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TWELVE RULES FOR DRINKING

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts in Humanities

by

Kevin McWilliams Coates

San Rafael, California

May 2014

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Department of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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ABSTRACT

Prohibition had an unexpected side effect: writers who wanted to see themselves as creative nonconformists began to flaunt their relationship with alcohol, adopting the persona of the charmingly and recklessly defiant individualist. Alcohol has been imagined as the writer's muse and has assumed a prominent role in countless works of fiction. My culminating project is a collection of stories and poetry with that common thread: alcohol. Borrowing from the Humanist Alternative of the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Steps, the collection is arranged into twelve sections, each headed by and inspired by a step in the program. My intent is not to disparage these steps but to illustrate how characters struggle with the principles of sobriety. Fiction can probe the profound effects of alcoholism on individuals, families, friends and society. My hope is that these pieces give the reader the opportunity to explore a character's life and feelings and in this way perhaps give a face to the often complex experiences of alcoholism. As the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book asserts, storytelling can be healing medicine.

Acknowledgements

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To my husband Dennis for his continual support.

To my children who have always encouraged me to keep growing.

And to my mother and father who saved every scrap I ever wrote and told me I was a writer.

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Step One: We accept the fact that all our efforts to stop drinking have failed.

Honesty

Egg Shells

"It's always something." She thinks she invented the phrase. I catch myself before I start to tell her – again – about Gilda Radner. She – my mother, not Gilda Radner – is fishing one stray piece of eggshell out of the broken eggs in the bowl. She does it the same way she has always taught me: using the edge of the broken eggshell. I don't understand how this works, but it does. It's like the edge of the shell is some sort of fragment magnet, and I want to ask her about it, but I wait. She will either continue to fish the stray piece out in her OCD kind of way – for a full ten minutes if it takes that long – or she will forget exactly what she is doing.

She forgets. She hands me the broken eggshell piece she is holding, asking, "Didn't you want this?"

No, this is not what I wanted, not at all. I didn't find any bottles in the kitchen recycling last night, but I was tired after my eight-hour drive here from my dorm at the Claremont Colleges. She had been slurry when I got in, but all she said was, "It's late, that's all. A little wine with dinner, Lucy, that's all." I will have to look more carefully before I go to bed tonight.

We eat our eggs in the breakfast nook surrounded by plants that are turning brown and yellow and dying. My mother has lived in this house since she was twenty-six, and

she never killed a plant in all of those years. Now, at fifty-one, she doesn't even see them. I don't find the eggshell in my eggs and wonder if she has swallowed it. Neither of us is all that hungry but you're supposed to eat breakfast. She is wondering why I am here, and I am too unsure of what I am doing to tell her.

There are no more eggs, and not much of anything else in the cupboard, so after breakfast we make a run to the store. I drive her in my car. Between eating our scrambled eggs at home and pulling a shopping cart out of the puzzle of carts in the lot, she has become giddy, and I can't figure out how. In the time I've been away at school, she must have become quite efficient at grabbing sips of something when no one's looking.

My aunt had found her at the store weeks ago, early in the morning, swaying through the aisles barefoot in a pair of sweats with nothing but whiskey in her cart. My uncle found her shoes in the produce aisle and drove my mother home, and my aunt drove my mom's car to their house, parking it on the street and mailing me the keys. Since that day my mother has relied on the kindness of her neighbors, the same ones who taught her about Vodka Collins, to get to the store.

I insist that she buy eggs, bread, frozen pot pies, soup, things she just might cook for herself without too much planning. She turns the cart toward the alcohol aisle but I won't let her head there. It is easy to distract her because she doesn't remember where we are except for a few seconds at a time.

At the checkout, she complains when I return the maraschino cherries to the checker and say we won't buy them. "It's fruit," she whines, "and you're always telling me to eat fruit, Lucy."

“No, Mom,” I say, “you are always telling me to eat fruit.”

She looks at the checker and says, “Fruit is good for you, you know. This is like killing your children in the bathtub.” But she doesn’t mean that at all. She means throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but I don’t know if I should explain that or let the checker pretend he didn’t hear it.

Her favorite drink now is an Old-Fashioned, a syrupy red thing not at all old-fashioned looking. When she first started to drink it, she taught me to make one, and I was pretty good at it. I knew how to measure out the whiskey, the bitters, the sugar, and how to spill a little of the maraschino cherry juice into the glass as I topped it off with a cherry. I was a senior in high school and felt some sort of perverse grown-up pride when I did it right. She told me not to take even one sip – and unwisely trusted me not to – each time she handed me the whiskey to mix my killer Old-Fashioned. Before I left for college that fall, I had come to the place where I refused to mix one; I wouldn’t even buy her what she needed so she could do it herself. When I wouldn’t get the cherries or the sugar or the bitters, she’d drink just straight whiskey. Occasionally I pretended to cave and told her I’d do it, but I only put in a thimble full of whiskey. She could tell.

“Lucy, dear, did you forget something?” she always asked, and I always said no.

“It’s a new brand of whiskey, Bothby’s,” I’d say, or Flanders’, or Thormand’s – that, in fact, was the most fun part of the whole charade, making up the words. “The taste is something you’ll get used to.” She didn’t get used to it, of course. She just drank enough of the damned weak things to get what she wanted anyway. I wanted my fake one to act like a placebo, but my mother craved the real thing.

Every now and then in my life I drink like my mother: I finish off either a whole bottle of wine or half a bottle of hard liquor, preferably gin, each and every night for at least a month. I started when I left home, when I wondered if I would have to end up just like my mother. I could drink, maybe, responsibly. Could I live without alcohol? How much did I need what she needed? Every now and then I tested myself. I made the decision to drink every night for a month; I tried that test over and over. I'd think about it – anticipate it – rely on it – and wallow in it. The last time I tried it was just last month, when I knew I was coming home. I do it just so I can stop, to see if I really can stop. I always can. I hope that's the difference between my mother and me.

Her first drink just five years ago was a Vodka Collins. She liked the tall, cool glasses and their appearance of lemonade. The neighbors brought them over in pitchers that first summer in the evenings after dad died. My mother had never been a drinker, but she accepted the drink just to have the neighbors' company on the back patio. At sixteen years old, I liked them with her. When she learned to mix them herself, she kept the vodka in the freezer, and in my junior year I would sip from the ice-cold bottle when I got home from school, replacing the real stuff with water. I got caught when I'd replaced so much vodka with water that the damn thing froze.

Before my father died, she didn't drink much at all. A bottle of wine would sit on the kitchen counter for almost a whole week; she and my dad would have a small glass at dinner, and that was it. In those days I didn't try to sneak a sip. Later, when it was only the two of us, I could finish off an eight-ounce glass, leaving red tears running down the side of the bottle like blood, and she wouldn't even notice.

I felt sorry for her in those days, and I didn't try to stop her from drinking. I would wake up to find her crying at night, and all I could do was pat her hand. "I hate these dreams, these awful dreams where you don't know who's awake and who's dead," she would tell me. I couldn't help her figure it out.

"It's all right, Mom," I would say, over and over. But of course it would never be all right again. From the moment he died she started becoming someone else, someone not my mother. She had been a quietly efficient mother; if anything, she had been too quiet. I had two mothers in my life, the one before and this one after. I never really understood either of them.

She missed my father so much. They had been truly happy as far as I – as a child – could tell. He had a way of making her laugh no matter what was happening. She waited for him at the door every single evening, and no matter how hard his day seemed to be, he'd be sure to say something to her when he walked in that made her laugh. They couldn't walk downtown without linking arms. He would tip his head at a particularly odd person –maybe a rich guy with absolutely garish taste in clothes – and say, "That guy looks like he's swept a few sidewalks in his time." She would laugh and laugh, even though she – and I, walking behind – had no idea what that meant. My father probably didn't know either, but he knew how to make her laugh. I laughed right along with the both of them.

