

1-1-2006

Nothing Personal : a Collection of Nonfiction Essays Exposing the Perverted Experiences of Life, Interactions, and Responses

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Nothing Personal:

*A collection of nonfiction essays exposing the perverted experiences of life, interactions,
and responses*

Thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

by

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Dr. Susan Swan, Committee Chairperson
Dr. Katherine Rodier
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Marshall University

May 2006

ABSTRACT

Nothing Personal

By Benjamin P. Taylor

Nothing Personal is a collection of nonfiction essays playfully written in response to subtle misunderstandings. Such misunderstandings, in this creative thesis, are fueled by an unexplained divorce, alcoholism, the new absence of love, and the difference between the personal and the traditional church. The essays also expose the science of conversation and other lighter occurrences and happenings in an esteemed pursuit to live life more humorously.

Not for Hugh.

Acknowledgements

My writing, in everything, is a response to beauty. Creation gets my mind working and turning, and my God begins and ends every thought.

Dr. Susan Swan was the first to allow me to explore old thoughts and make them new. I praise her for her persistence and raw teaching methods.

I affectionately stole Nicholson Baker's clever use of the footnote and now thank him for the exposure. David Sedaris showed me how to find humor in the obvious and in the mundane, and I thank him. Christian writers, Rob Bell and Donald Miller, taught me to poke, examine, and re-examine religion and then to write about this faith as if these were new thoughts. And I thank them too.

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Young Men Wear Diapers Too

I saw an elderly woman having her diaper changed, and *that* changed my life! I've not been the same since. I was 19 years old at the time, and you could say that, in some ways, I became a man that day. Every day before that one I believed, for the most part, that the world was pure and blameless. I believed that harm and danger were myths told to adolescents to keep them nice, and I was happy to oblige. I enjoyed being nice to people, and likewise—I enjoyed when people reciprocated my generosity, but after that one painful day, everything kind and gentle became perverted and destroyed. All evil in the world was set loose and attacked my mind and eyes with terroristic vengeance.

Five years ago, I attended—I guess I'm going to tell you the whole story—NYC in Toronto, ON. NYC is an abbreviation for Nazarene Youth Congress, an international youth gathering, ages 16-20. NYC takes place only once every four years, and is quite an enormous event. About 20,000 people all over the world attend. NYC is geared for preparing the Nazarene youth for servitude. Also, it offers young people an opportunity to seek their faith and meet others traveling along the same spiritual journey.

While in Toronto, we were separated into smaller groups of about 20-30 people. These smaller groups, with a chaperon, received service projects

throughout the city. We completed our daily tasks of manual labor and such, and every evening the entire group attended a large concert-like event at the Air Canada Center. Each small task seemed to have a great affect on bettering the city. My group, in particular, worked in a nursing home. The nursing home, at the time, was under major construction. Before our arrival, they had built a new air conditioned wing to replace the older wing which, of course, did not have air conditioning. Our job was to assist the tenants. We moved those living in the old wing to the new wing—sounds simple, right? One would definitely think so. I carried clothes, pictures, and other small things, belongings. These people owned nearly nothing. We spent most of the morning relocating the elderly men and women.

The afternoon, however, brought a bit of weirdness with it. I remember having a conversation with an old man. He was lying down and speaking gently to me until he became upset. Almost mid-sentence, he started to cry. He pointed to a picture of a man that I guessed was his son and began to weep profusely. He demanded to see the young man and the rest of his family. He became angry with me and started speaking Yiddish or something very foreign. I then ran—or walked briskly without hesitation—to find an assistant. When I found a lady who wore a uniform and nametag, I informed her of my present crisis. I asked

her if there would be any way the man could indeed see or speak to his family.

The lady barely acknowledged me, and then simply said, “He’ll be fine.”

I remember feeling sadness and pity for the old man. I returned to him and tried to calm him down. I told him lies and assured him that he’d see his family very soon. I, of course, did not know the ramification of my sin at the time. I didn’t care, and so I left.

