterate, disenfranchised serfs. But that was another story. It was ironic that the only place I could afford to live in Europe was with a woman who had worked all her life.

When Hitler took over her country, Mrs. Novakova was seven years old. Everything was registered—every chicken and every cow, and a designated amount had to go to the state. Ration coupons were exchanged for one liter of milk to last three days, ten deciliters of candy for one month. She lived under Hitler until she was fourteen. At nineteen, she married. Then her life was directed by her husband and communist decree. She worked as a bookkeeper and dispatcher by day, but she spent all of her free time helping to build apartments. She had helped construct this building, fetching materials for workers straddling scaffolding. Then her husband designed their vacation cottage, and she'd helped him build that. By the time her son was in high school, they were ready to build again—this time an apartment for him.

Even Mrs. Novakova's recreational activities were industrious. She showed me dried flowers from a linden tree that she used to make a sweat-inducing tea. "I learned about these things from the cleaning women where I work now. But I never had time for such things before. I was always at the construction site in the evenings." She showed me the soft pearl-gray wool she'd knitted and stretched across an old derby of her husband's, making the hat feminine enough for her to wear. "But I would like to buy myself some new things when I retire," she said.

While she inched her way toward retirement, I had plunged headlong into an economically non-productive life, and I was plagued by guilt and insecurity: guilt over just hanging out in Europe without a job; insecurity about renting in a country that usually charged foreigners much more than the going rate; insecurity about being told by Mrs. Novakova that I should not tell anyone I was living there because she didn't want to pay taxes on my rent; and insecurity in the face of her complaints about how expensive everything was becoming which I heard as overtures to the raising of my rent.

"My, aren't we a fine lady!" she remarked one day as I headed out the door. "You're going to lunch, aren't you?" she asked.

I enjoyed restaurant dining. I enjoyed not having to think about buying groceries, or cutting and cooking and cleaning up afterward. I enjoyed the variety of tastes at my disposal. And eating out was what my father had done to prove he was middle-class. Restaurant dining became the highlight of his once-a-month paycheck-weekend in an upscale steakhouse with a fireplace and bar.

I gave a little laugh at Mrs. Novakova's question, but instead of maintaining my dignity and my distance, I ended up defending myself. "I only eat a salad and a roll."

"Really?"

"I don't cook much meat for myself. You know, I'm afraid to leave the meat leftovers on the balcony. The weather is sometimes not cold enough," I said, turning my defense into a mild attack at her frugality because she did not use her refrigerator in the winter.

It did not bother me that she was privy to personal aspects of my life, how late I slept, how often I ate out, or how many times I flushed the toilet. But what she thought of these things, the censure underlying her reactions, a

censure that had been necessary for her to survive her life, was not necessary for me to enjoy mine. And she could not help but compare my residence to those of the college students who had preceded me. They had not stayed in the apartment all day, using the overhead light on cloudy days. They hadn't even been there on the weekends, taxing the water heater, locking and unlocking the door, incrementally wearing and tearing her world that had known only lack and limitation.

When my father died in his sleep, he was fifty-three years old, just two years before his early retirement and the full-time attainment of his dream, which had not been to live in a Central European town, but in a trailer in the foothills of the Uinta Mountains in eastern Utah. After he died, I stayed in that trailer, smelled the dew-slicked cedar trees, felt the heartbeat rush of a buck's hooves pound the ground as he chased the dawn. My father's death taught me the importance of living my dreams as soon as possible. And I had the courage to do that. But did I have the discipline to enjoy them?

When Mrs. Novakova raised my rent, telling me the six dollars a month extra was really a repair fund for the television in my room, I decided to leave. What good was twice the leisure when it was sickled over with the pale cast of anxiety? Although my new rent would be double what I'd been paying, it was still only \$94 in 1998, providing a fully furnished apartment with skylights, a fireplace and a balcony. And I had Mrs. Novakova to thank for the tang of my new freedoms. Three months of her increasing censure had primed me to enjoy my first hot soak in the tub, my first gaze into the flames of my fireplace, my first breakfast on a sunny balcony overlooking a ripening field of barley. Until, of course, habit and inurement drained these ecstasies, and the dog downstairs attacked my shopping bag, and my lower back went out. But that was another story.

One day, I passed Mrs. Novakova on the street.

"You should have kept working," she said. "You can do your other things later."

"No," I answered. "There is no later. You wait and wait, and then your life is gone. Now is my later."

"I went shopping," she continued, raising her shopping bag. "I went to the bazaar. I bought a pair of black stretch pants like the kind you wear," she said. And I remembered that one of the things Mrs. Novakova had said she was going to do for herself after she retired was buy some new clothes. I did not think she would be as wracked with guilt over this self-indulgence as I had been over my new life in Europe. She was more disciplined than I was.



After I'd had a chance to live one of my dreams, I joined the Peace Corps. I thought it would be a good way to travel and learn about culture and language. And in the process, I could aid others in the pursuit of their goals—what we call in American English a win-win situation.

When the Kazakhstani Peace Corps staff asked about the type of host family I would like to live with after training, I suggested a widow. It was something I was familiar with. So, in the eastern city of Ust-Kamenogorsk, Alla was found, this Russian woman, grieving her dead husband only five months before my arrival. Sixty-four-year-old Alla, a retired retail manager of industrial clothing, would be my landlady and cook for half a year, as stipulated by Peace Corps contract.

I knew I could change my host family if the situation became untenable; Alla had grown up with Soviet institutions. She did not realize that if I did not like something about my living conditions, something—or someone—would have to change.

One morning, she placed a bowl filled with brown food in front of me. I recognized pieces of meat amidst kernels of buckwheat, but these pieces were soft and frothy.

"What kind of meat is this?" I asked with trepidation, thinking such a question might be received as a criticism, and I did not want to ignite any tension so early in our obligatory relationship. My fears were unwarranted, however. I underestimated the stubbornness of relationships in a society where people were assigned jobs by the state and had to learn to live with colleagues and neighbors for the rest of their lives, tolerating, loving, hating, ignoring each other. I underestimated my landlady's threshold of disregard.

Her back to me as she stood at the sink, I removed the meat matter from my mouth. "What kind of meat is this?" I repeated.

"Beef."

"But . . . what part of the body?"

"The lung."

"Excuse me, but I am not used to it," I said and pushed the meat to one side, picking out the kernels of wheat.

"We are a poor country. We are used to eating all parts of the body."

I could say nothing to this.

"I suppose you won't eat any of this liver I bought, either?"

"No. Thank you."

And because I did not make it completely clear what foods I liked and disliked, or maybe because I did not repeat myself enough or raise my voice loud enough, or it could be that she did not really listen anyway, Alla continued to prepare food the way she always had, dishing up the amount she thought I should eat, always so assured that she was adding the right amount of lard and salt. I continued to have occasion to reject her offerings—like a pork-and-garlic Jell-O for breakfast, when I had to again announce, "Excuse me, I am not used to it."

She thought she was a good cook. She was proud of her ability not only to nourish, but also to please. During the week, she brought food to a sixty-two-year-old neighbor in the hospital dying of intestinal cancer. On weekends, she cooked for her sixteen-year-old grandson. Then a mouthful of baloney gave me a week of diarrhea, and I could not tell her I was not used to it. I had to tell her the truth. "I am afraid of it."

This baloney was not cheap. It was almost as expensive as cheese, but she told me there was another sausage she could buy for me. I did not have to be afraid. And I ate the mildly spiced sausage dotted with small balls of fat, which I rolled around in my mouth before spitting out. But my aversion became more than I could control, and I eventually asked her not to serve me any more sausage.

And then she really did not know how to please me. She finally asked with an obvious intent to listen. I repeated what I had already told her. I liked porridge for breakfast, and I did not have to eat meat at every meal, but I liked chicken.

A few days later, she placed a plate before me. On it were four pieces of chicken. They were chicken necks. I picked up a slick cylinder and tried to flesh out the spinal bones, the meat sticking to my fingers, which I wiped off into my soup. She told me I was supposed to separate the bones from the meat in my mouth. My mouth. My mouth, a portal of primary importance, was learning a lot, not just the feel of new foods, but also the shape of new sounds. But I still needed to learn how to sharpen sounds in order to cut

through Alla's resistance to change.

She eventually learned what I would eat, mostly porridge, soup and bread, and she no longer joked about how afraid I was of everything. I supplemented my diet with vitamins, juice, and yogurt. But even when I liked what was in front of me, I limited my portions. And when I professed a lack of appetite, Alla offered me a shot of vodka as an aperitif. She was doing her best within her frame of reference, within her world, where being overweight and alcoholic were the behaviors she had not only learned to live with, but also perpetuated.

After three months, a new problem arose, and I did not know why I had not noticed it before. Maybe the sounds of traffic coming through my open window drowned it out. Now it was cold, and the window was shut. It wasn't another earthquake, like the few mild jolts back in September that cracked some plaster, hurled a few ceramic tiles, and sent people running out into the streets. No. It was her snoring. Roof-rattling, seismic snoring sawing through the makeshift wall.

So I woke up. And when I woke up, I moved. And when I moved, an iron spring in my bed clanged, and the snoring stopped. This wall between us, a white membrane that separated us visually, was quite permeable auditorially. We could hear each other sigh.

The next morning, Alla was grumpy and accusatory. Why did I wake up so early?

I sipped my coffee and paused. "I could not sleep," I finally said.

"Why not?"

"Why do you think?"

She also paused. "Was I snoring?"

"Yes."

She told me her snoring was so bad at one time that she tried tying her jaw to the top of her head to keep her mouth closed, but it did not help.

"Oh, well," she said. "It's only three more months. You'll survive."

My familiar panic in the face of her resistance to solving my problems bubbled to the surface. "How can I survive without sleep?" I asked, "Without sleep, how will I work, how will I think? No. It is not possible. It is not possible to live three months without sleep." I was no longer an American touchy about my consumer affluence, come to rescue the poor and downtrodden of a developing economy, afraid of committing social blunders. Now my voice was as implacable as a Russian face on a public tram.

She grudgingly admitted that she could sleep on the sofa in her living room. Ah! I had won! But no, that night she did not sleep on her sofa. I wore earplugs. When that didn't work, I wore a hat over my earplugs. When that didn't work, I proposed hanging a rug on the wall to muffle the sound. She only said, "No. The rug won't help. It is too small." I proposed moving furniture against the wall. She only said the furniture was too heavy. I removed all the glass and chinaware from the bureau and inched it across the floor, positioning it directly on the spot where I knew her head was. And when that didn't work, I dragged my bedding into the kitchen, shut the door and plopped down on the floor, only to be kept awake by the refrigerator motor.

After she saw me dragging my bedding back into my room the next morning, I reminded her that she had said she could sleep on the sofa, and she agreed. I forced this woman to leave her bed. And I finally slept through the night. But still, the problem had not been completely solved. The next night, the familiar sound again rumbled through the wall, and I got up and went into the living room. The sofa had been made up, but Alla had not

gotten that far. Sensing my presence as I stood in her bedroom, she looked up from her bed, disoriented.

"You're not going to sleep on the sofa, are you?" I asked sadly.

"Yes I will! Right now! I will!" she said, as she scrambled to get up.

The next morning she was grumpy, and I doubted the sustainability of this situation. She had as much right to sleep in her own bed as I had to a good night's sleep.

On the third night, she slept on the sofa without my prompting, and in the morning, I asked her what she thought. "Will this be a problem? Will you be able to sleep on the sofa for three months?"

"I'll get used to it," she said, and I wondered if the pride Russians took in their ability to endure suffering was working to my advantage.

"There is another apartment I can go to," I said, finally getting through to her that my contract did not force me to undergo the degree of social contortions she had endured in her life.

"No. There won't be a problem."

That settled, she confessed that on the second night on the sofa, she rolled off onto the floor. "Did you hear me? Did I wake you?" And because she laughed, I laughed. It was the first time in thirteen weeks we laughed together.