And then, when the worst happened, no one was there to make her laugh. He died suddenly, falling asleep at the wheel, so she didn't have any time to get herself ready for losing him. He left her with plenty of money to live on but with no idea how to live.

I missed him, too, but it didn't seem to matter as much to anyone since she was so blatantly needy. At the funeral service, she was the center of everyone's concern, and I stood behind her in the only black dress I owned.

"She's going to need you," my aunt said.

"What about me?" I shot back. "Who is going to take care of me?" In the coming weeks I would learn that I had lost both parents in that crash but no one wanted to see me cry.

I knew she was going to say it, and she did. "God only gives us what we can handle," she said, and if she hadn't been my aunt I would have slapped her. I wished I were weak right then and there so that I could not be given this impossible thing to handle.

My mother has been living in this house – bereft – since that day. The plants are dying, her refrigerator has a puddle of something sticky on the bottom shelf, and nothing in the house is really clean, a film of dust on every surface as though she left the windows open in a sand storm. She calls me once a week, but our conversations are fragmented, and I don't know what she does all day, even when I ask. When she does think of something to tell me, something about the neighbors I barely know, she repeats her story over and over until I can say it verbatim back to her, and I do, but then she thinks I'm being a smart ass. I try to ignore the lost quality in her voice and the conspicuous slurring together of her words because I have other things to think about. Her sister – my aunt – is worried enough that she has asked me to come home from college for the summer to take

care of her. She called me every week for the last month and counted things into the phone for me: days lost, bills left unpaid, weight dropped, bottles emptied.

After the grocery trip, while my mother sleeps off her morning hangover, I search the house. This time I am not hoping for the best – and she can't fool me. I feel like a whiskey-sniffing dog. I find some partially full bottles: in the toilet tank, at the bottom of the garbage can, in her underwear drawer. No hiding place is that original, and I'm mad at her for that. It all goes down the sink, and she wakes to find absolutely no consolation there, only me.

The next days are horrible. She is angry with me: embarrassed that I'm seeing her without a shower wearing her oldest nightgowns, worried that I'm doing her laundry wrong, trying to take the dust rag away from me as I clean the living room but not sure when she gets it what to do with it, forgetting from hour to hour what exactly is happening. She is tired of me making food that neither of us will eat. She looks but can't find even one bottle, and it feels to both of us like another kind of loss. I don't know what to do when all she does is cry and sleep, and my aunt won't answer her phone.

I get through the time by looking at old photo albums, by remembering her stories about me as her baby. I see pictures of me with no hair, ribbons glued to the side of my head with double-sided tape. She is holding me up for the camera. She is keeping my hand tight in hers as we walk to the park in photos with pinked edges and the date stamped at the bottom. In our real moments, she walks from the bed to the bathroom to the couch, never changing out of her nightgown, looking to me for help. I get out the albums and show her. I remind her that I had colic and cried for three months straight

when I was born and that all she could do was hold me, walk me, sing to me, bathe me, love me. "Three months to the day," she always told me. I retell her those stories and she looks at me as if I am a ghost. "Three months to the day," I tell her.

"Is that what you want?" she asks me. I'm not sure what she means: do I want to be her child again, or do I want her to stop drinking, or is one of us going to start crying?

I say yes, but three months to the day sounds like a whole lifetime to me.

In a little over a week, one unexpected morning, my mother wakes up coherent. She opens the curtains in the kitchen and turns to me. "Scrambled eggs? Toast with it?" She's hungry.

"Sure."

This time, not one egg breaks. As we eat, I put on the morning cartoons. For just a minute she is my mother again. She asks about school, about the boy she thinks is my boyfriend; I tell her I broke up with him months ago.

"With …?"

"Andy," I tell her. She only met him once, and even I thought he was pretty forgettable.

"You're okay with it all?" She is looking down into her coffee, worried to look at my face.

"I'm okay, sure," I tell her. "It just got … old, I guess. We're still friends." I don't tell her that it was February, that it was one of the months I drank each and every

evening, trying to be glad that I was no longer tied to a boy I did not love, but worrying that I'd never be tied to anyone ever again, and especially anyone like my father. I doubt that my mother or I will ever be loved so open-heartedly again. It feels like a curse.

She asks why I'm home.

"For you, Mom. For summer break."

Her eyes startle open, and then something seems to crack.

"Oh, I see. Lucy …"

"It's okay, Mom."

"No, it's not." She sits looking at her plate and sets her fork down even though some food is still there. "Summer?"

"Mom -- "

I start talking, trying to convince her that being there is fun for me, that I love being home. I'm not sure what words I'm using because I've never thought them out loud, but whatever they are, they feel insincere, and we both know it. I don't say what a weakling she is, and I can't tell her how angry I am. She leans to kiss me on the cheek but misses somehow, and she goes into the bathroom.

While she is out of the kitchen, I do the things I am good at: I clear the dishes, I put things away, I make sure it all looks neat and tidy and ordered. I try not to listen for my mother. I dust, pushing the dust rag across every surface as if it is feeling itself I want to erase. No clutter. Eventually I accept what I need to do: I go toward the bathroom. I

walk quietly – do I want to surprise her? – and slowly. I am putting off what I can't control.

When I open the door and find her there twenty minutes later, she is holding a bottle of pills in one hand and her razor in the other. She is sober, and she can't decide what to do. All of her energy has been used up making our eggs, and she is left now with only the immediate reality of a bathroom with aquamarine tiles and faded towels.

"Mom?"

"Lucy …" She looks so confused that her eyes don't even look the right color.

"Is this what I'm supposed to be doing?" she asks.

"No, Mom."

"Then what?"

I just go ahead and ask it. "Do you want to die?" I don't know if it's the right thing to say, I don't know if I want her to say yes or no; I don't know if I will do anything at all based on whatever answer she can find.

"I don't think so," she says, and I know that is as good as I am going to get.

I help her off of the toilet, straighten her nightgown, smooth her hair, but my hands are too business-like. I have done this too often, and no matter how badly I have done it, it's just not fair. I think it might not be so bad if she really did go away. My hand is holding her up by the arm just above the elbow, much too tight. She is still gripping the pill bottle and the package of razors.

"So what the hell are the pills for, Mom? The razors? Deciding on the lesser of two evils?"

She just starts to cry and puts both things down, gently, on the edge of the bathtub. "I don't want to die, I don't think," she says. "I can't remember." She pulls herself out of my hands and sits down on the floor.

I know that once again it is up to me to get her back on her feet.

The thing is, I'm not sure getting her on her feet is the kindest thing. Without the alcohol, she just sits and wonders. With the alcohol, at least she can still laugh. She makes conversation. I am in great need of some sort of conversation.

I go to the kitchen and do what I've always done best: I mix up an Old-Fashioned. I hand it to her in the bathroom and go back to the kitchen to make another. We sit on the aquamarine tile floor and drink.

Step Three: We turn to our fellow men and women, particularly those who have struggled with the same problem.

Surrender

Baseball and Booze

"Write what you know," the teacher said. "Be sure you have three paragraphs, and don't forget to check your spelling and punctuation."

I wrote:

Baseball is my favorite sport. Baseball makes sense because of the rules, which are enforced by the umpires. Referees are striped, and that's why they are called zebras, but umpires wear suits, and that's why they are called "sir." My father is an umpire now, but he played baseball when he was younger and did not have a beer belly. My mother says his beer belly gets in his way, but I only see him drinking gin fizzes. He drinks gin fizzes on Sunday mornings when the neighbors come over for brunch. All of the other days he works, and he says you can't work after a gin fizz.