Leaving that situation didn’t allow my mind to settle. I again started carrying clothes from one room to the next, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the pitiful man. My head wandered and lost itself in his pain as I grabbed a short stack of an old lady’s clothes. The garments were worn and cheap. I felt the fuzzballs¹ of her clothes brush against my arms. The fuzz was inexplicably course and screamed discomfort. I asked the attendant where to take the clothes.

“Go down that hall and ----- then turn ----- and it will be back in that corner.”

¹ Fuzzballs—I assume that these form from a mixture of things tossing around in the clothes dryer. Sometimes the fuzzballs are simply lint and dust, in which case they are quite soft—just unattractive. Once, I noticed a different kind of fuzzball on a very nice shirt I laundered. The balls were white and I later gathered that my mistake was washing my nice shirt with a white towel. White towel remnant fuzzballs are also quite soft but unattractive. A different kind of fuzzball, which is what covered the lady’s clothing I was now transporting, is what I now call the **poverty** fuzzball. The poverty fuzzball is the most extreme mixture of hideous unattractiveness and discomfort. These particular fuzzballs are typically gray in color. They are tightly wound balls with dark hairs protruding outward from them. I believe the protruding hairs are much to blame for their difficult removal. The long nappy strands of hair seem to latch within the fabric as if begging to become one with the shirt. The gray nucleus forms an outer shell, which is comparable to the willpower of Velcro and the coarseness of sandpaper, and holds steady. There is no sense in trying to remove these things. They are determined and vindictive. By the time your clothes attract such satanic things, you should have discarded them long ago—no excuses.

I have no explanation or assumption to describe the birth and make-up of a poverty fuzzball, but this poor lady’s clothes were covered in them.

I started walking having no idea where I was going. Too ashamed to ask again, I just hoped to find other people from my group and follow them. I didn't find anyone...immediately. I walked down a long hallway and made some turns—all the wrong ones, I'm sure. Eventually, I ended up in a smaller hallway which led to three different rooms. There, I actually found some people from my group. I left the clothes in the room where they were working and then -----

Now, before I continue, you must make a promise to yourself and me that you will, as adequately as possible, picture in your mind everything I say...everything! You must recreate this story within your own imagination. I had to live it, and I promise it won't hurt you. In fact, it may make you stronger. Since I cannot see you and don't trust you, I ask that you sign the given contract.

I, _____, hereby swear on my life as a reader/writer/lover/friend/member of society to picture all details explained. I will put myself in the author's shoes and see exactly what he sees and nothing less. I will not by any means skim through this section of the essay.

Your signature

As I was saying, I dropped the stack on the top of a small dresser. Then, I was hoping to find my way back to the fuzz-ball covered clothing room and repeat the process, but something very different happened. I stepped out of that small room and into another, believing I was retracing my steps. I looked up, and at first, I saw only two people in the room, and I didn't know either of them. Both of them looked at me as if I were wearing hammer pants² from 1993. Full-fledged, solid black—parachute out like an overturned balloon—hammer pants. If I *were* wearing such pants, I actually wouldn't expect such a look. Their glares beamed at me with shock and embarrassment, but I would soon realize that the embarrassment was all my own because I just then noticed that a fourth person occupied the room: me, the two attendants, and the elderly lady...getting her
DIAPER CHANGED!

The awful sight froze my legs in a stuttering position. My eyes inflated instantaneously to the size of melons, and my hands immediately soaked with sweat. The woman's toes pointed straight up in the air as one of the attendants wiped her under-area. He clasped her knee and supported her arrangement. The wrinkles that lined her long limbs painted a picture of rain leaking down a basement wall or vines tacked against an aged oak tree. In a flash, I saw an array of dark, sinful colors, while other, more dismal shades, poked through. Her pale

² You know...MC Hammer.

legs revealed pasty yellows and grays and some purple. I couldn't actually decipher, from my distance, wrinkles from veins, but I knew that they all existed together in a mush of humanity and atrocity, top to bottom. Everything was discolored and misplaced. My eyes, as if I had no control of them, moved DOWNWARD, and I saw a cushion of lines and flesh. The bottom curve of her body, in fact, was hardly a curve at all. I would say it closer resembled an angle or something more geometric. The flesh was shaded surprisingly darker than her upper legs. I assumed that the blood had fallen from her toes and knees downward and pressurized a pocket of discomfort.