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After almost four months, our relationship became relatively harmonious. She seemed grateful for this "job" of hers—getting up with me every weekday morning to serve hot porridge and boil two eggs for my sack lunch, which also included a slice of cheese and an apple. After I came home from work, dinner was ready at six o'clock, right after her early evening soap opera was over. Sometimes she sat with me. Our conversations mostly consisted of my checking in on her life—how her eighty-four-year-old aunt was doing, or if her grandson had skipped any more classes. Then I retired to my room where I read or listened to my radio. After I did a cursory reading of the local paper, I gave it to her so she could fill out the crossword puzzles. And she let me know when "The Forbidden Zone" was on TV—a "reality" show from Moscow of hidden-camera shots showing neighbors trying to poison each other's pets and unfaithful spouses taking advantage of empty summer cottages. At the weekend, she would ask me, "Can we sleep in tomorrow?"

"Of course!"

I probably should have been amazed that harmony grew between us at all, two women of different generations, from different parts of the world, from systems with very different political, cultural, and dietary beliefs. What I needed to realize was that language was an easy barrier to overcome, a matter of learning new vocabulary and new grammatical constructions. What was much harder was learning how to shape stories to make them relevant across cultures.

During my first few weeks in town, as I was getting to know the city, I wanted to share details of my discoveries. I talked about the free concerts I attended at the Palace of the Metallurgists, or the depiction of the American West in a children's play. But Alla did not seem interested, responding with a gruff grunt, if at all. And when she told me negative stories about the people in her life, their illnesses, their drinking, and their drug use, I heard these as evidence of failure, proof that these people did not know how to live their lives. Weren't people responsible for making their lives successful? Couldn't bad habits be changed, addictions recognized, confessed, and dealt with at twelve-step meetings? Of course, I suspected there were no twelve-

step meetings here, and just as little awareness of codependency and enabling behaviors, but consciously suspending judgment when hearing about other peoples' "bad luck" was not the same as being warmed by these tales.

Then I wondered if Alla was sharing points of pain to illicit my sympathies. So I began to tell her more stories about my own pain. Instead of restaurant reviews, I told her of the losses in my life. One night in December, after coming back from a long walk along the dark, early evening streets, I told her that I had been listening to Christmas songs on my Walkman, and as I walked, I wanted to cry. I told her I was thinking about all the Christmases in my life, and that my worst Christmas was eleven years ago. That was when my dog got run over and my brother committed suicide. "That was my worst Christmas. But then my ex-husband drove eight hours to take me out to dinner. I will always be grateful to him for that."

And so, we used our pain to bond, and at her New Year's Eve dinner, during which I drank too much, and she and her daughter reminisced about her dead husband, amidst the food and drink and thoughts of death, I felt a gratitude for simply being alive. "Life is a gift!" I sloppily announced. And my landlady, having drunk past her own limit, echoed my words.

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I ended up staying with Alla just two weeks short of a full year. She had long since moved her bed into the living room, and I had long since taken my dietary destiny into my own hands. If some aspects had been different, if car exhaust had not routinely billowed into my room from the increasingly busy street, or if she had been more cooperative about adding an extension to her cable connection so I could watch TV in my room, I might have stayed. And despite the initial conflicts, I knew that if I was ever in dire need, she would have done the best she could to help me.

At least my rent had given her more purchasing options, funded the realization of her own dreams. It gave her two rows of natural-looking front teeth, and the confidence to smile more. It gave her a toilet made in China. And she was able to buy fish for her aunt, feed her grandson on the weekends and offer money to her daughter, whose paycheck was withheld for six months. She also was able to invite ten people to the dinner she prepared on the anniversary of her husband's death. But however accustomed Alla got to receiving my rent, my leaving was probably a relief. She would no longer have to yell at her grandson for getting drunk because now she would have less drinking money to give him. And she could return to her old self, not having to adjust to the living rhythms of a foreigner. She was one of a cadre of steel-willed women who had endured suffering and expected others to do the same. She was a Babushka.

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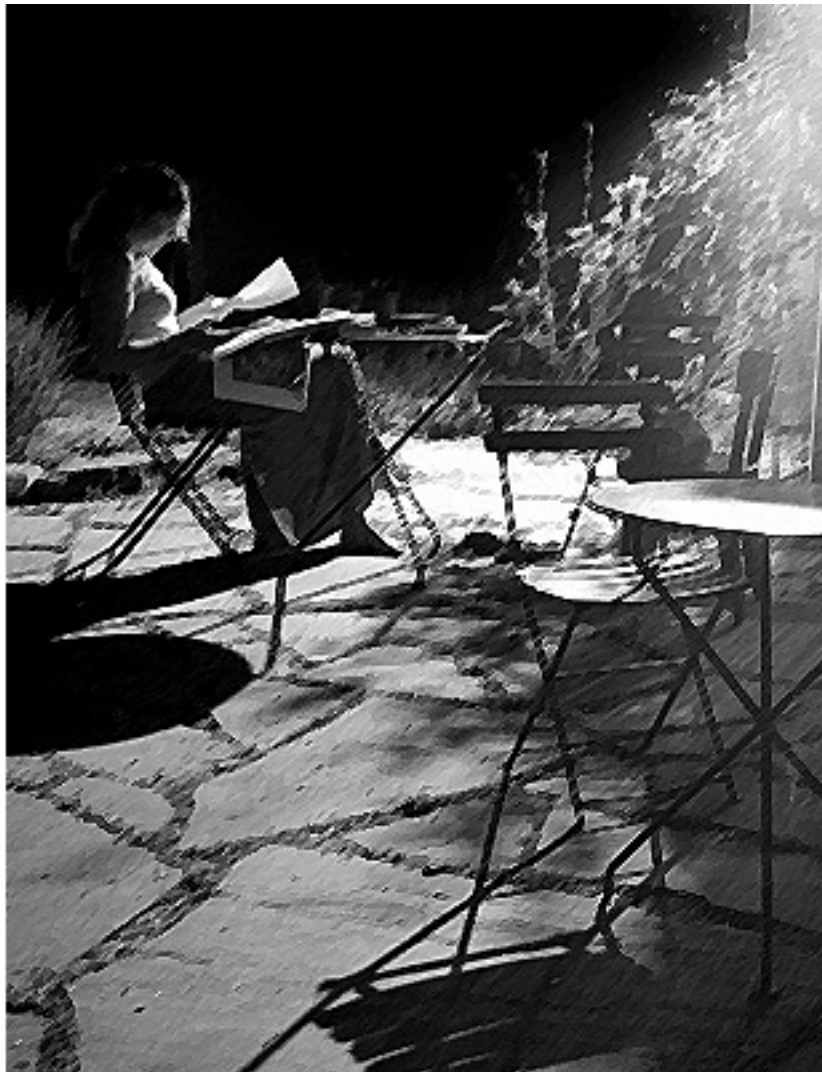
My first attempt to cohabitate with a former communist widow was motivated by thrift. My subsequent attempt was decreed by Peace Corps policy. But all the while, I learned how women engage in this process of modeling, helping, and sometimes thwarting each other—alternately spurred by loving generosity and stumped by fears of scarcity, as we all surged toward the survival of human life, the survival of our dreams.

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# The Summerset Review

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Eddie  
by  
Shellie  
Zacharia

Your story starts with a memory of third grade. Square dancing in P.E. class. *Honor your partner. Right hands around. Left hands around. Do-si-do. Head couple, down you go, take your gal to the rodeo.* You are a suburban child, you know nothing about the rodeo, but here is a chance to dance with a boy. You have a crush. You line up before the music starts, figuring how you can partner up with him. Your teacher notices, says something to you one day, bending her lanky body to meet your ear. It is something like, "I see you have a little crush."

His name, the crush, was Greg. For your story, you change it to George, then you think it is too similar. You choose Tony. But then Tony reminds you of someone else, so you hunt through a book of baby names, looking at Xavier, Denton, Ikabod, Saul. You decide those names are not at all like boys you knew in elementary school, though you did know a boy named Sebastian who sat next to you in class. Where is Sebastian now? You remember his big teeth, how they got in the way when he spoke.

You choose to stick with the real name. Greg. You name the dog Sebastian.

It's a toy poodle that can fit in a large handbag. You hadn't figured on a dog, but there it is, its pink-tinged white fur like the hair of an old woman in a salon. Soft, tender. You aren't sure yet if the dog will play a part in the story, though you consider from your days in advertising how kids and puppies sell products.

The story starts with memory, and so that is what you begin with. You turn it into dialogue, a "remember when" between two friends. You decide one friend is getting a divorce. She has decided it is too much—her husband doesn't understand her. You wonder what he doesn't understand, but you wait. You write dialogue about old crushes, old loves.

Jack Daniel's helps. You start to loosen up and your typing gets worse. You make your other character an ad executive who is considering quitting her job.

You type, pause, eyes sweeping to the clock. It is almost time to wake the girls. Just three more stories and your collection will be complete—your agent will be happy and you will be happy, and then your husband will be happy and everyone will dance around in some glee circle.

You read over what is on the page and wonder about the use of *you*. Second person narrative makes you think about your high school English teacher who had a breakdown. You decide the friend, the one getting a divorce, is breakdown material. She shakes, she sleeps, she has stopped eating. You say she is spooky, ghost-like, wavering in and out. You name her Willow.

The other character—who is you and not you—listens to the friend weeping, and begins the conversation about old crushes. She says, "Remember Greg Holliday? I saw him on a TV commercial." You make this character a brunette; she is tall, slender. Her name is Annamaria. She is Italian and carries the purse with the dog.

Jack Daniel's helps. You wonder. You look back and see countless typing errors. You see *Hack Danels* and *remembering brushes* and *spoky got*. You continue, leaving the typos. You are on a roll. Roll, ha, ha, you will name a character Kaiser, thinking your own personal joke will always be there; you will know it, maybe explain it one day at a reading, where you will tell real life stories and make some up too. At the reading, you will be witty and charming and nervous. No one will know that you fear you will pee in your pants. If you do, you will use it as an opening for your story about an elementary school teacher. You will say, "Excuse me," and cry in the restroom.

In your story, the friends are having lunch in a greasy diner, though you have rarely eaten in one. Sometimes you run in for coffee on roadtrips, and when you leave, large cup in hand with trickles of hot coffee burning your wrists, you know your shirt and hair smell like grease. You hate it, the smell, and you think you must change clothes, but an hour back on the road and you don't notice it anymore. You turn the music up louder, sing along to songs you want to know by heart. The kids in the backseat complain about your singing. They shout with wide-opened mouths, "Stooooooooooooooooop!" You tell them they should be happy they have such a hip mother. You turn and sing into their cranky faces.

You have fifteen minutes until the kids get up. You type, you let words spill, slide from you. You think, "This story will not hold," and you feel a flush, it is warm, summer heat even this early in the morning. You stand to stretch, reaching for the ceiling fan to turn it higher. When you sit, you close your eyes. You take a look around the diner, introduce a waitress who is not typical—an atypical character. She is lovely, purely lovely, an innocent, and after she sets two cups of coffee on the table, she sits down with the two women—right next to Annamaria's purse—and says, "It can't always be like this." You wonder what she means, and your characters wonder what she means. Her nametag says—you pause—Eddie.

Willow, her red eyes only slightly hidden behind tiny sunglasses, says, "Eeeeedie, what are you talking about?" She says it in an agitated tone; it is in fact, a breakfast to discuss her problems, not some waitress who is far too lovely to be in this greasy diner.

"It's Eddie," says the waitress, fingering her nametag. The nametag has a children's sticker, a small panda carrying a yellow balloon, right there next to the big E.

*What are you talking about, Eddie?* you think, but there is no more time. You've got teeth to brush. Yours first. It wouldn't be good for Becky and Deena to smell whiskey so early in the morning. Brush your teeth, brush your hair, wake the girls. Later, later you'll sit back down and find out why Eddie is sitting at the booth, her French-tip manicured nails drumming lightly on the tabletop while her green eyes look to the door, the floor, and back again. She'll finally notice the dog, reach one hand to scratch at the top of his head.