Gin fizzes are light yellow because of the raw egg, so they look pretty. I asked my father to add some food coloring to make it pink, but he said you can't do that. He is an umpire, so he knows the rules. You make a gin fizz in a blender so a gin fizz is loud, and it is always better to wait until everyone in the family is awake before you start the blender so no one wakes up mad on Sunday and has to go to church and tell God they woke up mad. When there are gin fizzes and powdered sugar donuts for breakfast, the kitchen table is light and sugary, and you want to think it will make the morning sweet.

You can't play real baseball after a gin fizz. My father can play ball with me, but that's because I'm a girl and baseball is not that important with a girl. He started playing ball with me on a gin fizz morning after he saw me throw a ball with my right hand and with my right foot forward. He came out of the house yelling, "No child of mine will throw a ball like that while I'm alive." He practices with my brothers on Saturday mornings and with me on gin fizz Sundays, so I guess I have gin fizzes to thank for my baseball talent. I play shortstop, which everyone knows is the most important position after pitcher. My dad was a pitcher. My brothers are pitchers. They all spit a lot but girls aren't supposed to spit even when they are playing baseball. That is one of the rules the umpires enforce, which brings me back to my first paragraph, which means I am now concluding.

* * *

"Write what you know," said the teacher. "Be sure to state your opinion clearly and support it with concrete details. Use robust vocabulary."

I wrote:

Baseball is the finest sport ever created (opinion sentence). It is a sport where the point is more elevated than to not knock into someone or jump on them, but is instead to do your best as an individual but never forget you are part of a team. Baseball requires finesse (robust vocabulary). You need to know how to run, how to catch, how to hit, and you have to know a plethora (robust vocabulary) of rules. If you break a rule, there are immediate consequences, not like in football when you knock someone's mouth guard on purpose and nothing happens except the guy you hit gets a concussion. In baseball you

will be sent to the bench just for using the wrong words. In baseball you never want to mention someone's mother. When the fans eat too many hot dogs and drink too many beers at the ball park, they sometimes forget this rule, and even fans can get kicked out. That is an effective immediate consequence.

There are many rules in baseball that the ordinary fan is not familiar with (by the way, I know you said not to end a sentence with a preposition but baseball is a sport of the people and the people would not write: with which the fan is not familiar). There is the number of strikes (3), the number of outs (3), the number of innings (9), and the number of players (9), which makes one wonder if the game was designed as a multiple of three. But then there are four balls, and any number of foul balls unless you are playing on the street at home, and then it's four fouls and you're out. But the most inspirational (robust vocabulary) rule is the infield fly rule. It is a rule that makes sure you can't cheat the other team by pretending to be bad at what you do. In baseball you have to be proud of what you do and everyone assumes that you do your best.

My father taught me the infield fly rule. He takes me with my brothers to a professional baseball game every chance he gets, and he lets us take turns picking the seats. We get frozen chocolate malt ice cream, and my dad gets beer in tall glasses fit for a major leaguer. One time I picked the seats in the last row of the upper deck, and that baseball game looked like nothing I'd ever seen before. The players looked inconsequential (robust vocabulary), and the field was so far away it was hushed like a TV show with the volume down low. Ever since that day in the top row I've wondered if all things look that different from a distance. Maybe when baseball players are old men, they will look back on their lives, and their lives will look different. My father is not that

old, but he already looks back on his life and says things like, "I'm not complaining, but I never got paid as much as that prima donna." Even if the rules of the game now are the same, the players are different, and he says the ambiance (robust vocabulary) is different.

When I am older, I will look back on my life as if I am in the last row of the upper deck. I will remember all of the rules, but the people will look different, and it will seem hushed, like the few seconds after the end of the National Anthem. By that time, maybe even a swing and a miss will be negligible (that is enough robust vocabulary for one paper). But since baseball can thus instruct one about one's life, you can see why I think baseball is the finest sport ever created.

* * *

"Write what you know," the TA said.

Great, I thought. I have to write about baseball or booze. Again.

"Use vivid details – make it real. Make me feel as though I were there."

Who in their right mind would want to be *there*? I couldn't wait to leave home because of the vivid details. Reality was being eight and coming home from a dinner out with my eyes shut in the back seat – if your eyes are shut, you can't see the accident coming. When I was nine I didn't tell my parents when parent conferences were but hid the note from the teacher in my backpack, praying that no one would call home. I remember being twelve and answering the same questions over and over again until I either started yelling in frustration or got very quiet and was sent to my room for being too quiet. And I remember baseball.

Baseball is like mathematics. Baseball makes sense. The rules are predictable, and I like to think that most of the players have a reverent feeling when they are on the field. I can see the geometry of the field with my eyes closed, and I can tell you the scoring numbers of the different positions, the way to score the play that makes it look like a subtraction problem. I know when to write K and when to write it backwards. I wasn't allowed to play once I was out of elementary school, of course; I was in high school in the days before girls were allowed on the field, but I was the first girl they allowed into the dugout. The baseball coach at my high school had played for my father and had known me since I was a baby. The sport of baseball is huge but the community of people involved in it is incestuous, and he thought he owed my dad something. I was his payback. He did it just to be nice, just to give me somewhere to sit when I showed up to watch practice each day, but once I got started scoring the game, he kept me because I was good. I was the first girl to have a gold baseball on a chain around my neck that I earned by being the official scorekeeper when we won the championship and not merely by going steady with a baseball player.

The first spring I was in college, I walked into the Physical Education building and right to the office of the baseball coach and told him I wanted to work for him. It turns out he knew my father – even at the collegiate level, obviously, baseball is an incestuous community. My father had already called him to tell him about me. I had wanted to make it on my own merit, but decided to think of it as payback for all those years I tagged along behind him.

I loved being in the dugout. It was like I was hiding in plain sight; no one expected a girl to be there. Baseball players – in the days before steroids – were the best

looking athletes of all. They weren't neckless fire hydrants like football players or bean poles like basketball players. They were regular, athletic, healthy looking boys. In the dugout we pretended we hadn't been out drinking together the week before. We pretended we hadn't gone back to my room. We pretended I was a normal girl who just happened to hang out in the dugout.

I was heartbroken when I had to quit. I wasn't fired – I quit. The varsity team had three people who scored the games: two sophomore boys and me. I found out that the guys who scored the games were paid five dollars an hour, but I only received five dollars a game. Are they doing a different job, I asked the Athletic Director? Is there something wrong with my work? No, you're the best we've got, he told me. But you're a girl. When the male scorers kept the books they were sloppy, and I could drink them under the table after a double header, but there it was: I was a girl.

I waited until one afternoon when they couldn't find anyone else to cover the game, and then when I showed up, I asked: Five dollars an hour, right? No. Then I quit. I was burning a huge bridge in that moment but it sure felt good – for that moment – like I was striking a blow for women everywhere even if no one knew it but me. The AD was really upset. He had to score and announce the game himself. I sat in the stands and watched. In the fourth inning, he announced, "The score is tied, three to nothing," and everyone laughed. I waved at him and left.

I felt as though I'd ripped off my right arm. When I got home I opened a beer and called my dad. "You're telling me it's about the money?" he asked. "Haven't I taught you anything?" And he told me again about how he picked strawberries for eight hours a day

in the summer just to make enough money to play in the spring. He told me again about how he walked eight miles to the C and H Sugarcane factory and back again in the winter just to make the money he needed so he could play in the spring. “It’s not about the money,” he said, and I heard him clink the ice in his glass. “It’s about the game. It’s always about the game.” Then he asked what I would have done with the extra ten bucks anyway, wouldn’t I just have wasted it on booze or clothes or something I sure as hell already had enough of? “You were lucky,” he told me, “to have had a place in the game at all.”