The young gentleman dressed in white continued to wipe things as if I were not there, and the lady, too, didn't acknowledge me. I hoped, for an instance, that I had hallucinated from lack of sleep and created these images with my sick brain, but the images moved about and became real. Frightfully real! I looked closer at the surface of the mattress and saw more things I wished I hadn't. The diaper was dirty. Very, very dirty.

Quietly, I took steps backward, my eyes fixated on the scene. My feet eventually found the exit, and I went about the rest of my day pretending nothing had happened. I went about the rest of the week like a machine. No emotion. I had the same movie, the same freak show playing and replaying and

replaying inside my brain. That same movie for which I hadn't paid or even wanted to see...ever.

Three days later, I dropped out of that 35 passenger bus like a bag of air, floating from step to step to concrete, knowing that nothing pure ever really existed in my little world and that everything had been a facade. A veil had been lifted. Reality smacked me like an anvil to the teeth, and I winced in some kind of unseen agony. That movie with that poor woman and her poor veins and wrinkles turned over in my head. I saw her there, helpless, again and again, but now she *looked* at me and wondered why I was there watching her. I wondered the same and wished I could explain how I stumbled upon her by accident, but she knew my accident had cost me. No matter how unbelievably pitiful she seemed, she knew, just by looking at my young puerile body, that my youth would soon expire and my innocence would diminish and, one day very soon, I *instead* would lay there, legs pointed toward the sky, having *my* diaper changed.

Constructivity

If women are from Venus, then I must be from Jupiter or someplace farther, someplace more clueless and less capable of pleasing or understanding women. If women are the salt of the earth, then I must be pepper, but even pepper and salt sometimes are coupled in some sick seasoning intercourse. So that's not it either. I can't be pepper. I must be the flying phlegm tossed from a convulsive sneeze induced by that hated pepper. Rejected from bodies, I spray out of mouths in tiny molecules and mingle with those already dancing in the air. I am infectious and gross.

I do like salt, though.

My salty girlfriend, who is not my girlfriend anymore, stood there in front of me. Her hair was beautiful and red. Not like red fire or red cars, but more like red sun. It beamed with some gentle radiance. It glowed with orange and some yellow, each strand hanging down around her neck, seeming to tickle her bare chest and shoulders that were slightly exposed. The strands gracefully pointed in the directions they apparently decided. The mild yellows accented the other darker shades and all framed her pale skinned face. Some strands had curls, others lay straight. Everything seemed soft yet somehow unbreakable.

Looking at her, I imagined that I must have failed. In some way, I missed an opportunity that I may not have even known existed. I didn't say, "I love you" enough. Or maybe, I didn't call enough. I was never, ever charming. I was just dull and methodical. I was mechanical. My body has acted as a machine that just goes in motions and routines that are so simple while my head thinks of quick answers to get out of situations that I don't want to be in. I clam up when I need to be calm, and I'm calm when I need to focus and be constructive. I can't ever remember being constructive. *Constructive?*

CON—

STRUC—

TIVE

CONSTRUCTIVE.

That word makes me think of construction paper. You know, that thin cardboard-like material that our grade school teachers insisted we make things with. I passionately hate construction paper. It's grainy, and the colors are the worst. I've never seen a bright colored piece of construction paper. They're always so dull and bland, and I hate the sound they make when you tear them. At least when you tear a good piece of notebook or printing paper, it's crisp. If you fold it first then rip, it's amazing. I've never seen anything so smooth. But not construction paper. No way. You tear a piece of construction paper, and you

see these long hair-like strands clinging to one another like fingers. Is it too much to ask for a swift tear, no hairy strands? The strands do kind of remind me of pulp, actually. I do love orange juice with pulp, but when I see a tearing piece of construction paper, I can't help but think about some horrid pulp massacre, millions of strands clinging, hanging from each torn edge.

Constructive?

CON—

STRUC—

TIVE

CONSTRUCTIVE!