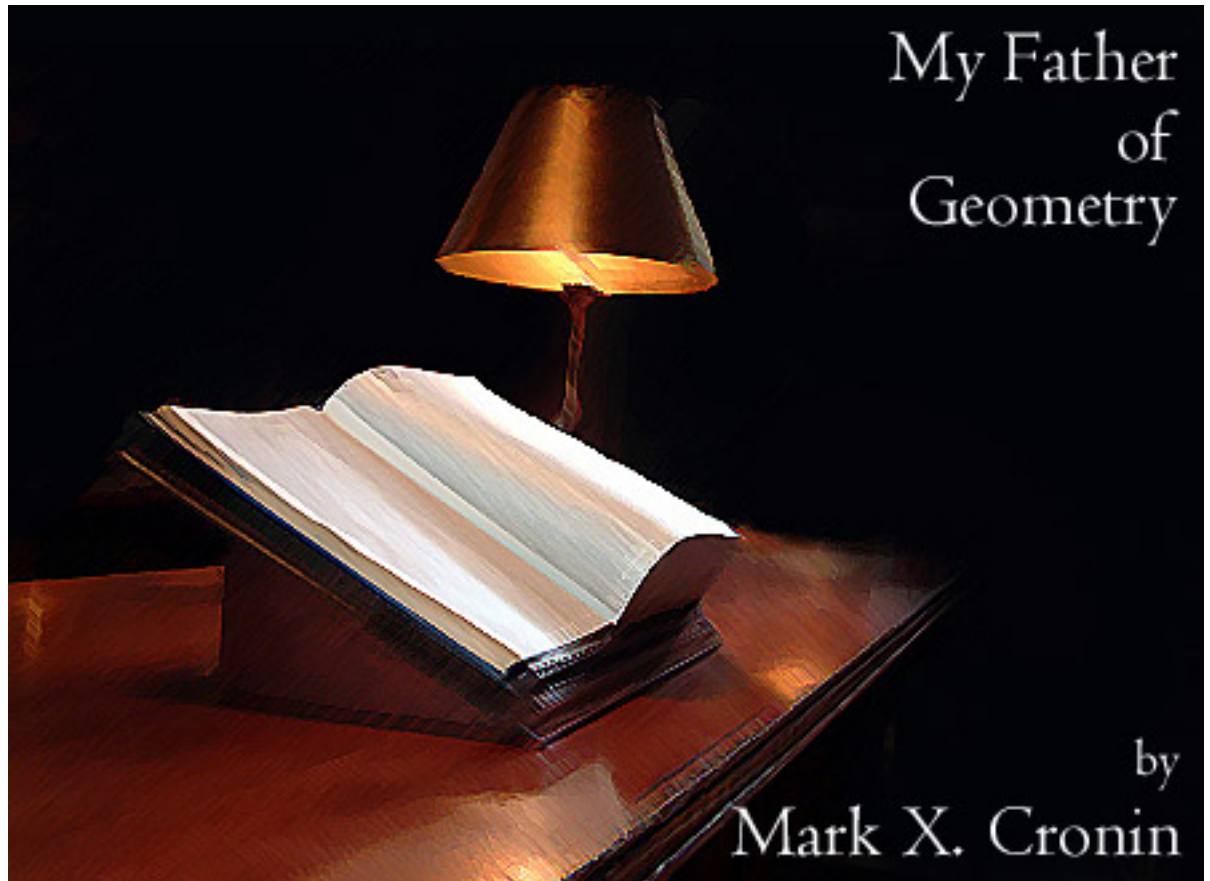
*Eddie, what can't always be like what?*

You so badly want to know what she means. You have no idea though. Not an idea you want to follow or one you think will work, and your mother's voice on the phone yesterday, "So when will you go back to the agency?" keeps going through your head, it loops there.

*Tell me, Eddie, you think, a tiredness coming over you. Tell me.*



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I hauled crap out of the storage room all morning before I found the poetry books. Two of them, thin and flimsy paperbacks trapped under a stack of brick-like college textbooks. They had such odd titles, *St. Judas* and *Body Rags*, and I'd never heard of those writers, James Wright and Galway Kinnell. The textbooks made sense, leftovers from my parents' college years, but poetry, in Brockton, Mass.? My mother didn't read anything besides the Bible and cookbooks and my father never read anything thicker than a newspaper.

I put the poetry books aside. I was on a mission, turning the storage room into a bedroom. For two months, I made a pain in the ass of myself about a room of my own. Jennifer, my ten-year-old sister, had her room and they still kept one for Kevin—no matter that he'd been dead for nearly a year and a half—leaving me, a junior in high school, stuck with Alex, my nine-year-old runt of a brother.

I tried logic and persuasion; I tried shouting. My mother sighed and listed all the reasons the storage room wouldn't work: I'd be all alone downstairs; the tiny window wouldn't let in enough light; I'd get lonely without my brother; there'd barely be enough room for even my bed and dresser. "You might think it's a good idea," she told me while wiping her hands on a dish towel, "but trust me, Bobby, you'd hate it in there."

I couldn't ask for Kevin's room, that would be too creepy. Anyway, she'd never let me move into the shrine. Seventeen months since he went back

to Yale, fifteen months since he died, his bed still made, the basketball trophies arranged on his bureau, valedictorian plaque on the wall, clothes still hanging as if my parents thought he'd show up one night and ask for the stupid Hawaiian shirt he thought made him look so cool.

My mother's the only one who goes in there. She sits on Kevin's bed, plumps his pillow and talks to herself or to him, I don't know for sure. Sometimes she clutches her rosary, her head bent, carefully fingering each bead. I did notice that she'd taken down the Gwen Stefani poster—her tits hanging out, her lips all puckered up; I guess that didn't fit the memory my mother decided to keep.



This morning—in the kitchen full of the smell of the only bacon my mother lets us eat all week—I asked about the storage room one more time. My mother put one hand on her hip, and waved a spatula at me. She'd always been big, but since Kevin died, she'd grown huge. She'd given up her job as a lawyer, so she never wears her business suits anymore, just sweat suits with drawstrings around her waist. "Not again," she said, "can't you let it go?"

I didn't and we argued until my father let the pages of the *Globe* droop, rolled his eyes and said, "Enough already—if you clean out the back room, we'll see how it looks." My mother crossed her arms and glared at him, then me.

After all that, I couldn't get the storage room door to open. I lowered my shoulder and rammed the door—*thwump*. I drove back a fallen tower of boxes. What a mess. Black plastic garbage bags, piles of clothes, all sorts of stuff. A busted up loveseat lay crushed beneath Kevin's old barbells. The room had become the place where we dumped the things that broke, wore out, grew useless, but couldn't quite give away or throw out.

I saw a collapsed easel, cracked and chipped test tubes from a chemistry set I got for my tenth birthday, fake money strewn under the window, and red and blue plastic tokens spilling out of games I once loved. Kevin and I played *Stratego* all the time; he called it little kid's chess, and when I won, I knew it was only because he let me.

The room stank of mothballs or something, the same musty stench that comes from the bedrooms in my grandmother's house. My throat began to itch. All the junk made the room feel tiny; I could almost hear my mother saying, "Sweetheart, that's really just a closet and calling it a bedroom won't change a thing."

I kicked at a bag of something soft, shoved and pulled at more piles, knocked into my father's Nordic track machine, nearly tripped as I made my way toward the back wall and the white frame window. I unlatched it and, after three tries, forced it open. Outside, the freshly mowed lawn rolled cool and green to the tree line. Beneath the window, my mother knelt in her garden, scooping out mounds of peat moss and pressing it with her fingers to firm up the tomato plant stalks.

"Where do you want this junk?" I called to her.

"Put the things we want to keep down in the basement. Then make two piles. We'll take one to St. Vincent de Paul; the other goes out with the garbage on Monday night."

I dragged the big bags of old clothes and didn't bother checking them out, just towed them to the curb. I reached for an old Filene's shopping bag and sliced my hand on a candleholder—a lame arts and crafts project from my summer at Camp Alvernia. I sucked the cut until it stopped bleeding. I pulled stuff from the heap: an ice cream maker we used no more than

once, Alex's inflatable dinosaur, an oversized ceramic bowl inscribed *1998 PTA Mother of the Year*. I folded empty boxes from computers, a printer and a fax machine. Spotting a copper Empire State Building in a milk crate filled with junk, I put it aside to keep in my new room.

I found two of Kevin's Citizen of the Month certificates curled inside a shoebox. Kevin with the right words, Kevin with the curly hair, Kevin tall and lean. Everything cake for him, not a goddamn thing wrong in his world and everyone loved him for it. Last summer, taking a break from weeding the back walkway, I stretched out on the grass. My father came walking out of the garage and said, "Kevin used to smile so much, I wish you could do that more often."

"Kevin didn't have a brother who died."

My father opened his mouth, raised his hand as if to speak, then shook his head and walked away, too late for me to take back my words.

At school, I heard it all the time. "Your brother was a wonderful boy," no one wanting to come right out and say, "Why can't you be more like him?" They talked about his promise, about the future he could've had. My biology teacher dropped yet another lousy test on my desk, his face full of pity and disgust, then squatted next to me to say, "You could make your parents proud, if only you applied yourself."

Of course, they don't talk about how nothing Kevin did in high school mattered, none of the years of hoops practice, none of the report cards taped to the refrigerator, the newspaper articles or the list of awards. He still went to that frat party and we'll never really know who said what to whom, if Kevin was a peacemaker or an instigator, or merely a bystander. We only know there was the fight. Kevin landed on his head at just the wrong angle—an inch too far—and he never got up.

If I was always the second son, Kevin had grown more perfect since he died; I'd grown worse. Now my mother watches me all the time, goes through my knapsack, warns about "that crowd you're in with," even if Teddy and I don't exactly constitute a crowd. It's the usual stuff from parents, only multiplied ten times. Who will you be with? How late will you be out? "I know you want to drive, but you need to understand how dangerous it is," even if I'm the only junior at Cardinal Spellman without a license.

Lose one son, save the others, even if she gets pissed at me for being the one who lived. I tell her that if I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die. She gets all shaky, her face flustered and quickly blesses herself. "Oh honey, don't even joke like that." Then she hugs me—not sure where to put her arms—and I wish she'd stop.



In the late morning, I came across the piles of books in the far corner, mostly old college textbooks: *Medieval Architecture and the Cathedral*, *Macro and Microeconomics*, *History of Ancient Civilizations* and *Collected Shakespeare*. That's where I found the poetry books. I sat against the wall and flipped the pages. Inside the back cover a stamp read, "Property of the Emerson College Library." Not textbooks, for sure, and Emerson College? My mother had gone to BC, my father to BU—as if I didn't have enough t-shirts and sweatshirts to remind me.

I scanned the titles—"Complaint," "The Refusal," "At the Executed Murderer's Grave"—read a few lines about a drunken old man. In school, they force-fed us stupid singsong rhymes or poems so old that the English sounded like another language. They told us the poems were good for us, made us read about things that couldn't possibly matter—urns and a chambered nautilus—Mr. Blondell droning on in that high-pitched nasal

sound he makes, "Now class, this is a very famous poem." And yes, it would be on the test.

The poems in these books, they were different—words I recognized, words I could speak, yet they felt strange, strung together in a way that gave them a whole new meaning: bones, pain, lung, blood.

A breeze blew through the window and the sweat on my back gave me a chill. I grew hungry, but didn't want to stop for lunch. Outside, Alex and my father, back from Little League practice, played catch in the backyard. With me too slow for the other sports, it had been football, my father crouching down so I could block him. I lost interest as it became more serious—hard to see me hanging out with the jocks at Spellman.

I picked up a dented chest filled with photos and souvenirs—trips to Disney World and Niagara Falls. I dug out a slingshot from the annual Labor Day Pow-Wow at the Shinnecock Reservation near my aunt's summer house. Underneath that chest, I discovered an old radio so I closed the door, plugged it in, tuned in the U. Mass-Boston station and filled the room with Dr. Filth and his Medicine Cup's furious hip-hop.

My mother stuck her head in the door. "Turn it down, Robert."

She moved towards the kitchen and I slammed the door behind her. How different it would be not sharing a room with Alex, who burrowed through my privacy like a rat in the town dump. I thought of the final incident that made my own room a necessity. I'd been reading *Siddhartha* over the Easter break, and flattened a yoga book on the floor, crossed my legs, raised my arms overhead, twisted them and breathed deeply, then deeply again. Alex flung the door open and tumbled into laughter. I could hear him squealing, "Mom, you gotta see what Bobby's doing now."