The rest of the season was still there, rolling out on the field like someone else’s vacation. I found reasons to walk past the field on game days, standing by the fence in left field. I couldn’t make myself get any closer to the dugout. The left fielder was embarrassed to see me at first. I felt naked out of the dugout, just standing there like a regular girl without a scorebook or a hat. Eventually he got used to me. He even tossed me a foul ball one time that he caught at the fence, but he got in too much trouble to do it again. Back in the dugout Coach yelled, “This isn’t the show, Riley. Every one of those balls is a dollar of the tuition your mother pays each year.” Coach broke the rule: no talking about someone’s mother. Riley struck out in the next inning.

I was there for every home game, leaning into the chain link, calling the game just for the fielder and me. Full count, one gone, two on, a sacrifice could bring in the tying run. At bat, Martin, in the squat today for the Hornets. He hits a little dribbler to third. Tanner tags and spins, hurling to second just in time, ending the Hornets’ chances to tie it up this inning. If Ramirez can hold them for just three more outs we’ll end with a score of 5-4, Aggies.

The dugout looked so far away from left field. I had five bucks in my pocket and the sun was in my eyes. “Hey,” I called to the fielder as he trotted away from me. It was a long trot for him back to the dugout. He turned back to me. From this distance he looked like he was smaller than I was.

* * *

“Write what you *don’t* know,” the professor said. “Don’t try to surprise me – try to surprise yourself.”

I panicked. I didn’t know so many things. That list could include the automobile industry, Antarctic animals, meteors, probiotics. I couldn’t turn any of that into a story without hours of research. Maybe that was what the professor was suggesting: we can only write when we stretch. Seventh Inning Stretch! I knew baseball, and I knew booze, but I didn’t know why the game had built into it a carved-out time for the two to join forces. That would not be creative writing; it would be pure research. I’d have to put someone new into the story, someone absolutely not *me*. A Mormon.

I wrote:

Joseph Riley knew it was coming, but he still was not at all prepared. Six and a half innings gone and here it was, time to sing, “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” or, if the stadium executives were feeling particularly patriotic and continuing to capitalize on post 9-11 patriotism, “God Bless America.” Maybe both. Joseph was not a good singer, and he didn’t want Amy to find that out on a first date.

“Heading to the men’s room,” he said.

"Now?"

"It's okay?"

"If you have to, I guess. But don't you just love the feel of the whole stadium singing 'God Bless America'? You'll miss it, and I kind of wanted to share it with you."

Joseph didn't like the feel of a whole crowd of people doing any one thing, but he sat down again. Then he remembered and stood. The good thing about a crowd singing is that if you mouth it right, no one needs to know, just a few notes here and there loud enough to convince. Amy smiled. Worth it.

"Do you know," she asked, "why we have a seventh inning stretch?"

Joseph would have to do more research before he took her up on her offer to go to more games. He knew her father had season tickets, but he hadn't know it was such a *thing* for her.

"Why?"

"Well, there are a lot of possible explanations, but the favorite is that in 1910 when William Taft was watching the Washington Senators, he was super uncomfortable in the seats. He weighed 300 pounds, you know. So he stood up to stretch in the middle of the seventh, and all the fans – to be respectful, you know – stood up with him. And there you go."

"Poor William Taft," Joseph said before thinking if that was the right thing to say or not.

"Why poor? Don't you think it was a sign of respect?"

"Well, it highlighted his weight, don't you think? He was the heaviest president we've ever had, and to be remembered for being fat and making everyone stand up – well, I'd be embarrassed."

Amy looked impressed. "I never thought about it like that," she finally said.

Nailed it.

"Can you get me a beer if you're going to the men's room," she asked.

Joseph didn't need to go to the men's room, but that was too much to explain. "Sure," he said. He came back with a beer and a lemonade.

"No beer for you?" she said as she took the sloppy cup from him.

"I don't drink," he said. Here it comes, he thought. Be ready. It always made people nervous when he said that, like he was some recovering user or something, someone who might blow at any minute.

"Why not?"

"Mormon." Simplicity in all things was often the best answer – he hoped.

"Mormons don't drink?"

"Nope. No alcohol, no coffee, no tea. Some people say no carbonated drinks, but that's not really the case."

"Why didn't you get a coke then?"

"Caffeine?"

"Oh, right. Why not a 7-UP or something?"

"Never got used to the carbonated thing. My parents were convinced it was a part of the Mormon Word of Wisdom, but it's not. Not the only thing they were wrong about."

That made her laugh. Nailed it again.

"Well, if we get that far, I'll get the lemonade at the fourteenth-inning stretch," she said.

"And at the twenty-first?"

"Let's see if we make it that far."

Yes, Joseph thought. Let's see how this all turns out.

* * *

It was a start. Follow the rules. Write what you know and what you don't know. Assume that you are doing your best. Remember to stretch.

Step Five: We ask our friends to help us avoid these situations.

Integrity

One Drink

I mean, it's only one drink, you know, and one drink never killed anyone, not a single person, not even that good for nothing drunk you see in the doorway on Fifth Street West, the one with brown pants the color of used up dirt and the parka in that hideous orange color that makes him look like a criminal on the side of the highway, picking up trash, but he's not a criminal, because just being drunk does not make you a criminal any more than wearing a ring makes you a jeweler, if you know what I mean, but you don't know what I mean, because you're giving me that look – that look that says, "I know what you mean," when you really don't know, you just assume, and somehow you always assume the worst, especially about me, which is such a sad thing, because it did not used to be this way between us, and in fact, it used to be just the opposite, with you so thin and so full of laughter and me so – I have to say it – debonair with my brown suede hat like the one that alligator hunter in Australia wore, and we fancied ourselves like modern characters in *The Great Gatsby*, but then, just like in that book, things started to take on an edge, became too real, like the ocean which for a while looks blue green and powerful and somehow contained and mysteriously unknowable but then becomes angry and gray and invades the shore and threatens to take small children and dogs off leash and is just too much in focus: that's what we became, too much in focus, and you quit laughing so much and said you knew what I meant when I said I just needed one drink to keep going but you really didn't, I know you didn't because one day

you just stopped, cold turkey, and you wouldn't take a sip of my gin or have one beer or even any of that fancy wine my brother always had, and that was that, you were lost to me even though you said that I was lost to you, but that never made much sense to me, because here I am, still, and here I still am, all the time, and all I ever ask you for is just one damned drink – that and just one smile, but can you even remember how to give me one without that look on your face, and what is the problem, I want to ask you with that holier than thou look on your face that I'd like to wipe off or slap off or even kiss off, but I don't, so I sit very still and wonder, what is the problem with just one drink anyway?

Step Seven: We earnestly hope that they will help.

Humility

Baby Teeth

Janice liked to tell people that her brother had run away 1,689 days ago, and then when she saw them mentally trying to divide that by 365, she'd say, "Get a life." In close to five years, she never tired of that excellent excuse to act angry.

Her brother Jerry left when he was 15 and she was 14. She did not know the space he occupied in her life until he was gone. Every one of the 1,689 days had been filled and emptied slowly. She didn't know what to do with the time.

"Clean your room," her mother said. Her mother was busy wiping the baseboards with a wet rag, not letting any grit get under her fingernails.

"Buy a Ford," yelled the mynah bird Joe in the hallway, a leftover from her grandfather. He was gone, too. So was her father.