I once had a stepfather who was constructive and motivated. He was a jackass. "Be constructive," he'd say. "BEEE...constructive!" What a Jackass!

Most of my least favorite memories are tied to that stepfather experience in one way or another. His insincerity and hatefulness, to this day, still seems to amaze me. However, my most painful memory has nothing to do with the stepfather and very little to do with the girlfriend/ex-girlfriend. I had been playing basketball or some other recreational thing, like young teens do, and I felt tired. We had a dreadfully colored sofa, at the time, positioned somewhere in the middle of the entrance to our house. Even then, I believed it to be oddly out of place. Nevertheless, a tired teenager is never choosy. The offensive

mixture of tans and yellows, browns and blacks, coated in the scratchy wool-like fabric, had no bearing on my decision to plop my young body quite liberally on the sofa.

I do, though, wish that I would have spared at least a glance toward the old couch. If I would have, I might have seen the #2 pencil standing vertical between the two cushions. But I didn't see the pencil. And I sat squarely on the object as all my weight glided with gravity downward. I expected a cushioned seat, a moment of relaxation, but I felt something very different. In fact, the most pain I had ever felt shot through my skin. In the instance, I shifted all my weight to my left side, attempting to dodge the thing, not knowing what it might be. I wasn't completely successful. My arse had already been pierced with the now broken lead. The pencil was pointed in a way that looked purposeful, as if I were set-up, but I didn't remember arranging it myself and assumed that no one else would do such a thing.

The pain was intense, but I was too shocked for tears. I checked for blood and found some. Not much, but some...enough. My head and body broke into sweats, and for the first time in my life, I didn't feel embarrassed when I *should* have felt embarrassed. Instead, I only felt agony, extreme agony.

• • •

This girl, salt of the earth, beaming red hair and everything, stood before me as tall as she could, but she was still much smaller than me. Her back was arrow straight, and her chin pointed upward towards my face. I noticed she was quite uncharacteristically confident and somewhat prepared to dispense my punishment.

My mind quieted, and my head paid little attention to all that she was actually saying. Instead, I watched her mouth move. Her chin quivered, and her teeth stayed hidden behind those puffed lips. I watched her eyebrows gesture each time her eyes widened, and her head nodded with syllables and sounds. At times, her teeth clinched, and her eyes watered. I thought of times when I could have been constructive and instead I was lazy and methodical. I remembered the day, or the approximate day, that I stopped opening doors for her, sending her flowers, and putting her needs above mine. Other missed opportunities came to my attention, and I pinched myself for them, damning myself for each little thing. I began to side with her on every small and large issue. Everything she said was correct and painful.

Her soft face hardened but still seemed unbreakable, and I wondered if *she* wondered what I was thinking. Although, I imagined that she didn't much care. I couldn't help but feel like this had all been rehearsed time and time again, only I had not been invited to the rehearsal. Shards of honesty spat from her mouth

and pelted my guilty skin like morning rain on a tin roof³, clanging louder and louder as each drop grew larger and larger, drowning out the thoughts in my head, and I knew that she felt more than justified.

When it was over, I felt an increasing pain somewhere inside me. It was low, beneath my chest, down near my stomach. It wasn't the kind of pain felt after eating too much or not eating at all. Instead, it was more exteriorly placed, as if someone had both hands *around* my stomach, grasping and squeezing. In fact, I thought of that pencil I plopped down onto those years ago and how, from nowhere, it pierced my body. That weapon shocked me and embarrassed me. The tiny wooden thing erased my pride and left me naked, checking things and places I hadn't the habit of checking. I felt that this same weapon was now piercing my heart. Not the metaphorical heart that we relate to the thing of love, but the actual organ that beats and pumps blood. I felt a physical pain inside my body, now under my chest, up my throat, and down into my stomach. The pain was moving about from one callused area to the next, as if I had swallowed poison and it was killing me from the inside out.

As a child, when I felt the pencil pierce my body, I was able to move and shift and nearly avoid it, but this time was quite different. The pain was unavoidable. Or maybe I knew what I deserved, so I took it.