Marching me to the living room, my mother patted the cushion on the couch for me to sit next to her and she spoke in the concerned tones of a TV psychiatrist, asking why *Siddhartha*, why yoga?

"Have you even read the book?" I asked.

"Of course."

I told her that Brother Shane, my religion teacher, suggested I read it. That stopped her—a teacher, a Brother—but I knew she didn't like him. Months earlier, at a PTA meeting, parents complained about Brother Shane. My mother came home to tell my father, "How could a teacher tell his students that he wants to confuse them?" She kept smacking the back of her hand into her other palm. "We send the boy to that school to learn what he should believe, to remind him what's right, not to tear things down."



I'm not one for doing chores, but the very act of hauling boxes down to the basement felt good, as if for the first time in my life, I could create something meaningful. The gray dust the cardboard left on my hands didn't bother me, nor did the way it clogged my nostrils, no matter how many times it sent me into sneezing and coughing fits. I took perverse pleasure in the black goop I blew into the red bandana I used as a handkerchief. The more crap I dragged out, the more I could see the black and white checkerboard pattern on the floor, the more I unearthed a new world.

Tugging at a red plastic handle, I yanked out an old slot car racing set I'd gotten for Christmas—how many years ago? Second grade? Each Thanksgiving weekend my father and I had laid out a new configuration—an oval with loops one year, a figure eight the next—always a new one

ready for Christmas. I had held the tracks while he twisted wires and tightened connections; I could almost smell the stink of the soldering iron. I used to think that smell represented the skills, the magic, that only adults possessed.

On the first Saturday of each December, my father and I, just the two of us, set out on a day long hunt for slot car accessories. We stopped at the expensive two-story hobby shop in Framingham, drove as far west as Leominster to visit an overcrowded toy store—it was full of dusty and dented orange boxes crammed on sagging shelves—then swung south through Worcester where a slot car club held its annual holiday swap meet.

We always stopped at the same deli for lunch, my father buying oversized roast beef sandwiches lathered with horseradish—he swore we couldn't get sandwiches like that anywhere else. In the afternoon, he held my thumbs, showing me how to pry off the miniature tires to inspect the tiny axles for damage. My father had these long, bony fingers; they were so strong, yet, I don't know, gentle. He taught me how to haggle with the balding fat guy in Worcester. The fat guy leaned his puffy and flaking face close to mine, his belly pushing up his shirt, and wheezed through years of cigarettes. "You remind me of me, so I'm going to give you a special deal."

At dinner, my father regularly threw me a glance, jabbed his thumb up and down, pantomiming the controls, and I knew that afterward we'd go down to the basement to race a few times, cars flying off the track as we pressed for speed. It had been three years since we'd set up the track. Last Thanksgiving, my mother asked if we would get back to the old custom. I peeked over at my father. We both shrugged.

I stuffed the whole set into a box and lugged it toward the curb. My father wandered around the front lawn picking up fallen twigs and branches. Tracks stuck out of the top of the box, wires hung down from the transformer. I imagined that I would've done it again, that I wouldn't have minded a trip back out to that swap meet to see if the bright yellow Lemans race car had finally showed up. My father saw me look across the lawn and gave a half smile. He bent down to pick up another stick. I flung the box on top of the garbage pile.



Back in the storage room, I picked up the poetry books again and read about a man who drowned and a kid needing to tell someone what he saw, but afraid he'd get in trouble. I read it three times, and it scared me, made me think of the secrets I couldn't let my parents know, couldn't let anyone know. The times I imagined sneaking into Kevin's room: I found him stretched out on his bed and asked him why and what happened next and was Mom right about Jesus and God, and he wouldn't even look at me, so I punched him over and over until his nose smeared across his face. I remembered the day last month when I cut school and rode the train into South Station. I vowed that I would finally leave home, left a note under my pillow about how I needed my own life. I almost got on three different Amtrak expresses to New York and I would have if each time I stood up I hadn't nearly puked—afraid to leave, I hated myself for staying. I hunched over my knapsack hoping no one would recognize me.

I tried to make sense of these things, tried one night with Teddy and a stolen six-pack of Coors Light behind the Kentucky Fried Chicken. I told him what Holden Caulfield said, told him about the trap of expectations and how Eminem had dropped out of the ninth grade and begun freelancing with rap groups "while we're getting fat and stupid in Brockton, Mass.—City of friggin' Champions."

When we wound up in silence, I thought of Kevin and felt so angry, so helpless. I screamed at no one, just screamed until my chest and throat hurt. "He fell down. He banged his head. You're supposed to get up."

Teddy said, "Oh man, let's just get drunk," and crushed an empty can with his boot.

Those books, those poems seemed to understand, seemed full of desperate thoughts. No citizens of the month, only the weird, the freaks, the outsiders. Which of my parents could have spent time with those poems? Which of them once believed in "Saint Judas?" I picked up the other book and fixed on lines that twisted the story of the phoenix, not asking to rise from the ashes, but to be the flame itself. Those poems sounded like the Gospels and Psalms I'd heard in church all my life, but different; they had a rush of rock and roll, but different; they spoke in a logic that I couldn't explain, but could follow. The words felt jagged, dangerous—definitely not something my parents would read. Saying them aloud, I felt a shock as if the voice in the poems knew exactly what I felt, as if the voice came from inside my own mind and whispered, "There's more, much more."



When my mother called us to dinner, I came carrying the two library books, holding them out like evidence. I dropped them on the table, rattling the silverware.

"What are those?" my mother asked. My father, busy pouring glasses of water, didn't pick his head up. Jennifer immediately reached across the table, grabbing the top book; Alex lunged for the second.

"Found them in a stack in the back of my room—they're from Emerson College."

My father squinted at the book covers; his jaw tightened.

Jennifer let out an exaggerated gasp and said, "This book is *so* overdue; it was supposed to be back on November 3, 1976. That's...twenty-three years late."

My mother turned toward my father. "Those must be from when you worked at Emerson, Bill." My father continued to unfold his napkin and placed it on his lap as if she had not said a word.

"You worked at Emerson, what did you do there?" My mother had told the story of my father so often that I knew I would have heard about him teaching at a college.

"Oh, it was nothing," he said in the way that parents speak when they're trying to hide something. "Pass the broccoli."

I asked again.

He scooped some soggy stalks of broccoli onto his plate. He reached for the salad dressing. I knew he could feel my eyes locked on him.

"I worked there as a custodian right after graduating college."

I didn't understand—a janitor? I ran through the facts of my father's life—college, law school, the Mayor's office, Aetna Insurance, State Farm, never the boss, but always something that sounded serious, that required white shirts with dark suits. Never a janitor. Why hide it? Last year when I told them that I wanted to work for Mr. Santiago's landscaping crew, my first paying job, one that would help me get in shape, get a tan, my mother said, 'I don't think that's a good idea,' and looked at my father.

'Son,' my father said, idly spinning his fork, 'I know you won't understand; it's not too early to start building your résumé.'

'But it's only a summer job,' I said.

My mother arranged an internship at Councilman Geraghty's Office, the same post that Kevin held three years earlier. I think she wanted to see Kevin, to pull him back: no Yale, no party, no fight and no funeral.

My mother told Jennifer to put the books down, that we had to say grace. We bowed our heads and Alex said the words. I studied my father's face—the high forehead, the eyes that never showed any emotion, the sturdiness, the predictability. Nothing had ever been out of line.

Alex finished the prayer. The seat where Kevin would have sat remained empty—did he know?

"You were a janitor? Like Bearded Tom at my school?" Alex asked, his voice full of glee. "A janitor, how cool."

"Don't be silly," my mother said.

Alex could barely contain himself, saying, "So you got to run all the machines and hang out in the janitor's closet?"

My father smiled at Alex and said, "I only did it one summer." Alex peppered him with more questions, the whys and how-comes that came across as cute.

My father described the job—cleaning the library and the gym, waxing floors, sweeping hallways, emptying trashcans, dusting books. "They made us scrub the little scuff marks off the racquetball court walls and yes, I even cleaned the toilets."

Jennifer giggled. My mother forced a croak of a laugh and said, "A professional—but do you think I can get him to help around the house now?" She patted the back of my father's hand. "But I love him anyway."

My father actually squirmed in his seat—my father, tall and muscular like the basketball player he'd once been, my father, whose every step seemed measured and plotted, all straight lines and right angles. He said, "There's nothing wrong with being a janitor" in a way that confessed there was everything wrong with it and he was sorry.

I didn't want him to be sorry, didn't want him to apologize. When my mother explained that what mattered was where we were today—a loving family, the house, their careers, the new kitchen, the Catholic schools, the golf club and the summers on the Cape, and each of us could go to the college of our choice—I wanted to scream. Did she pretend that Kevin hadn't died? Did she have no idea about me? Did she lie only to us or did she lie to herself too?

I quietly said, "Maybe I'll be like Dad and become a janitor."

My mother slowly laid her fork across her plate. "Must you always be like that?" She stared as if willing me to back down and I knew that she only saw her "large-boned" child, her "problem" child. "Sweetheart, we've always said that you should be what you want, but we hope you take advantage of your talents and opportunities. We only want . . ."

I refused to make eye contact. I wouldn't allow her to suck me into her argument; I wanted to know about the job as a janitor, about the books, about my father—what else was there?

He and my mother exchanged glances that contained whole years of conversation. My father looked at Alex, while checking me out of the corner of his eye. "It would have been smarter to start my career right away instead of wasting my time."

"Come on, Dad. Tell the truth," I said before I even thought about it.

He snapped his head to look at me, then pushed back into his chair. He

and my mother spoke at the same time. My mother said, "Your father is telling the truth, he's only trying to help you, to teach you."

My father said, "Robbie, what do you want me to tell you?"

What did I want him to tell me? I wanted to know that he was like me, that he had no idea what he wanted, yet he knew exactly what he didn't want. Teddy and I talked about it all the time—get out of Brockton, nothing that involves a clock, a suit, a boss, or a deadline. After Brother Shane gave me *On the Road*, I told Teddy, "I want to wake up in the East Village, my clothes in tatters but my soul burning."

I wanted my father to go on, to tell us more. I groped for the right words and slowly, tentatively, I asked, "You were a slacker?"

He struck one of those looks that pinned me back to childhood. "No, that's not it at all. You take a job, work hard and good things happen."

I could almost see my father reaching for the shelf in his mind to pull down another tidy lesson like the time I brought home that seventh grade report card, the first of many blotted with C's and even a D. My father had climbed the stairs after work, chased Alex away and sat on the edge of my bed, rubbing his hands. He asked me about school.

I told him about teachers I didn't like, books I forgot, things I didn't understand, stupid things they made us learn.

He never mentioned Kevin and his A's. He spoke softly, evenly. "Make it easy on yourself, Robbie. Think of school as a job." He stood up and put his hands in his pockets. "Put in your time, give them what they want, don't fight the rules and then come home and relax."

Last report card, he drew a heavy breath before opening the envelope, stared for a long time at the C in English, the C in math, the D in history, and chewed his lower lip. I started to explain, but he held up a hand and said, "I don't want to hear all the reasons you can't get it done. Do the assignments, study for the tests, ask the teachers for help."

"It's not that simple," I said.

"It is, son." He handed the report card back to me. "You keep fighting, keep resisting, just do what they ask and you'll have all the success you need."

This time I refused to listen. I escaped to the kitchen with my plate. Alone with the new refrigerator, the curtains with the precious yellow flowers which—my mother pointed out to all who listened—perfectly matched the pattern in the Mexican tile on the walls, I swore I wouldn't let this happen, wouldn't accept the cleaned up version. He must've been a mess and that's what I wanted, the huge swirling mess.

I came back and stood over my father. "I'm trying to understand. You did this after you graduated, you didn't even go to Emerson, you weren't taking any classes, but you took these books out anyway?"

"You don't think I checked them out?" My father pointed his fork at me, and then softened his tone to say with a forced grin, "I'm not a criminal."

"No, no, I meant that no one made you read these, you did it on your own."

Jennifer and Alex lost interest and whispered to each other. I sat down in Kevin's chair. "What about the books, Dad? What was it about these poems?"

My father looked down at the scraps of his steak and at the remains of his baked potato. He shook his head and then looked at me, not quite in the eyes. "I read poetry for school, nothing very special. Just like you, I read a

lot, but you can't take it too seriously."