"Hat trick," said her mother, when she found out that Jerry was gone.

The day he left, she tried to pull him back up the front stairs, tried to take away the backpack full of – what? She wanted to see what he thought he needed to take. "Don't go," she pleaded.

"Can't you see?" he asked, pulling away. "Can't you see I'm already gone?"

"One day," she said out loud the next morning. She started to look for him constantly: in dented cars at the side of the road, at the 7-11, at gas stations, in the

hallways at the movie theater, at the food court in the mall. She never consciously stopped looking.

At home, she made a list of all of the things he had taken with him: his fleece vest, his fountain pen, his running shoes, a copy of his favorite Hemingway, the picture of the two of them, ages six and five, at the edge of the Russian River. All of the things she couldn't find, she assumed he had taken. She didn't know why he needed the one amber earring or the screwdriver her mother needed to fix the kitchen cabinet.

She found her first letter later that month.

Dear Janice,

Once upon a time, a little old man lived all alone at the edge of an ocean. His house was whitewashed with moonlight, and the sun reflected its shine. He polished the windows until they were an open invitation, but the sea creatures ignored him and pretended they did not see him. Each day he polished his windows with soft flannel rags and stood at the end of the world. "Come on in," he would call in a voice full of sand. But only the smallest creatures came close.

So the very old man started to shrink, started to fold in upon himself until his teeth were as small as seed pearls. The moonlight from his house washed over and filled him, and he himself became a creature in the ocean listening to a voice he almost remembered calling, "Come on in." The silence was his comfort. He lived for two hundred years, but the house fell away in only fifty. Today, with no one calling, it is full of ocean creatures who needed to leave home.

Love,

Jerry

* * * * *

She left for college 1,454 days and eight letters later. She hoped she might see her mother's heart break to be left alone at home, but her mother was busy vacuuming the sofa cushions.

"Jerry will write to me," she said to her mother, "so I'll know he's okay."

The vacuum stopped. "But I won't know he's okay," said her mother. They both knew that of course Janice would never tell her; it was such an easy way to act angry for both of them.

She started school and told herself she was far too smart for this crap, that it was far too easy. She had read all of the literature books assigned that semester while still in high school, and although it would not be true to say she was bored, it would be true to say she could pass without much effort. She had too much time. She looked in the lecture halls and on the bike paths and in the local bars, but she didn't find anything she wanted. She decided her life was a metaphor: she could not decide for what.

She introduced herself at the parties where big, beaten-dull kegs of foamy ocean beer filled the yards and people danced around the tap like bees with red pollinated cups. People moved constantly, wiggling the air into undulating waves of physical questions.

Can I get you a beer? No, she said each time.

Are you seeing anyone? No.

Can I get you a beer? No, thank you.

Can I get you a beer? No, I'm quite capable of getting my own beer.

Are you seeing anyone? No, not anyone special at the moment.

Are you seeing anyone? No, not right now.

Are you seeing anyone? No, I'm blind.

She went to parties wearing a single bed sheet toga over boxer shorts. She went to parties dressed as Mrs. Santa Claus. She wore nun habits, bare-bellied genie pants. She showed up at every party as a question mark.

"Oh, I get it," someone always said. "How clever! I *get* why you dressed that way."

"Why?" she asked. That they pretended to know gave her a new reason to act angry.

She learned that a bottle of cheap red wine would float in a hot tub. She added cloves, a cinnamon stick, screwed the top back on and said she was recorking it, said it was hot mulled wine. She pretended it was snowing. When it did snow, someone would invariably jump from the hot tub to dive into the pool, then jump from the pool to roll in the snow. That was college bravado, post-adolescent joie de vivre. She was not fooled. The person rolling in the snow still hurried to turn in term papers and balance his bank account. She looked at him as if he were a disappointingly small firework, and she went back to the wine.

Her mother called every now and then. She had so little to say that she repeated herself just to keep Janice on the phone for more than a few minutes. Janice had trouble remembering the neighbors she spoke of, and she could not recreate pictures of the rooms her mother had redecorated. When her mother said that she painted the windowsills in her bedroom, Janice said, "The one with the teeth marks? Jerry's and mine?" Jerry had taught her to bite down and step over, bite down and step over. The hard wood of the sill gave way in a most satisfactory way, and their teeth marks looked like art.

"I suppose," her mother answered.

"Where," asked Janice, "are all of the baby teeth that Jerry and I lost?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"The teeth," Janice repeated. "The teeth we put under our pillows. You traded our teeth for quarters, remember? Where do you keep all of those teeth?"

"The teeth?"

"The teeth. Where are Jerry's teeth?"

"Well," said her mother, "where are all of those quarters, huh?"

She was in college but only attending school enough to pass the time, and she sat in the dining halls and watched for Jerry in every story in the news. He was writing the news. He was the word Vietnam, the country Cambodia. He was the one with a draft number of one. He was the one falling at Kent State. He was running, on fire, from napalm.

Dear Janice,

Once upon a time, all of the metal in the world rebelled, quit being metal. It glided up mine shafts, it wriggled off of cars. It danced out of boards, left its cages. It was bored with the perfect pressure of a cylindrical can. It was tired of the hard edges, of the lack of imagination. It was tired of the same finite conversations, of the needle with such premeditated conviction going straight into the skin. It wanted instead to be the skin.

You're drinking, aren't you?

I miss you.

Jerry

Reading this at her desk, Janice threw down the paper, then picked it up again and reread it. She crumpled it and threw it onto the floor, pushing her pen off to one side. She would try to stop drinking. She made deals with herself: one glass of wine and then only a soda; one gin and tonic and then only ginger ale; just one more and then none tomorrow; two more but then she'd stop and eat. It was like the deals she had made on the living room floor at age fifteen with Solitaire. If she won this game, Jerry would come home. If she won two in a row, he would be home tomorrow. She made many of those kinds of deals, and since she was the only dealer, she could keep upping the ante. Two more games – he'll be back.

She went to the ocean and made deals with the tide: if I stand here and count to a hundred and the wave does not reach my toes, he will come back. If it only touches my toes two times out of ten, he will be here in a year. If I stand here long enough, the tide will answer. One more bottle of wine and her life would start again.

But her reality was this: no matter how many dry toes she had or how many games she won, he did not come back. No matter how many last drinks she had, her life had already started its first and only time. It was entirely possible, she thought, that if he ever did return, she would not recognize him. One more game of Solitaire lost.

Step Eight: We have made a list of the persons we have harmed and to whom we hope to make amends.

Willingness

You Would Do Anything

You are driving on the interstate, and your daughter says, “Look, Mommy! A polar bear!” You are not so far gone that you think it really can be a polar bear, but you cannot in that split second think of much else that it could be.

“A polar bear?” you say.

“Polar bear, polar bear, what do you hear?” she says.

You remember vaguely that those are the lines of a book you read to her at night. What do polar bears hear? You don’t know what the polar bear hears. You imagine white noise, wind filled with tiny particles, the breath of fish.

“Go to sleep,” you say, more like a wish than a directive.

You are doing your best to navigate the tunnel vision of the road and the place where the yellow lines – or are they white? – merge and become impassable. You can only see so far.

You do your best. You would die for this child. You would take a bullet to the chest – or the heart – or anywhere, actually. You don’t want her to be in some anonymous assembly line day care, and you won’t let her ever visit the man who abandoned her. You picture yourself as a mama bear, claws out. You have had six gin and tonics at your sister’s house, and you are navigating the spaceship that carries this

child home. Your sister told you it was time to go; her husband was on the way home, and you couldn't be there for that. He gets upset if anyone parks in the driveway. She was on her fourth drink and trying fast to catch up to you. You kissed her and said you'd be back next week. You are doing your best.