³ I don't think I've ever truly seen a tin roof in person, but I know the sound rain makes when it pours against one. I've heard it on TV, and TV doesn't lie. So sometimes clichés are indeed insufficient and loose, but sometimes they are inescapable.

I stood there as the poison filled my insides and then seeped through my pores and overtook my whole body. I felt weighted and immovable when she was through with me. She waited for a reply, but I could not respond. I had no rebuttal. Instead, I slid from her room in silence like discarded water down a drainpipe, my tale between my legs.

Through My Dusty Window, I See Your Plane. And It's Leaving

The smile of the middle aged Australian woman makes me think that she doesn't smile often enough. As her grin appears and reappears, her eyes wrinkle at the corners, pleasantly, and I start to think that she must be flirting. Only minutes ago, she asked me in that "down under" accent if I knew what banana peppers tasted like. Well, of course I know what they taste like. I cover every possible thing with the tiny skeletal slices. I have been eating them for years, but when she asked me if I knew what a banana pepper tasted like, I was speechless. I knew, but I couldn't seem to articulate the thought. My mouth watered by the mere scent of the peppers, and I imagined the familiar taste, but as I tried to convert these senses into words, it just didn't happen. Nothing came to me, and I was left searching for anything. Finally, I told her, "Well, they're not hot. It's not a *hot* pepper. It's *mild*...like maybe a pickle minus the vinegar. But there might be vinegar. Vinegar?" Realizing that I was stumped, I just said, "try them, you'll like them."

This lame description astounded me. Me, a writer, a language enthusiast! I am 3000 miles from home, dining in San Francisco. Sure, it's only Subway, but I'm stepping out, conversing with strangers, learning accents, yet I am faced with

something so completely familiar as a domestic pepper, and I am stumped. My stupidity embarrasses me. Needless to say, she decided not to try the peppers although I insisted.

This stranger is sitting across the Subway table from me. Fortunately, she looks a bit younger than my mother, but not much. She has dark brown hair with a few locks curling around her shoulders. She's dressed oddly, so much so that I may have guessed she was foreign before hearing the accent. Foreigners seem to always wear tight clothes, especially jeans which usually are abnormally colored. I mean is America the only place in the world that sells BLUE jeans? What's with the browns and greens that don't go with anything? And fanny-packs? Apparently, fanny-packs are amazingly cool in every other country in the world. But my stranger isn't wearing a fanny-pack. She is wearing tight, non-matching brown jeans, but no fanny-pack. She has only a small carry-on bag resting at her feet, and I imagine that she probably travels often.

Even in San Francisco, the Subway tables are all the same color. Yellow. Green walls and brown tile floor. Such decorations make me think familiar thoughts—fresh bread, veggie subs, maybe tuna, Wednesdays, West Virginia. So it worked! What a brilliant idea! The Subway people, at some point, decided that the color coordination within their restaurants, no matter the location, should be exactly the same. Perhaps the colors mean something or actually have

some minor connection with the restaurant's origin, but mostly I believe they're trying to evoke some emotion of comfort and confidence, perhaps familiarity. Those Subway geniuses want to make me feel so confident in the notion that what I order here will taste very much like the sandwich I get from the Subway down the street from my apartment, and they've succeeded. The unthinkable psychotic masterminds took a million restaurants, decorated them all the same, planted them all over the country and knew that I would unquestionably eat here because I believe I will receive the same service and the same tasting sandwich—all by creating a sense of familiarity. Yellow tables.

The Subway guys knew how I would feel just by the coloring of a yellow table, and yet I could not describe the taste of a banana pepper. How low does this put me on the creative food chain? The bottom? What's wrong with me? Was I stupefied by her beauty? I don't think so. She's older. I would say about 42. Forty-two's not bad, but it's not great. Perhaps, it was the accent. Ah, yes! I propose that, although I do on occasion watch Steve Erwin, the crocodile hunter, and *have* heard Australian accents on television, hearing one in person was an altogether different experience for me. Her voice and the floating timbers waved up, sparking foreign sounds, and I became confused, so completely confused that I could not describe something so common as a banana pepper. But even sitting

here now, across from her minutes later, I still can't think of one satisfying description for a banana pepper.