"What the hell's that mean?" I asked so sharply that both Jennifer and Alex stopped talking.

My mother quickly spoke. "Has everyone had enough to eat?" She looked at my father in the same way she looks at me when I do something wrong.

My father put his silverware on his plate and faced Alex. "Did you tell your big brother about your hitting today? You keep that elbow up when you swing, and you're going to have a great season." He picked up his plate and walked away.



I returned to my old room, pulled a sweatshirt down from the closet shelf and unplugged the reading lamp next to my bed. I went back to the storage room. The sunset angled through the window, casting a long shadow on the checkerboard floor. I plugged in the reading lamp and could see the gunk on the linoleum floor, a weird brown liquid that had hardened and some mushy yellow stuff that bubbled along the wall. I got a scraper from the tool bench in the garage, kneeled down and began prying the crud from the floor. I wedged the scraper under the yellow stuff and it peeled up like the skin of an orange. It took me a good forty minutes to scrape everything off the floor.

I brought in a bucket of warm water, an oversized sponge and some ammonia. I poured the ammonia on the linoleum—its smell stinging, tearing my eyes—squeegeed out some water and scrubbed the floor. I wanted it absolutely clean. The sun had fallen below the horizon leaving a soft blue sky. I moved the reading lamp to shine on the next section of the floor. My knees ached. The ammonia hurt my lungs. I scrubbed harder.

When finished, I sat against the wall with only the radio, the miniature Empire State Building, the reading lamp and the two books of poetry. A Jamaican DJ played some music I'd never heard before.

I gazed toward the ceiling and the space felt so large as if the roof would give way to a vast sky. My mother could not deny me this room. "My walls, my ceiling," I said aloud, my voice pinging off the bare walls. I could start a journal and not worry about being found out. I could paint the walls blue, that cobalt blue that comes late at night. On one long wall, I'd hang that poster of the Manhattan skyline, the one I saw at the mall, 'cause I knew someday I'd live in New York City. "It is your destiny," I said in a perfect Darth Vader voice. I'd build a collage on the other long wall, a testament to whom I had become. I'd start with posters: Escher drawings and *Rushmore*, Eminem on stage and sunrise over Provincetown. I'd layer in postcards and photos—portraits of Teddy, maybe the one of Kevin and me in the tire tubes on the Merrimack River. I'd put up pages from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, let my parents know that, yes, I can't stop staring at those breasts, those smooth stomachs, the lips moistened. Over the pictures, I'd paste quotes like Dan Bern's, "I saw a man with dreams/ Like the ones I had/Beg quarters outside the 7-11," or maybe something from System Of A Down or Rage Against The Machine. As soon as possible, I had to get a lock for the door, had to keep out Jennifer and Alex, or worse—I couldn't have my mother snooping through my things.

I picked up the two library books, opened the first one and read poems about longing for women and losing those women. They described convicts, drunks, soldiers, prostitutes, killers, hunters, ghosts and animals, entire poems about a porcupine and a bear, poems where animals took on whole universes of meaning.

I tried to hear the lines in my father's voice. I couldn't. My father never read poetry. My father did not spend time by himself in meditation; he did

not place a book down on the table, stare out the window and lose himself. My father seemed all surface, his world so neat, so organized. These poems spoke of chaos, a world of shadows, whispers, hidden intentions and death—no glorious resurrection, just death. I thought of Kevin and that stupid fight, how they could recite the facts, but no one—not the cops, not the teachers, not the priests, not my parents—could ever explain why Kevin died. At his funeral, Father Ryan said that Kevin had risen to a happier place, that he would be there to greet us all. I couldn't believe a word of it. I told my father and he bent over me, hugged me and whispered in my ear, "You have to believe, Robbie, you have to believe." When I tried to talk, he hugged me tighter and kept repeating, "You have to believe."

I read on about a lone man hunting a bear across the tundra with only his bare hands, his sheer desperation to stalk and kill his prey, and even that might not be enough to save him. He dragged himself across the frozen trail, sniffing at the faintest whiff of bear tracks, eating bear turds to stave off hunger. When he found the beast, he sliced him open and climbed inside, wrapped in his fur, gnawing on his meat. The terror of the poem washed over me and I shivered on the floor.

I stood up and pulled the window closed. Sometimes I didn't want to know, wished I could go back and do it over. Maybe if I had stuck with football, maybe if Kevin didn't die, maybe if I could stop thinking so goddamn much.

I picked up *Body Rags* again and some handwriting caught my eye. In an intense, small blue scribble, I read these lines:

*My father of geometry  
My father of straight lines  
My father of answers  
My father of the commuter train  
My father of practiced lies*

I read them aloud, enunciating each word. Were these my father's? I thumbed through every page and found more, written sideways in the margins of another poem, written in the same tightly wound letters, a big "X" scratched through them,

*My eyes purpled, my lips split  
Thrashed, beaten  
I will bleed until I feel  
I will hurt until I live*

My father? My father the janitor. My father the poet. These were not merely new facts, but a re-arrangement of all the facts, as if a different William O'Brien lived in this house, like a *Star Trek* episode where someone alters the past and the present changes before your eyes. Everything seemed suspect; anything seemed possible.



I found my father in the family room sitting in his chair, a game board across his lap, halfway through dealing another hand of solitaire. My mother watched a home remodeling show on TV, her evening prayer book face down on the couch. She hid a chocolate chip cookie under a napkin. I opened the book to the first handwritten poem and lay it over his cards. He stopped moving his hands. My mother lowered the sound on the TV. My father looked up at me. "What are you doing?"

"Did you write that?"

He bent closer to the book. He shrugged.

"Dad, it's in your book."

"Not my book, a library book. Anyone could have written those lines."

"Dad."

He took a deep breath. "O.K.," he said, then quickly added, "but that was a long time ago, something I did as a kid." He put up a smile so false and feeble that he quickly gave up on it.

My mother turned the TV off and moved to the end of the couch near my father. She held the prayer book on her lap.

I took the book back and sat on the floor. I read both poems, careful with each word.

My mother said, "You don't want to do this."

I looked at my father. "Tell me about these poems, what do they mean? Why did you write them?"

He stacked the cards into a neat pile and put them on the table next to him. He leaned the board against the chair. "They're not exactly poems, just some lines."

"It's all a lie, isn't it? The walk the straight line, live by the rules speeches—you took any shitty job you could get, you wrote poetry."

"Robert," My mother yelled

"You didn't give a damn about school or grades or a career or doing the right damned thing."

My father ran his hand across his mouth. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Son." He stood up and walked to the far side of the room, picking up a small brass car from the bookshelf. He held it in his hand as if weighing it. He put it back on the shelf and turned to me. "Things happened, they're long past; you don't need to know about them."

I stood up. In the past year, I had nearly reached his height, so I tried to look him eye to eye, not as a challenge, more as a plea. "Dad, you have to tell me."



We moved to the kitchen table, round and white, a light fixture hanging over our heads. My father crossed his arms. "You only think you want to know." His voice had become little more than a whisper, raw and tired. Part of me knew he was right, that I should get up and walk away, let him remain the father I had known, let the world, as fucked up as it was, remain the same. That part of me—forever helpless—understood that whatever my father would say would only make things worse. His neck muscles relaxed; he laid his arms on the table so I could see the inside of his elbows. "I entered college with all A's, as square and solid as any high school principal would want from a student. I thought I knew the world and my parents and teachers all praised me for my poise, my confidence."

He grinned in a way that let me understand the word ruefulness for the first time. "But what did I know? Soon I learned that the history taught me in all my previous years was wrong. I took a class where the professor showed how the Gospels were not written by saints who had witnessed miracles, but by scribes who had never met Jesus. The government finally

admitted that all those soldiers died in Vietnam for no reason and Nixon resigned because of all his lies. I learned to question everything and tore apart what I saw as fake and hollow." He continued as if reading from a list of sins. "I stopped going to church, stopped listening to my parents, stopped caring about what my professors or anyone else at school said. None of them understood."

He explained how he graduated from college "without a plan, not the slightest clue. I went with whatever urge I felt." He told of his job as a janitor, how he got fired and fired again from a job washing dishes, and then fired from a job stacking boxes in a warehouse.

"I had all these feelings that had nothing to do with getting a job or paying taxes or doing anything that might smack of being a citizen." He held his arms out, his palms open, shaking. "I felt such things."

"I read poetry—people they'd never show you in high school—Bob Cording and Gary Snyder, John Berryman and Frank Bidart. They had the sensitivity and the outrage, they had the intelligence to know what I saw and felt. Soon I decided that I must already be a poet; why else would I have those thoughts, that awareness?"

My father rose from his seat and began pacing, his head stooped, the kitchen suddenly seemed too small for him. "I was proud of the fact that I didn't go on a single job interview my senior year. Think about it: I was proud of that. And when I failed at everything I tried, I told myself I wasn't a janitor. I wasn't a bus boy. I wasn't the kid making minimum wage in a warehouse. No, I was a poet." He threw his arms out and looked ready to spit. "I had thoughts others could never think. I had feelings beyond what others could feel." He waved his arm in the air. "I can hear my own stupidity."

He leaned close to me, the small grains of grey in his stubble now visible. "I knew—I knew the truth. I was a fraud, a fake." His eyes showed such self-disgust that I turned away. The refrigerator hummed. A basket of fruit stood at the center of the table, yellow apples and pears going soft.

He walked over to the sink and looked out the window into the backyard. My mother spoke to me in a soft voice. "Bobby, we didn't want you to know, we're so afraid for you, afraid that if you knew, you would take it as a license, not a warning." She looked over at my father and spoke as if he would not hear. "He wound up in the ER at Boston City Hospital, a bar fight, he was beaten up so badly that he couldn't remember what happened. The doctors said he was sick from not eating and drinking too much, that he was exhausted."

I stared at the man gazing out the window. My mother slid her hand over mine and squeezed.

My father came back to the table and sat down. "My parents were the only ones I could call. They didn't know what to do so they locked me in the house. At first, I hated them for it. They laid down rules: when to get up, when to go to bed, what to eat. No more drinking—ever—but that was the easy part. In the morning, my mother took me to 9:30 mass at Sacred Heart. In the afternoon, I worked at the church's thrift shop, doing the lifting the old ladies from the Rosary Society couldn't do. When my father came home from work, we played board games, games like *Monopoly* and *Clue*. We ate dinner at 6:30 sharp. My father and I went for a walk every evening and came home for dessert."

"We agreed—my parents and me—that I should go to law school. It filled my days; it gave me structure. I tried to follow, but it wasn't easy. I sat in an auditorium, a professor droning on about contracts and I couldn't make myself care. Right after the start of the second semester, early February, I looked around at my classmates taking notes, leaning on their hands listening, and I knew I couldn't be like them. I spent the whole day sitting in that one chair, unable to move. That night, a janitor found me sitting in

the dark and I couldn't begin to tell him why. He called campus security, and, after shrugging their shoulders and laughing a bit, they called my parents."

"I started the routine again. Six more months of morning mass, lunch at the same time, afternoons at the Thrift Shop. I went back to law school in September. I wrote out a schedule, hour-by-hour, accounting for every moment of my day. That's when I met your mother; she sat in front of me in constitutional law." He stood behind her and spoke in a low voice about how she listened, how she helped him stick to his plan, how at night they would go to an 11 o'clock mass in the chapel at BC.

"Don't you see? Don't you see what we're trying to do?" My mother reached to touch my hands. "Do you see why I gave up my practice, to be home?" The silver band of her engagement ring pressed into her skin. "We thought everything was O.K. with Kevin, we thought we could let him go."

"I'm not Kevin. What happened to him won't happen to me."

My mother shook her head; she mumbled something to herself. My father went to speak, but my mother stopped him by touching his wrist. "No, you're not Kevin; we didn't think we'd ever have to worry about him." Her voice faltered. "We've always worried about you, our reckless boy, our heedless boy." My mother sniffled, her head erect, but individual tears rolled down her cheeks. "Long before we lost Kevin, I prayed that nothing would happen to you."

"I'm not Kevin." I hadn't done anything wrong. "I'm not Dad."

My mother rubbed her wedding ring and said, "You don't know. We're only trying to protect you from yourself."