You listen for the sounds of sleep: the slow, melodic breathing, the hair brushing softly against the fabric of the car seat, the absence of interrogation.

You concentrate on the road in front of you. Just a foot at a time, you tell yourself, but the foot goes faster than your responses can travel. You think you're lost, so you turn off the radio, first thing. It doesn't help. Your light blue Ford Pinto – seemingly independent – rolls trustingly onto the off ramp, and you know you are blessed to get this far.

"Mommy?"

You were wrong about the sounds of sleep, as you are wrong about so many things. "Yes, love?"

"Where is the polar bear going?"

You know it wasn't a polar bear, that it can't be, but you are unsure whether you should answer what that polar bear will do or what the proverbial polar bear would do or what the polar bear really was.

"He's going to go to sleep," you say, selfishly.

"He's not sleepy," she says, kicking the seat in front of her, breaking the delicate semblance of peace.

“He is!” you say, and your voice sounds loud in your head. You want it to be true. You need sleep; she needs sleep. All good polar bears need sleep.

“He wants to go see things,” she says, and she starts to sing her own song. “If you knew polar bears – oh, oh, oh – if you knew polar bears, then what would you say? What would they say? What would Daddy say?” Finally she is silent.

“What would Daddy say?” you wonder out loud.

That makes her stay quiet a minute longer. But just a minute.

“Where is Daddy?” she asks you – again – and, as always, you change the subject in the clumsy way of a person who has missed the last step on a staircase.

“You want to get ice cream tomorrow?” You know as soon as you say it that it is a mistake. Tomorrow is too far away for a four-year-old.

“Ice cream now!” she says with more kicks.

“The ice cream stores are all closed,” you say, and you think you might be right. You are right for all intents and purposes; her father used to say “for all intensive purposes,” and you only made the mistake of laughing that one time.

“Polar bear wants ice cream,” she says. “Vanilla ice cream. Like snow.”

Your driveway appears blessedly in front of you, and you pull into it slowly enough to brake before you hit the garage door. Excruciatingly slowly, the zealous caution of a drunk.

“Polar bear can have whatever he wants *tomorrow*,” you insist.

It is time to take her out of the car seat. She knows how to unbuckle it herself and is obviously capable of walking up the stairs, but she simply refuses to do that. She pretends to sleep; she loves to be carried into the house. You are too tired to reason with her but worry that you might be too tired to manage to carry her and your purse and the car keys and her stuffed ladybug and the bag of extra clothes and the snacks and the thermos – all of the things that you are too afraid to leave at home.

She starts talking the minute you drop her down on her bed.

"When tomorrow?" she asks. "For the ice cream?"

"Whenever you want – if you go to sleep right now." You know you can't command her to sleep, but you can hope.

She closes her eyes and keeps talking. "I never saw a real polar bear before."

"Yes, you did – at the zoo. Remember?" You are trying to take off her shoes but the laces are tangled. All at once you become impatient – that is the essence of impatience, of course, that it comes on all at once, as a surprise, even to you – and you pull them off, still tied, far too violently.

"I did not! And you hurt me!" She turns her face to the wall. You are going to let her sleep in her clothes.

"I did *not* hurt you." But you know you did.

"I hate you," she says to the wall. You begin to rub her back through the pink Hello Kitty sweatshirt. You remember that she has to go to the bathroom before bed because you will not be awake enough to change the sheets in the middle of the night.

“I think there’s a polar bear in the bathroom,” you tell her, and you start to walk to the door. “Come on, let’s go look.”

She turns and looks at you with eyes that both challenge and accept you.

You do your best. You would die for this child. You would take a bullet to the chest, or the heart. Buy her ice cream before breakfast. Lie about polar bears. Lie about ice cream. You do your best. There is only a little gin left in the bottle in the freezer. It may not be enough, but you can check. You can hope.

“It isn’t a real polar bear,” you say, going over to the bed and pulling at her arm to get her into the bathroom. “It’s just a bag of sheets.” You don’t know if this is true, but it’s as true as a polar bear on the interstate.

“It isn’t! It isn’t!” she is crying, pulling back to resist you. “I won’t go to the bathroom, I won’t!”

But she does – because she has to – and you wait in the hallway while she cries more softly than she talks.

You would do anything for this child. You would take a bullet to the ribs. You would pull her from a burning building and buy her ice cream and comb her hair gently when it’s tangled. You would do anything. But maybe not right at this moment.

You would do anything. You head to the kitchen.

Step Nine: We shall do all we can to make amends, in any way that will not cause further harm.

Forgiveness

The Things We've Lost

She coughs in her sleep, and I think how she sounds like an old man, like someone I am going to lose. I hear her rolling over from the next room, and I turn away from the wall. She coughs again.

Do I go in? Do I try to save her?

I go in.

"Mom," I say, and her eyelids flutter only a little, like she's offering me a teaspoon of her attention in a recipe that calls for a full cup.

"Don't hurt me, I'm decrepit," she says, turning her head.

"Mom, it's me," I say. I can see her hands are shaking, but I don't know if it is alcohol or Parkinson's or if she's just cold. I pull up her blanket. She coughs again, a faraway sound.

"Mom, wake up," I say, and I pull on her nightgown near her shoulder. The faded yellow fabric is soft and thin, like old tissue paper, and who uses tissue paper anymore?

"I'm here!" she says, and she tries to lift her head off of the pillow. She can't do it.

“Oh, okay. You can go to sleep.”

Now her eyes open. “I *was* asleep,” she says, and she is looking right at me with the same face that she used to wear when she hit me with a wire hanger. “Why did you wake me up to tell me to go to sleep?”

“You were coughing,” I say, backing out the door. “You’re supposed to sit up and clear your throat. I was just trying to help.”

But she has already fallen back asleep, a soft uh-uh-uh noise coming from her open mouth.

It is Christmas and I am home for the holidays, as they say. My mother is no more ill than she ever was, and I am no more at ease with her than I ever was. It’s like a Christmas Eve truce in a war zone, and we are both raging to get back to the actual fighting. The silence alone could kill us.

I can’t sleep anyway, so I go to the front room with the tree – that we decorated last night – and the nativity scene. My mother loves to make people out of bottles and fabric, something I assumed for years that all mothers did. She has made an entire nativity scene out of fancy empty liquor bottles: regal whiskey magi, graceful chardonnay Mary, squat apricot brandy shepherds. The thing is, no nativity scene has that many people. No one needs fifteen shepherds and several families with baby Jesuses instead of just the one, and there were not really nine wise men. It is like that with all of her bottle people: Wizard of Oz scenes with six scarecrows and munchkins the perfect size of airplane and mini-bar liquor bottles, Jack and Jill going up the hill as quadruplets, Snow White and the fifteen beer bottle dwarves, processions of saints and movie stars

and every single slave from Roots in triplicate, proof of her affection for the rich brown of whiskey bottles. You need only so many people in a nativity scene, but my mother had the bottles already and as she will tell you she is not one to waste things. I fall asleep on the couch under the watchful eye of the velvet-draped Kahlua Elvis and his entourage of impersonators.

My mother wakes me up early the next morning – to open presents, she says, walking haltingly first to the kitchen for a Bloody Mary. “It’s Christmas,” she says as I look away. “Jesus Christ, be charitable. I have to cook all day.” She offers me one, too, but I say no. I have always said no. Someone has to think clearly; someone has to be able to drive away.

I hand her my present and she unwraps it: it is a new set of stainless steel flatware. I know she has ruined most of her old spoons in the garbage disposal, so I thought it was a good gift. She likes fancy things, things with curlicues, and this set has scrolled edges and something I like to think is fleur-de-lis on each handle.