My brain does this quite often and quits me when I need it to just function. I have trouble deciphering two nonspecific things, such as condominiums and apartments or sweepers and vacuums⁴. But this is a separate problem. A banana pepper has a very specific taste.

Is it tart? No. Bitter? No. Sweet? Maybe a little!

⁴ Seriously, what is the difference between a vacuum and a sweeper? Can you sweep with a vacuum? Can you vacuum with a sweeper? I've heard people say, "Run the vacuum," and I've heard people say, "Sweep the floor," so is the difference merely a part of speech? I know that can't be right. I've also heard people say, whether correct or incorrect, "Vacuum the living room" or "I vacuumed the carpet" (both in reference to some form of cleaning). Here, vacuum is now the verb, but in the previous example, vacuum was a noun. *Sweep* can also be used as both a noun and verb, so I must conclude that the part of speech has little to do with the meaning or action of the words. I must also mention that these are not my sentences or thoughts. I didn't make them up to fit in my essay or prove my point. I don't even know if I'm going to prove anything yet. I simply took four phrases that I've heard other people say and questioned their meanings. I am not trying, nor do I intend, to manipulate you in any way. In fact, if you know the difference between sweep and vacuum please, for the sake of my sanity and my search for clarity, try to understand why this does not seem to make sense to me. Try, if at all possible, to forget those minor details about sweep and vacuum that you apparently know and I have yet to stumble upon.

People say things, I realize, that are often nonspecific. Such are mostly examples of regional slang and dialect. We say *coke* when we mean *soft drink*. We say *car* instead of *automobile*, because saying *automobile* requires too much work—four syllables. But why not truck? Why not van? What is this American tendency, this American need to generalize everything? When I was younger, I remember people asking, "What is your dream car?" Even then, we were taught to categorize things, to lump them together and eliminate specifics—not for structure but for personal convenience or laziness, to be more accurate. When asked, "what does your dad do for a living?" Don't say, "He sells cars, trucks, vans, and sport utility vehicles." Say, "He sells cars!" "He's a car salesman!" Why have I never heard of an automobile salesman or salesperson? Why is every non-white person black or Mexican? How about African, Asian or South American? If we want to get really personal, maybe we could even name their country instead of continent, but I understand that maybe asking a bit too much. Perhaps, I am asking too much to know the difference between vacuum and sweeper.

My mother always asked me to run the sweeper. We all had certain jobs around our house that she would ask us to do, and they were pretty much the same every week. Mine was to run the sweeper. She made my sister clean the windows and polish the furniture. My brother...well, he never did a whole lot of chores. But my mother always said it just like that, "Will you run the sweeper?" I was forever branded with this horrid task, it seemed. I seriously hated "running the sweeper," which is probably much to blame for my unsettling issues with this current sweeper/vacuum dilemma, but whenever she asked if I wanted to switch with Tiffani, my sister, I would always decline. I knew that, sadly, no one in our household could do it better than I. Oddly, I apparently took pride in doing something I hated to do because I did it well. Even then, I had somewhat of a love/hate relationship with the vacuum/sweeper.

Susan continues talking. I'm pretending to listen. She mentions New Zealand and missing flights. Her daughter graduated from college this week, but I don't know why they're not flying home together. I'd ask her, but I fear she's already told me. She's talking and talking more and more. I'm starting to feel as if she's just using me, as if she stumbled upon me like a bum stumbles upon a warm meal. Feasting on me, some random listener, she tells her stories, and I start to realize that having a voice and a pulse is, right now, quite insignificant. All that matters now is that I have ears and a face. I start quizzing myself on things she's said. "Her name is Susan. Her daughter went to college to become a yoga instructor, and *her* name is ----." I feel weird eating in front of her. I can hardly chew because I have to keep nodding my head, assuring her that I'm still interested in our conversation. Suddenly, I realize that my sub tastes bitter and that it's almost entirely without taste. I have so much attention directed across the table that I can hardly enjoy my sandwich. I'm not thinking about the crunch of the lettuce or the softness of spinach, the freshness of the honey oat bread. Did I forget to order banana peppers?