I rolled out a sleeping bag in my new room. I thought of Kevin and how he lived the life they wanted and wound up dead anyway. I thought of my father and his poems. I turned the reading light on and reread his lines. I tried to imagine my father back then, a few years older than me. I pictured him reading his poetry. He steps out of the shadows, no microphone, no podium, just an area in the light, takes a single sheaf of paper out of his pocket, though he never looks at it, and reads his poem in the most clear and unwavering voice.

My father found me in the hall bathroom brushing my teeth. He wore his white flannel pajamas, his toes curling, his toenails yellowing. He waited for me to finish. He put a hand on my shoulder. "Son, about tonight, you need to understand."

"Dad, tell me about the poetry you wrote, tell me about the poem about Grandpa."

He shook his head. "Son, I threw them all away for a reason. I can't even tell you about them now if I wanted to." He leaned against the doorjamb. "You need to let this go." He brushed my hair back. "It's better this way; it really is." He kissed me on the forehead.

I returned to my room and lay out on the floor. I stared until my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. I spoke my father's verse from memory. "My father of geometry/My father of straight lines."

What happened? I wanted the poet to walk through the door, kneel next to me, touch my face and say—say something. I heard only the sound of my own breathing, the hum of the blood in my ears. I thought of the bear and the kid who saw the drowned man, and Kevin. The room felt so large and I'd never felt so alone, so afraid. There were no footsteps and I knew none

would come. A light shone under the crack of the door, but I knew it meant nothing, just a light left on.



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# The Summerset Review

## Typical American

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by Elise Davis

Nine rows of Elite-class passengers queued up behind me like anxious school kids, blocking potential poachers with no-look shoulder feints into the aisle. Glancing back, I saw Ted by the cockpit door, talking to the sleek-haired flight attendant who had plied him with mimosas all the way from Amsterdam. My theory proved once again, that the beautiful people were always seated in the first few Elite rows, thoroughbreds assured of never having to make pained conversation with lesser beings. I had endured the flight in the last row, next to a fat Dutchman with an unconquerable need to pick his neck acne.

The line started to move, the Dutchman shuffling ahead, a Burberry scarf swathing his scabby neck. I hoisted my carry-on bag over my shoulder, glancing back at Ted again. It would be very European to have an affair. My plan was to impress him at the Frankfurt train station, smoothly buying our tickets to Marburg. I had a sick premonition, though, that I was going to mangle the German and the Bundesbahn clerks would laugh at me—or worse, speak English. The Germans were like that, or at least they were ten years ago. They laughed. They practiced their English.

I didn't need any more humiliation. Over the past three days, the Amsterdam branch, slender, serious-browed beings in gray suits, had refused to approve the new fee structure, or even sign off on the annual meeting minutes. My boss had been reluctant to approve an international trip. 'Sorry, Helena,'

she'd said, 'budget cuts.' Then Baxter had stuck his head in, asking if she wanted a ride to the leadership luncheon at Union Grill. 'You guys going to share the chateaubriand again?' I'd asked bitterly. The next day, Baxter signed off on my travel. Sadly, the meetings couldn't have gone worse if the company had sent the Three Stooges in our place.

Waiting on the jetway for Ted, I tucked away my airline goody bag of L'Occitane toiletries. He strode up, tall, husky-chested. His ruddy complexion always seemed on the verge of blushing.

"All set?" I asked, and he yawned an answer.

Last night he'd told me he hated to travel. Liked sleeping in his own bed. We were having consolation drinks at a bar on Spuistrasse.

"Then living in Philly and contracting in Seattle makes perfect sense," I'd said.

"Just give me my own bed," he'd repeated, grinning and hazy-faced, and I'd kissed him, tasting beer on his lips. Later, he lurched back to the hotel for a conference call, and I went shopping, buying a giant Toblerone and a hundred euros' worth of underwear.

I'd be dumber than a rock to fish off the company pier, but I worked too much, traveled too much—stultifying hops to Bakersfield and Bend—for a real social life. I did a little fooling around on the road: drinks on the corporate tab, mini-bar-fueled makeout sessions. Ted visited the Seattle office once a quarter, and lusting after him had become a pleasant preoccupation, an aide to whiling away boring conference calls.

"You're on the red-eye tonight?" I asked, as we strode into the Frankfurt airport.

"Yep, midnight. Straight back to Philly."

There was the Philadelphia accent, broad and hard, sticking in his mouth like a bite of food. So far, neither of us had mentioned last night's kiss. And he'd been giving the flight attendant the same goony drunk-eyes.

"You sure you still want to go all the way up to Marburg? I wouldn't want you to miss your flight tonight."

"What else am I going to do on my layover? Go eat sauerkraut somewhere?"

"Actually, they don't eat sauerkraut much. The Germans." Hurrying to match his long-legged pace, I was a little out of breath.

"Helena, you promised me sauerkraut." He grinned at me with a captain-of-the-lacrosse-team smile. A practiced smile, but still, it gave my stomach a roller-coaster dip.



When my host-mother Franke drove me home from the Marburg train station that first day (I was twenty-two and tearily jet-lagged), she asked me in chirpy English questions about my school, my family, my boyfriends.

My answers—*undeclared major, brothers, just friends*—were lost on her, because while Franke excelled at reciting English phrases, she comprehended almost nothing. It was like talking to a radio. One that asked a lot of questions.

"Welcome," was the extent of Heinrich's English, I discovered on arrival at the Gleich's tidy stone house. Franke's husband was a timid Jack Sprat, hiding behind glasses and an overhang of black bangs and jutting eyebrows. At dinner, I met the boys—Martin and Peter, identical twins imminently off to college, and the baby, sixteen-year-old Richard, teen-idol handsome with

thick blond hair and heavily-lashed blue eyes.

I was sticky and sweaty that first night, like a half-sucked lollipop. My college German eluded me as the Gleichs spoke in ever-slower, ever-louder voices. Soon we were reduced to getting out the atlas and pointing out the many inches between Marburg and the United States of America, six uncomfortably grinning mimes.

Each day then, when I came home from my classes at the language college, Richard would holler from his slouch on the living room sofa. "Helena, *wie war es?*

How was it, I'd repeat, closing the front door and shaking my head. I didn't have the words to explain how awful it all was. Despite two years of German classes, I couldn't even understand when a stranger asked me the time; I blurted, *Excuse me*, in English, as I pushed my way off the bus; and I understood little of the movies that Franke watched with her feet in Heinrich's lap, American films starring Meg Ryan and Bruce Willis, dubbed into incomprehensible German.

"*Versuch' mal*," was Richard's daily mantra. *Try*.

"Richard," I whined, at the start of my second week. We were camped out on the living room couch, eating ginger cookies and chocolate pudding.

"*Richard*," he corrected, with the German pronunciation. *Rrreesh-ardt*.

"Richard, Rrreeschardt. Whatever."

"*Nein, nicht*, 'Whatever.'" He held my gaze with his beautiful eyes. "Why do you speak English? You're in Germany." *Du bist ja in Deutschland, Helena*.

Stupid Germans, I thought miserably. Maybe in time I'd get used to Lutheran soap operas, bad teeth, and chain-flush toilets. But I understood it now, why cultural differences persisted in the world, despite the ubiquity of McDonald's and *Cheers* re-runs. Because in the end, you wanted what you were accustomed to.



Train tickets were purchased from kiosks now. The moment I inserted my Amex into the ticket machine at the Frankfurt station, the entire transaction was carried out in English. Disappointing, after all my mental gearing up to impress Ted.

"Can't we catch an earlier train?" He was looking over my shoulder.

"Yes, but it leaves way out on Gleis 21. It's another zip code out there."

"Quitter."

"Fine," I said. "You know all about the German train system."

He took off at a brisk jog, pulling my roller bag. My plans for a cozy coffee, intimacies exchanged in the gentle congeniality of aimless waiting, evaporated like mist on a window. Behind him, I hurried past newspaper vendors and snack counters and kiosks that sold ties and Asterix comics. The airy, steel-girded Frankfurter Bahnhof churned around me, echoing with a thousand murmurs. As I rounded the corner to Gleis 21, the conductor was briskly waving Ted aboard.

In the doorway of our compartment, I panted like an emphysema patient. "Told you we'd make it," Ted said, hoisting my bag up to the luggage rack.

"Yes, and Franke's expecting us on the later train." I mopped my sweating face with a tissue, hating him.

He sat down and crossed his legs circumspectly, opening his notebook. "Get a little grumpy when plans go haywire, do we?"

"Oh, I love it," I said testily. "I'll bet you feel fabulous about Amsterdam."

"Well, it's not like it was my fault, or your fault—" he hesitated.

My jaw fell open. I didn't like the way the emphasis felt on *your fault*. "No, no," I said. "I'm the flunky here, and don't you forget it."

"Don't worry, Baxter will get his trip report." He paused at a photo tucked inside the notebook. Even upside down, his fiancée was gorgeous. Per office scuttle, a former Miss Idaho, worked with deaf kids, probable boob job. I made a pillow from my cardigan. The rhythm of the train on the tracks was soporific. One minute I was reliving last night's kiss; the next, I was waking up, the side of my face wet with drool.

Franke was waiting for us on the platform. "Helena, you've gained weight," she said cheerfully, hugging me. *Du bist dicker geworden*. She was a petite lady in her early sixties, fit and capable looking, her gray hair in a youthful bowl cut.

"*Er ist Ted*." The German was heavy and awkward on my tongue.

"*Hier ist der Ted*," she corrected, looking him over with an appreciative smile. She liked men, talking quite openly at home about how she'd like to go to bed with Bruce Willis. "Nice to meet you, Ted," she said to him, in her parrot English.

"I thought she didn't speak English," he said accusingly in my ear, as we headed to the parking lot.

Franke popped open the Audi's trunk and we stood by as Ted loaded up my bags. "How did you know we'd be early?" I hoped she would let my poor accent and grammatical mistakes slide.

She smiled. "I had a feeling. Helena, *was ist?* Are you married? Any *Kinder?*"

"No," I said flatly. Somehow, I'd forgotten how nosy she was. As the train glided into town, the sight of the Marburg castle, its cold, remote stone tower set deep in the green hillside, gave me a pang. Hadn't I learned anything in the past decade? Not enough, apparently, to keep me from coming back to Marburg.



I met Michel at a birthday party one Sunday night in the school's back parlor. The birthday girl, Paola, a gorgeous Italian with high cheekbones and a trunkful of Gucci scarves, was darting around the cavernous room lighting candles and pouring tart Chianti into water glasses. Someone put on a Prince album.

As Paola refilled my glass, she said, "Later we go to a disco, *si?*"

"*Si*," I yelled, over the throbbing music. "I mean, *Jawohl*."

"*Jawohl*," Paola yelled back. Her German always sounded slightly jokey.

"*Ciao, ciao*." A blond girl squeezed by, flipping long blond hair over one shoulder. Catherine, a Quebecois, always flirting with the literature instructor.

I turned away from her, and there was Michel, smoking, one hand in his jeans pocket, his lips pinched with boredom. He was in my cultural studies class, a French boy with sufficient German to argue with our instructor over the strenuous subjunctive-tense articles she forced us to read from the

*Franfurter Allgemeine.*

Michel looked at me with a flicker of interest. "Na, was denkst Du?"

"Guten Abend," I said, stiffly, trying to think of a response. "Ich denke—uh—"

"Oh, hell," he said. "Forget about German."

I hesitated. I'd been trying to avoid speaking English with my classmates. But it would feel good to rattle off some fast idiomatic American English and confuse this guy. "Sure," I said, with a cool smile.

"So, what do you think?" he repeated in English.

"About what?" Sipping the Chianti, I saw how slender he was, his wrists narrower than mine. Despite my bold lipstick and new German boots, he'd probably suss me out as a fellow nerd, honors student and secretary of the university German club.

"What do you think about Germany?"

"I love Germany. It's gorgeous. It's German I can't stand," I joked.

"Let me guess. You love the castles, the cathedrals, and the cobblestone streets." His English had a lovely soft French curve to it.