“What’s this for?” she says, looking at the box.

“Silverware, Mom. New silverware.” She looks at me. “For the kitchen. I know how you like nice things.”

“I like the old things. I’ll never recognize that these are mine when I look in the drawer,” she says, finally taking off the top of the box and looking inside. “Pretty, though. Thanks.”

That is that.

She hands me a bottle-shaped gift, and I – once again – am surprised that she would actually give me alcohol. I open it: hazelnut brandy.

"Thanks, Mom," I say.

"I want the bottle when you're done," she tells me, going back to the kitchen for more of Christmas breakfast. "It would make a wonderful vampire. Think you could share it with me tonight? We could empty it."

"Sure," I say. "But you remember, Mom, that I'm allergic to nuts, right?" My reminder feels like a dangerous accusation to make but it might be safer than anaphylactic shock.

From her place in the kitchen, she is instantly angry. "You shouldn't be drinking anyway!" she calls out to me, spilling the tomato juice. "Shit!"

I head for my purse and the door, glad I slept in my clothes again.

"Where the hell are *you* going?" she says. Her fists are raised, and in one hand she has a paper towel covered with tomato juice. She rushes at me, dropping the paper towel and reaching for me with both hands, and I can't tell if she's going to slap me or hit me or push me down.

But I am not six years old anymore. I am as tall as she is, and my fear is of a totally different strain these days. It's like ancient fear, something bruised beneath the skin. I grab both of her upraised arms and hold them tight until she starts to cough, tiring herself out.

"Can I get you some water?" I ask, watching her to see if I can let her go yet.

"Water!" she says, and as she gives up on me I let go, and she turns back to the kitchen. "Just be back for dinner, three o'clock sharp. Your uncle and cousins will be here."

And when I come back, after driving all around the closed malls for hours, there indeed I see my uncle and his wife and my two grown cousins. They are on the third bottle of wine already, and they hand me a glass by habit – their habit, not mine. I set it down on the coffee table next to the third baby Jesus.

On the dining room table are hot dog roll ups and clam dip and chips and salsa and pepper jack cheese and crackers. There is store-bought pecan pie for dessert – either no one remembers about my nut allergy or they're overtly trying to kill me. There are plenty of new bottles on the counter – gifts from my uncle, probably – but I don't see any dinner. No one seems worried about this, including me. I stopped at the only fast food place I could find that was open and ate a fish sandwich before I came back.

"So," booms my uncle, "tell me about work." He always does his best to talk to me; he tells everyone I'm his favorite because I'm his only girl. His two boys work as checkers at the local hardware store. There is always a big stock of tools and parts with the tags still on in his garage that no one needs but no one questions.

I got a waitressing job at a truck stop an hour outside of town when I left home last year. I start to tell him about the highway patrolman I purposefully poured coffee on – waitressing in a truck stop can give you some great stories – but before I can get to the part about the manager, he turns to his wife. She is sitting at the dinner table singing, with her head on her palm, her other hand slowly dipping a finger in the guacamole and

licking it, over and over. He reaches down to rub her shoulders, kisses her on the top of her head. It is all pretty sweet until he grabs her arm and kicks the chair out from under her, yelling, “Stand up! You going to sit there eating all night? Fat as a sow, that’s what you are.” Her sons look away and laugh without smiling.

“Where’s your wine?” the older one asks me. I am trying to figure out how I can get my backpack out of my old bedroom and get out of there without letting anyone know I’m leaving. I distractedly reach for my wine – and knock over the baby Jesus. He falls to the tile and shatters, and the whole room goes silent. The holiday détente is over.

“What the *HELL*?” my mother shouts, picking up a bottle with only a few fingers of chardonnay left and waving it in my direction. “What the *HELL* were you thinking?” She raises the bottle over her head, pulls back, and starts toward me, swinging for the fence.

The voices of my uncle and cousins rise up and tell her to stop, to calm down, it was an accident – but she is not listening. Their voices are just background, like a laugh track on a television show, something not entirely real. She charges her way over to me, the bottle swinging away.

I pick up Joseph and swing him right back at her. I hit the wine bottle out of her hand, and both bottles break. The floor is covered with glass, brown and green and yellowy clear, like Christmas tinsel. No one moves. I have never broken a bottle before, and I like the sound, I like the look of celebration all over the floor. I move to Elvis, baby Jesus crunching beneath my feet, and lift him high above my head. I drop him. He shatters. Then I drop Snow White, three dwarves, the Wizard, Kunte Kente, and several

shepherds. The glass confetti sprays across the floor, bits of colored felt and gold braid falling away unglued and decorating the floor. I am suddenly tired. Through it all, my aunt is humming, and my mother is crying, “My babies, my babies,” and bending over to pick up the bigger pieces of glass. “I’ve lost my babies!”

We all lose over and over again all of the things we lost before.

I would hate her, but she is my mother.

Step Twelve: We, in turn, are ready to help others who may come to us in the same way.

Service

Otherwise Known As

Leland Fischer had been driving in the rain for hours – going nowhere, just driving. He had his wallet and the clothes on his back, and he'd been gardening in them all afternoon until the rain had started, so he couldn't imagine going anywhere in particular; he knew he had to go home eventually. He drove around the reservoir, a lovely view if wasn't raining and you weren't driving and could look. It had been gray all day, and now it was almost dark and he was having trouble seeing. He knew the reservoir was there off of the side of the road only because he had lived in this town and driven on this road for so many years.

He thought it was a deer at first, there, by the road – but it was a girl, a teen-aged, skinny girl. She stood by the shoulder with her thumb poking out in the opposite direction that he was driving. The rain was rising in intensity every minute, and Leland thought, "Hell, what have I got to lose? Things can't get much worse." He turned the car around to stop along side of her and pushed the automatic button for the passenger window.

She looked in the window and stared at him before speaking. "It's wet out here? I need to get somewhere? It's okay if I have a ride?" Everything seemed like a question, so Leland wasn't sure how to answer. He nodded and reached over to unlock the passenger door.

"So," she said, settling in and staring at him. "So."

"Yes," he answered. "Wet night. You okay?" He remembered to look carefully over his left shoulder before pulling back onto the wet road.

"I am now." She kept staring at him. "Where're you going?"

"No where," he said, knowing how stupid it sounded out loud.

"Then why are you driving?"

"My wife – she – it was a good night for a drive."

This girl's eyes were huge. "So you're married then? What do you do?"

"Right now?"

"No, of course not right now. I mean what do you do – you know, to make money, for a living?"

He hated to say it. "I teach preschool."

Her eyes got even wider. "An old guy like you? Preschool? That's kind of creepy." She looked out her window even though it was now too dark to see. "Do you like little kids?"

"No, of course not!"

She looked back at him. "Why do you do it if you don't like little kids?"

"I mean, I like little kids, just not – you know – not like that."

"You like older kids then?"

"No, I – well, I like kids, of course, but – I think of all kids as my pupils."

She snorted. "A four year old pupil? Give me a break."

"Well."

"I mean, I never met an old guy preschool teacher before."

He turned his shoulder to somewhat face her. "Well, I wasn't this old when I started, obviously. It just happened."

She looked like she felt bad – a good sign in a teenager. She probably hadn't meant to sound so flip. "What's your name?"

"Leland. Leland Fischer."

"People call you Lee?"

"No, why would they?"

"Seriously? Why would they call you Lee?" She looked closer at him. "Guess you're not the kind of guy to have a nickname then?"

Leland looked down at his garden-stained khakis. "No, I guess not." It had never occurred to him that he was that kind of person, the kind with no nickname.