How could anyone not love the castles, the cathedrals, and the cobblestone streets? Even in my worst moments I could see how venerable and lovely Marburg was. I felt the history of the old city when I walked through every afternoon to my bus stop, admiring the traditional Fachwerk, the black wood against the white plaster, the beautiful stone and mortar walls and foundations. In the States, my family lived in a house built in 1972, and considered it Stonehengeian ancient.

"I'll tell you this." Michel leaned closer. He smelled of smoke, and a piney scent. "In a month, you'll be sick of it."

"You think so," I said flatly. I looked out over the crowded smoky parlor for anyone I knew, an avenue of escape.

"You will." He fiddled with the scarf at his neck. Every day he came to class in pressed Levi's and odd, liver-colored sneakers. At home, he would have been beaten up, or elected president of the linguistics society.

"Whatever." By the door, I saw Natasha, a Slovenian art student. I waved.

Michel echoed me—*Whatever*—but in a studied way, as though he were memorizing something.

Natasha came over, and I had to shout my greeting over "Three Chains of Gold." When I turned back to Michel, he was slipping away. "Hey—" I called, but he kept going, shoulders hunched, not looking back.

After that, we were friends. We drank bitter coffee together during breaks, complaining about our instructors ("dumb eff's," Michel pronounced), grammar homework ("effing impossible"), and the German weather ("stupid effing cold").

"You can say, 'fuck,'" I laughed one morning. We shivered on the stone landing outside, so that Michel could smoke.

He looked down his nose at me—lumpy and ill-formed, surrounded by a pale narrow face, eyes the color of motor oil and thin, disapproving lips. "No. It isn't proper."

"You think I'm worried about propriety?" That wasn't exactly flattering.

Hugging his sweater to his shoulders, he said, "I know Americans, Helena. You are like babies in the world. What is the word—Puritan. Puritanical."

Nearly every European I'd met felt free to beat up on naïve Americans, and while I didn't blame them, sometimes it got old. Grumpily, I said, "Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck."

"Say *eff* all you want, but I know that it is unnatural for you."

"Thanks for letting me in on the secret," I shot back, starting up the steps. Michel reached for the door, but I leaned past him to open it myself.



"You can ride shotgun," Ted offered.

"You go ahead," I said. Franke was driving us straight to the Altstadt, the old city, for Kaffekuchen, and I wanted to freshen up with the L'Occitane toiletries.

He was already sliding into the back seat next to me. "I'm not moving."

"I'm not moving." We looked at each other steadily. This was how I should have behaved in Amsterdam, I thought. But I hadn't wanted to be a hardass. Why did the woman always have to be a bitch? I worried about what Baxter would say if we screwed things up, came home with no agreements. Well, I'd find out soon enough.

While Franke tried out her dictionary-English on Ted, I smoothed the wrinkles in my gray Ann Taylor slacks and massaged the L'Occitane moisturizer into my hands. At a stoplight, Franke looked at me in the rearview mirror, her smile reaching from one ladybug earring to the other. "Helena, are you two. . .?"

"*Ach, nee!*" I exclaimed. Somehow the slang for *nein* came back to me.

"Nay!" Mocking me, Ted turned it into a whinny. I elbowed him, and he caught my arm, holding it between his own. "Mine now."

I asked, "Franke, how are your boys?" As she brought me up to date—the twins married, Richard in the Peace Corps in Haiti—I watched the passing Mercedes taxis and the queues at the Imbiss sausage carts on the sidewalks.

Ted kept hold of my arm. His possessiveness annoyed me. Men like him—men like him, was I really thinking this?—were accustomed to going after what they wanted. But that wasn't interesting. Men getting what they wanted had been done and done to death.

At Café Vetter, we claimed a table overlooking the Lahn River. Ted drank two steins of golden beer, declining the plum cake we ordered. Then we wandered the cobblestoned Altstadt, Ted snapping a photo of Franke and me on the very spot where the Reformation had started in the 1500's. I wondered if Miss Idaho would ask about us.

Later, at the house, Franke started an early dinner, banishing us to the living room with a bottle of chilled Riesling. Ted stretched out on the carpet, his head lolling against the familiar brown couch, just inches from my knee. I yawned, sleepy from jet lag and wine. Sunlight streamed in from the windows overlooking the garden. The house smelled of oranges, and something spicy. I had sat in this living room so many times, under so many circumstances, the only constant a tugging undertow of homesickness, the growing sense that I was waiting to leave.

"Marburg is so amazing," Ted was saying. "It's like going back in time."

I sipped my wine. Typical American. Rode a train, drank some beer, thought he knew Germany.

"Helena, let's stay here," he said, sounding half-serious.

I could see our reflection in the blank television screen across the room, my crossed legs, Ted's sprawl, our blurry features. I got up. "Come on, I'll show you my old room." He followed me down the hallway, his expression slack, lacking its usual vitality. His freckled hands clenched his wineglass.

"Voila." A big sewing machine sat on my former desk. My bed had been replaced with a dusty stationary bicycle. The only thing that seemed familiar was the ceiling crack by the window, and the smell of musty lavender. I had passed four months in this room—sleeping, studying, masturbating, reading. I was different now, a working woman in a gray Ann Taylor suit, traveling the world with a handsome contractor and a corporate charge card. I was unrecognizable. And this time, I didn't have to stay.

Closing the bedroom door, Ted stood over me. The force of his kiss pushed my head against the door with a little thump. His mouth was firm, his lips searching. When I pushed him away so I could catch a breath, I felt the sponginess of his chest hair underneath the crisp white dress shirt.

He spoke into my ear. "When you travel, do you imagine yourself staying?"

"Sometimes." I felt tented by him, his jaw brushing my forehead. Miss Idaho was probably beauty-contestant tall. He probably couldn't tent her.

"I can imagine staying here," he breathed. "Drinking beer, living the life."

"You get tired of cobblestones and castles after awhile." I remembered how awful men in lust looked. As though they were about to be sick.

He looked down at me with eyes the color of old pennies. "But it's all so old, so full of history."

"Sometimes the history is the problem." I grabbed his glass and drained the too-sweet wine. Distantly, Franke was calling, "Hoo-hoo!" I heard the front door bang closed, and an answering, "Hoo-hoo!" Heinrich was home.



Franke had planned a girls' trip to Berlin on Michel's last weekend in Germany. I turned the situation over and over in my mind, trying to think of ways to delay the trip. A sudden illness. A test. Maybe I could invite Michel along. Franke teased me about him when he called the house, and quizzed me relentlessly when I came in late from a night out at Café Barfuss. We talked, I always said, and unfortunately, it was the truth.

Our proper relationship was driving me crazy. I longed to kiss his thin lips, to visit his dorm room and try on his funny sweaters. He held my hand, ruffled my hair, called me his American girl, but things never went any farther. All strangely prudish for a European, I fretted. For a Frenchman. He was the one acting like a Puritan.

The night before the Berlin trip, we sat at our usual corner table at Barfuss, trying to ignore the grunting band onstage. "Don't go to effing Berlin," Michel begged.

It pleased me that he was miserable. He looked awful, his dark eyes sunken, twin spots of color along his narrow cheekbones. Resting my head on his thin shoulder, I nuzzled his neck. He sat very still. "Kiss me good-bye," I challenged.

"No," he said decidedly. "You are cruel to leave me."

I pulled away. What was wrong with him? Often now, I caught myself imagining our future—Michel visiting me at school, my friends thrilled and

intrigued with my pale, gallant Frenchman. Me going to France, lounging together on striped towels on a sun-drenched Riviera beach, making passionate love on a linen-draped bed.

A group swept into Barfuss, laughing loudly enough to be heard over the café din. Catherine, the Quebécois, and some of her British friends—girls in bright lipstick, their boobs hanging out. So obvious. I saw Michel glance at the newcomers. At Catherine, in a fur-lined black ski jacket.

"You're a cruel bastard," I said.

He covered my hand with his. "My little Helena, go have fun in Berlin. Go have your fill of monuments and museums."

"Actually, we're going to a sex club," I said tartly, tired of being patronized. Looking at my watch, I got up. The last bus left in five minutes. If I missed it, I'd have to walk, forty-five minutes through the dark, hilly suburbs.

Michel saw me off at the café door with a long but chaste hug. "*Bis* Wednesday," he called, his voice anxious, and I waved without turning around.

The next morning, as I sat in a train compartment with Franke and her hamper of food, I thought I might be ill. My stomach hurt. My chest ached. I didn't feel like eating. All I could think about was Michel lying in bed, his skinny pale body wrapped in rough dormitory sheets, his thin fingers lighting a cigarette. This was love, I realized. I had never imagined it would be so similar to the flu.

During the stop in Eisenach, Franke tripped and fell on the train platform and broke her ankle. It took us most of the day to get home—X-rays, a cast, Heinrich fetching us in the Audi. At home, as Franke limped off to bed, I phoned the college dorm, but the line rang and rang and no one picked up.

Saturday morning early, I caught the first bus into town, arriving at the dormitory sweating and breathless, the sun a suggestive glow behind the surrounding hills. The dorm's heavy front doors were locked, so I sat down on a bench opposite to wait, munching on red wine cake from Franke's provisions basket.

Finally, a Polish student wheeled her bicycle outside the dormitory. I sprang up, electrified, and bounded up the stairs to the third floor.

At Michel's door, I hesitated, pressing my ear to the wood. Would he be angry if I woke him so early? But this was love. I was high, enervated, on the lip of exhaustion. As I stood there, his door opened, and out came Catherine wearing only a white t-shirt, her nipples poking out as if in greeting.

"Hey," she yawned, shuffling along the corridor past me.

Inside, there was Michel sitting on the edge of the bed, his chest bare and bony. I backed away and ran down the stairs, skipping some. In my stomach, there was a yawning emptiness, the sick sure feeling of being unfortunately and completely wrong. Above me, Michel's voice cracked. "Helena! Wait!"

He caught up as I stomped back through town, dodging the shopkeepers sweeping sidewalks and unrolling awnings. I had never seen him like this, in a mis-buttoned shirt and wrinkled jeans, his hair awry. "Helena." His voice was low, urgent.

I kept walking. I was crying, almost routinely: fat hot tears, no sound.

"Please, I want to talk to you."

"Talk to Catherine," I snapped. At the corner, traffic forced me to slow down.

Michel took my arm. "All right, I effed her. Is that what you want to hear?"

"You *effed* her?" The euphemism was so inadequate, that just hearing it

stranded me halfway between laughing and crying.

"Helena, I don't even like her. You don't understand."

I spat, "You would never even kiss me, Michel, and you slept with that slut. I can't believe it."

"That's why." His voice was strangled. His wet eyelashes were stuck together. "With her it doesn't mean anything. With you—you mean something to me."

"Sure," I said bitterly, but as I waited for a truck to pass, I saw that in a way it could make sense. In an anachronistic, European way, if I were a nubile virgin princess and Michel the worldly duke, our marriage a parentally-arranged political alliance. He waited, his palms mashing his temples. I shook my head and wordlessly pushed past him to cross the street.

At the Gleichs, I found Richard watching cartoons in his bathrobe, his hairy feet encased in Garfield slippers. I told him what had happened, my anger wiping out any fear of messing up the German. When I didn't know the right word, I substituted English words, *fuckbastardass*, words he surely knew from American movies. When I finished, he said admiringly, *Du kannst ja deutsch, Helena*, laughing so hard that tears popped out of his beautiful eyes.



Having an affair would be very cosmopolitan. Everybody had affairs. Only Americans got worked up about it.

But maybe now I wouldn't. The whole thing was dragging on, Ted with his appreciative traveler routine, as though he were Columbus and Magellan all rolled into one. I prickled with annoyance. When he praised the plump bratwursts and the buttery potatoes, I translated in a mocking tone. His leg brushed mine, and I leaned away.

"And you said Germans don't eat sauerkraut anymore," he teased, helping himself to more. Franke had worked her usual magic, adding chopped apple and Schmaltz to complement the pungent cabbage.

"Eat up. We need to get you on the nine o'clock train," I said calmly, but underneath pulsed my desire, the urge to crush the crisp white shirt like a paper towel, so that when he left he smelled of Secret and Chanel No.5 and my sweat.

Franke was doing her best to eavesdrop. "*Auf deutsch*," she reminded me sharply.

I felt a tickle of guilt. "Sorry. We're talking about going to the Bahnhof."

"Of course, I'll drive you!"

Heinrich was popping open another brown bottle of beer. "*Mutti*," he scolded. "Let Helena take the car. They might have business to discuss."

As they bickered, I advised Ted, "Heinrich wants to lend us the car."

He smiled with greasy lips. "You and me, alone in the car? Why, Helena."

After dinner, Heinrich took us out to the garage, extracting a key from the pocket of his vest. Behind him, Franke's expression resembled a simmering stew pot. It was going to kill her nosy self not to accompany us to the Bahnhof. "Wow, *danke schoen*," I said, to Heinrich.

"Wow, *bitte schoen*," Franke mocked me, saying *Vow* instead of *Wow*.

Ted echoed her. "*Vow!* God, I love these people!" Franke laughed unwittingly, along with Ted, her pal.

In the car, I busied myself with my seatbelt as Ted said his good-byes. My head ached. I was tired. My instincts had been off this whole trip. It would feel good to get home. Ten years ago, it had finally occurred to me that while I liked the idea of living in Germany, I could never get used to the fact of it, to eggs on pizza or fig-flavored yogurt, to men carrying purses and banks closing for two hours at lunch. Going home, broad streets and Ruffles potato chips had never seemed quite so wonderful.

"You O.K. to drive?" Ted hopped into the car. His breath was warm and alcoholic, his face flushed and open and warm, like a half-made bed..

I backed the Audi out of the driveway. The route to the train station was well marked. I'd have to be a moron to get lost, but it could happen, I supposed.

His hand cupped my elbow. "Their English was pretty good."

"Their English was terrible!" I chanced a look at him, at his handsome profile. "Franke can jabber English phrases for hours, but she doesn't understand a word of it."

"Wow, six hours in Germany and you're all European and dark," he said.

"I'm not dark," I insisted, but it sounded strained. "Franke can't speak English, and she's been correcting my German all day, but you don't speak German so you don't know that."

"Whatever," Ted said. The jokiness was gone from his voice.

The air in the car seemed to have cooled. I shrugged his hand away, reaching over to make sure that my window wasn't down. Stupidly, all I could think about was Baxter. The whole company knew about his affairs with his assistants, laughed about it at the Christmas party every year when his wife showed up with yet another honking big piece of jewelry. I didn't want to be a cliché. One never thought one was.

Behind us, a horn beeped, and I threw the car into gear, gunning through the intersection. Ted cleared his throat.

"So, how much longer are you staying?"

"Just long enough to mutilate the language some more," I said.

Stopping in the drop-off zone, I wished him a good trip. We hugged good-bye, a little longer than people who were ordinary colleagues might hug. "Talk to you next week, Sauerkraut," he said, closing the car door. My teeth were still bared in a polite grin as I pulled away from the station.



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So we're on the way to Giants' spring training in Arizona and the ride is boring as hell so I say to Larry bet you a hundred dollars the next animal we see is a cow. For real he asks me birds don't count I say you're on he says so he glances in the mirror and lets up on the gas till we slow down to about seventy-five and this pickup blows past us with a Rottweiler in the bed.

It's always been like that with Larry and me is my point. Every time. Except once. And that one time I won I wish I hadn't.

It's a couple of years ago when Bonds hit those seventy-three home runs and Larry's going crazy nuts about it. When Barry gets to forty-something Larry's convinced the guy's going to break the record and he wants to see every homer he can. He sneaks out to Pac Bell so often I'm scared he'll get fired and end up homeless or some shit. And then one day he tells me he wants us to go down to the Dodgers series in L.A. He gets me to agree somehow even though I don't care all that much and before I know it there we are in his red Firebird zooming down I-5 through the San Joaquin Valley which I don't care what anybody says is the duller stretch of straight-as-string flat road on the planet. We stop for gas somewhere between Coalinga and Buttonwillow and we're in the convenience store and this totally pneumatic blonde and even

moreso redhead come up behind us in line and they're sort of giggling to themselves but giving us some sidelong glances also.

So I say out of the side of my mouth sort of sotto voce to Larry hundred dollars you can't get them to come to L.A. with us. Without even looking at me he says sotto voce back done and he drops his keys and when he bends over to pick them up he sort of accidentally-on-purpose bumps into the redhead and it just goes on from there. Seems their car's broken down and they need to get to Bakersfield so of course we say we're glad to give them a lift.

On the way back out to the Firebird I say sotto voce Bakersfield is way short of L.A. Sotto voce back he says one step at a time and pretty soon we're cruising. I'm in back with the blonde and the redhead's up front with Larry talking about how nice we are to help out especially when we're headed to something so important and we might even miss a couple of innings. Then she says maybe they could do something to show their appreciation if we'd just like pull off into that cotton field at the next exit and Larry's saying he doesn't think it's such a good idea because of our other obligations but then the blonde starts rubbing on me which I guess the redhead was doing the same with Larry because pretty soon we're on this dusty little side road right by an oil well with the horsehead pumping up and down above the cotton bolls and before we know what's up the girls have us outside the car saying they like it standing up. Then about the time both of us have our pants around our ankles the redhead says let's go and gives Larry a shove and jumps in the Firebird and the blonde does the same to me and they take off so fast Larry and me can't do a thing but stumble around in the middle of the field with our dicks waving around like a couple of miniature baseball bats.

So for once I win the hundred but I don't even want it and Larry never sees his Firebird again or the girls either needless to say. Bonds jacks his seventy-three even though we aren't there and I still get sick every time I hear his name or see his picture which is a lot. But the worst part is Larry acts like it's all my fault calls it my dumb fucking idea even though he didn't have to take the bet or could have taken the keys out of the ignition or some shit like that. We can't hardly look at each other any more and always end up at opposite sides of the room or ends of the table or whatever and no matter how many times I tell myself it's stupid I can't get over wishing I had another chance to lose a bet to the dude. Hundred bucks you can't figure that one out.



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## Contributors' Notes

### **Erin Anderson**

is a Peace Corps Volunteer in Eastern Kazakhstan working with Russian and Kazakh English teachers. She has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Northern Michigan University, and has had essays recently published in *Mississippi Review*, *Cream City Review*, and *www.thesquaretable.com*. You may contact her at [erincamander2003@yahoo.com](mailto:erincamander2003@yahoo.com).

### **Carl R. Brush's**

piece in this issue is his first publication of a short-short story. He has participated in the *Squaw Valley Community of Writers* and the *Napa Valley Writers' Conference*; and he has recently completed a historical novel (working title *The Maxwell Vendetta*) set in early twentieth century Northern California. He lives in Oakland, California with his wife, Susanne, and enjoys the blessings of nearby children and grandchildren.

### **Mark X. Cronin**

lives in Huntington, New York, where he writes his stories, helps his wife with her business, and generates fun and mischief tending to his three sons. His essays and reviews have appeared in the *Long Islander*, *The Wave*, *Fine Times* and *Governance*. His fiction has appeared in *North Atlantic Review*, *the Purple*, and the Japanese magazine *Papyrus*. He can be reached at [mxcronin@bigfoot.com](mailto:mxcronin@bigfoot.com).

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lives and works in Seattle, where she is a telecom employee by day, and a story writer at night and on lunch breaks. Her story, "Naresh Makes the Call," appeared in the Summer 2002 issue of *Colorado Review*.

### **Shellie Zacharia**

is a teacher in Gainesville, Florida. Her fiction has appeared in the *Raleigh News & Observer Sunday Journal* and *Washington Square*, and is forthcoming in *South Dakota Review*, *Dos Passos Review*, *Slow Trains Literary Journal*, *The Powhatan Review*, and *Parting Gifts*.

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## Guidelines for Submissions

Writers are invited to submit literary short stories and essays of up to 8,000 words. Pieces of lighter content are likely to be given more serious consideration. To get more of an idea of what we are looking for, please read *The Somerset Review* or consult our [Recommended Reading List](#). We suggest that contributors be familiar with the writing typically found in literary publications such as [these](#).

Email submissions to [editor@somersetreview.org](mailto:editor@somersetreview.org) as an attachment in MS Word format, or as plain text. You may alternatively submit in hard-copy by sending to 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, NY 11787.

All submissions receive replies as quickly as possible. If we have not responded within three months, please hassle us. We read year-round.

All submitted work is assumed to be original. Book excerpts will be considered if you believe the work stands alone. Reprints will be considered if the work has not appeared elsewhere within the last two years. Simultaneous submissions are accepted.

We do not give previously-published authors any more attention than new writers, and judge submissions objectively on literary merit. Even so, a brief note accompanying the submission is preferred. We are not sure what we want to read in this note, but would appreciate the extra effort, rather than a blank email with an attachment. We are always interested in knowing how you've heard of us, and what you like about us.

Authors retain all rights to their work, and will see drafts of accepted pieces for review prior to release. Unfortunately, contributors cannot be paid at this time.

We nominate stories annually for the *Pushcart Prize*, *New Stories from the South*, and other anthologies and awards.

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Author	Title	Source
Aciman, Andre	Cat's Cradle	From the November 3 <sup>rd</sup> issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1997
Altschul, Andrew Foster	From A to Z	From Issue #1 of <i>Swink</i> , 2004
Anderson, Dale Gregory	The Girl in the Tree	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Alaska Quarterly Review</i> , 2003
Ashton, Edward	<a href="#">Night Swimmer</a>	Online at <i>The Blue Penny Quarterly</i> , Spring/Summer, 1995
Baggott, Julianna	Five	From <i>Other Voices</i> #28, 1998
Bardi, Abby	My Wild Life	From <i>Quarterly West</i> #41, 1995
Baxter, Charles	Snow	From the collection <i>A Relative Stranger</i> , published in 1990
Benson, Amy	Vectors: Arrows of Discontent	A memoir excerpt in Issue 29.2 of <i>New Orleans Review</i> , 2004
Borders, Lisa	Temporary Help	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Bananafish</i> , 1998
Broyard, Bliss	<a href="#">Mr. Sweetly Indecent</a>	From the Fall issue of <i>Ploughshares</i> , 1997
Burns, Carole	Honour's Daughter	From <i>Other Voices</i> #31, 1999
Cain, Chelsea	Pretty Enough To Be a Showgirl	From the Spring issue of <i>Grand Tour</i> , 1997
Cheever, John	The Stories of John Cheever	A collection published in 1980
Christopher, Nicholas	<a href="#">Veronica</a>	A novel published in 1996
Clark, Susan	Besides the Body	From the Spring issue of <i>Red Rock Review</i> , 2004
Crane, Elizabeth	When the Messenger Is Hot	A collection published in 2003
Crowe, Thomas Rain	<a href="#">Firsts</a>	Online at <i>Oyster Boy Review</i> in January, 1997
Dancoff, Judith	Vermeer's Light	From <i>Alaska Quarterly Review's</i> Intimate Voices issue, 1997
Dormanen, Sue	<a href="#">Finishing First</a>	From the Summer issue of <i>Lynx Eye</i> , 1998.
Doyle, Larry	Life Without Leann	From an issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> in Fall, 1990
Kennedy, Thomas E.	Kansas City	From Vol 62 No. 4 of <i>New Letters</i> , 1996
McInerney, Jay	Model Behavior	A novel published in 1998
Millhauser, Steven	<a href="#">Enchanted Night</a>	A novella published in 1999
Moses, Jennifer	Circling	From the Spring issue of <i>Gettysburg Review</i> , 1995
Murakami, Haruki	South of the Border, West of the Sun	A novel published in 1998
Offill, Jenny	<a href="#">Last Things</a>	A novel published in 1999
Orlean, Susan	The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup	A collection of essays published in 2001
Raboteur, Emily	The Eye of Horus	From <i>StoryQuarterly</i> #40, 2004
Robison, Mary	Why Did I Ever?	A novel published in 2001
Salinger, J.D.	For Esme - With Love and Squalor	From the collection <i>Nine Stories</i> published in 1953
Tilghman, Christopher	The Way People Run	From the September 9 <sup>th</sup> issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1991

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[Alaska Quarterly Review](#)

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[Swink](#)

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Kit Chase, Diane E. Dees, Edison McDaniels, Regina Phelps, Jacob Fawcett

### Fall 2002