"You?"

"Me?"

"You – your name?"

"Lucy. Otherwise known as Lucy. It's the kind of name you actually can't make a nickname out of, I think?"

They drove for a mile or so as all of the daylight fell completely away and then he pulled into the gas stop. The tank was low, and he wanted to make at least several more loops around the reservoir even though it was now full on night and the view was only imagined in the dark and the rain. "Lucy, you want something to snack on?"

"I've got money," she said, sliding out of the car and pulling her hood over her head to keep dry. "I'll be back."

He pumped the gas as the rain ran down his neck and muddied the dirt on his pants, then went inside and paid with his wife's money. Lucy walked back out with him, carrying a larger bag than he'd expected. "Can I put this in the trunk?" she asked, pulling out a Hershey bar and heading for the back of the car.

"No! Not the trunk." It slipped out before he thought about it. He hadn't wanted her to be scared.

"Why? What's in the trunk?" The girl didn't seem to have the sense to be scared.

"Nothing – just stuff my wife doesn't want – doesn't like me to keep in the house – nothing really…" He wasn't sure when to stop talking.

"Wow, what could it be? Porn? Bodies? Kittens?"

He was amazed that she got back into the car talking about dead bodies. He pulled back onto the reservoir road to make yet another loop, trying to figure out how to best say it. He had never had any luck making people understand.

“No, no, nothing like that – just – just my collection.”

“Collection? What kind of collection?”

“Just – it started a long time ago and I haven’t collected any new ones, of course, for a while – but – I collect corks.” There. He said it. He expected her to laugh but she didn’t.

“Corks? Like from wine bottles?” She almost looked impressed. “Like how many?”

“I haven’t actually counted all of them – but right at this moment I have two big plastic bags full in the trunk. My wife – well – she’s kind of tired of the whole thing …” he trailed off not knowing where else to go with that.

“You ever do anything with them? I mean, make something out of them?”

No one ever asked about his corks ever. “Well, yes, I did – one year I made these very intricate wreaths, had to drill and pull wire through each cork, and they were great.”

“Why didn’t you keep going with them?”

“I gave one to everyone I know for Christmas. After that – well, you don’t really need two, you know?”

“Trivets? Did you try trivets?”

“Oh yes, I gave those away, too. And bulletin boards. Coasters.” He looked out toward the reservoir. “I just ran out of ideas.”

“But not corks,” she said. “Isn’t your wife going to miss you?”

His wife had told him to leave when she came home and found him gluing corks to the living room wall, a herringbone pattern. He had thought it looked good. When he drove away, he was banking on the fact that she meant for him to leave just for a while. “Aren’t your parents going to miss you?”

She didn’t answer.

“Is there somewhere I can drop you? A friend, maybe?”

Now it was her turn to look out the window. In the dark, neither of them could see anything except for the constant pattern of raindrops. “My dad died a few months ago. My mom won’t know I’m gone.” So that was the reason for the big bag of provisions. And for her lack of fear.

“But I thought you said you were going home?”

“Eventually.” He could see her rub at her eyes in the window reflection.

“Lucy,” he started, and reached out to pat her shoulder – nothing weird, just a pat. He wanted to let her know that it would turn out okay. But as he reached her way with one hand, he awkwardly pulled on the wheel with the other hand, and that twist of the wheel was all it took. The car slid off the wet road down an embankment – he should have remembered that they were on that narrow part of the reservoir road – and lurched down the incline toward the reservoir, his tires slipping and catching on rocks and mud. Leland tried to steer straight downhill for the forty feet it took to land in the lake, filled to capacity from the season’s recent rains. He had enough time to panic and remember that

you weren't even supposed to fish or swim in the reservoir and wonder what a car would do to the drinking water. Would he get in trouble for this?

He yelled out, "Lucy!" He remembered to unlock the doors and hit the automatic window buttons to start them rolling down. He reached down to his left for the trunk latch, pulled it, and then they slid down vertically over the concrete sides into the water.

She turned out to be a smart girl, instantly squeezing through the passenger window to the surface, as did he, with more difficulty. They both started to tread water, trying to keep one hand on the car, not able to see in the dark and the rain and not able to hear over the roar of the storm. The car was sinking, but slowly, and the trunk was wide open. He swam to it and felt for the bags.

"Come here!" he yelled over the noise of the rain and the screaming. Was that her screaming? Was it him? He swam closer to where her door was and found her.

"What?" She sounded dazed. "Take off your shoes," she yelled into his ear. She threw one of hers over his head. "Too heavy to tread water," she yelled when she saw him watching. Leland took hold of the top of the trunk for balance and pulled off his own.

For the first time in a long time, Leland felt in control. "Corks!" he yelled. "They float – grab a bag and hold on." She swam toward the trunk. He used his teacher voice, and, like she was a four year old, she did what he said to do. He grabbed one, too, and there they were – holding onto bags of wine corks in the reservoir, no way to climb out on the moss-slick sides. He was sure someone had seen them, or heard them, that help had to be on the way. Would her mother report her missing? Would his wife wonder if he

was coming back? This had to happen all the time; help would be there. Leland looked over at the girl treading water in the cold, rain running off of her hair.^

She looked defeated. “I’m sorry,” she yelled, and started crying.

“My fault,” he yelled back. “It’ll be okay. We just have to wait.”

But the waiting turned out to take longer and used more energy than they had, and a bag of corks – although it did float – could not support the whole weight of an adult, even a scared sixteen year old skinny one. The rain drowned out the sound of any cars or any yells for help. Lucy was getting visibly tired, and he could feel her shivering when he held her arm. Her body was floating lower and lower in the water.

“Here,” he yelled to her. Treading water with his legs, he used the plastic drawstrings to tie her bag of corks to one side of her belt and his bag of corks to the other. His fingers were cold and it took a long time for him to get it secure, but he finally felt good about the knots. “The two of these should work to keep you afloat until someone comes – even if it takes until morning – someone will surely see you then.”

“See us?” she yelled, her voice sounding more scared and young than it had before. “You mean see us, don’t you?”

But Leland Fischer knew that he didn’t have enough strength to float for hours without corks; the corks would never be enough to keep him buoyant. They might work for her. She was a smart girl.

He started drifting with the water.

“Leland!” she shouted. “Leland!”

But he was gone.

“Lee!” she shouted, long into the night, up to the time when the sun came up.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bottle

I

Among twenty half filled containers,

The only restless part

Was the cork in the bottle.

II

I was of three minds,

Like a varietal

In which there are three grapes.

III

The bottle gleamed in the summer sun.

It was a small part of the metaphor

IV

A man and a woman

Are one.

A man and a woman and a bottle

Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of possibilities

Or the beauty of promises,

The bottle opened

Or just before.

VI

Goblets filled the wooden shelf

With leaded glass.

The shadow of the bottle

Reflected there, to and fro.

The mood

Traced in the shadow

An enigmatic crutch.

VII

O old men of Ireland,

Why do you imagine golden pints?

Do you not see how the bottle

Fills gently the hands

Of the women about you?

VIII

I know lofty imaginings

And modern, alarming rhythms;

But I know, too,

That the bottle is involved

In what I know.

IX

When the bottle became empty,

It implied the edge

Of one of many spirals.

X

At the sight of the bottles

Resting in a neon light,

Even the masters of sobriety

Would glance over surreptitiously.

XI

He drove through California

On an Austrian motorcycle.

Once, a panic caught him,

In that he confused

The camera in his backpack

For bottles.

XII

The sun is setting.

The bottle must be opened.

XIII

It was nighttime all day.

It was raining

And it was going to rain.

The bottle sat

On the wicker nightstand.

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