"...and I was on the beach, (Australian accent) lying and relaxing, and I saw a plane fly overhead. I never thought that it could be mine..."

"*Mine,*" she says, widening her eyes and leaning forward so dramatically. I wonder why I can't speak like that. Every word, from her, is a presentation.

Hands moving about like a whirlwind, fingernails glistening, tossing off reflections like a disco ball. Her eyebrows dance up and down with syllables, and she thrusts her shoulders forward and backward. I imagine being deaf and still somewhat entertained, possibly more involved than I am now in this conversation.

“...but since I had been traveling all day, I got confused. I hadn’t set my watch for local time, and...” I wonder if she’s attracted to me⁵. She invited *me* over. I was going to sit alone. “Sure enough. When I got to the airport, I realized that my plane had left hours ago.”

You know, Australian accents aren’t really that sexy. They’re sexier than American ones, but that isn’t saying much. That isn’t saying anything at all, really. What about southern accents? Mississippi or Georgia accents? Way too annoying.

We’ve been sitting at this table for about 15 minutes⁶, and I can count the words I’ve said on one hand, minus conjunctions. And prepositions. I can count

⁵ I wonder what she thinks of me. I suppose that she can speak about one thing and think about another. I can. I do. So often, I stare at my professors, partake in discussion, while I’m thinking about lunch: either the sandwich I just had or the one that I am soon to have. Surely, if I can manage two thoughts at once, *she* can. She can look at me, talk about travel and her life and think about me, wonder about me, about my experiences, about my preferences and loves, my wishes and dreams. So I assume that she does this as well. I wonder if she thinks I’m smart or young or naïve. I have not traveled much in my life or seen the things she has, so I wonder if she notices. If so, what does she think about that? Am I sheltered, inexperienced, or just American? I wonder if she thinks I’m attractive or if she wishes she were my age—not to be with me, of course. But does she envy my youth or pity my lack of wisdom? These questions stir and stir, but I don’t ask them.

⁶ I’m of course guessing because I’m too self-conscious to check my watch.

the nouns on one hand: Benji, United States (one finger), banana pepper (also one finger)...

A few more minutes pass by. Out of nervousness, I ask questions, one after another, hoping that she'll continue to talk. My hands sweat profusely, and it embarrasses me. I try thinking about things I could tell her that might interest her. Nothing comes to mind, and I realize that I have a disturbingly limited knowledge of visiting foreigners. I don't know what Australians know or care to know about America. Do they like it here? Is she ashamed? What does she think about our government? Do our sights compare to the things she's seen in her country? All these things bounce around my mind, but I couldn't possibly ask her. Maybe these are obvious things that everybody knows or *should* know, and if I *do* ask her, she'll look at me surprised as if I'd actually done a Steve Erwin impression—how pathetic and stupid. I start to pity my own thought process. I seriously feel sorry for myself.

I look across the street and see a taxi cab and wish I were in it. I see my friends, who have traveled with me, walk in the restaurant and sit at another table and wonder what I'm doing, and this strengthens me a bit. I know I'm doing something that they would never do. Here, with a total stranger, I sit talking, conversing about things. This stranger has helped me imagine some place I've never been, and suddenly I'm thankful. I'm thankful that Susan,

whom I wouldn't necessary call a friend, put a window in my life. It might be a dusty old thing, so clouded I almost cannot see through it, but somehow I can. I see a green New Zealand hillside. I see an Australian beach. Planes fly overhead, and I wonder if I should be on them, going someplace else. I wonder if I should be here with her. Through the dusty window I see a woman with an entire life without me except for one day, one Subway sandwich of a meal. My hands dry almost instantly, and I take another bite of my sandwich. I am refreshed when I taste the familiar pepper. It's sour, almost acerbic but pleasant. I feel the soft crunch of the lettuce and cucumbers. Small squirts of juices come to the top of my mouth and around my tongue. The sweetness of these couple well with the pungent meat, and I feel thankful that the cool fillings have yet affected the temperature of the warm bread.

Susan stands up to leave, and I sense an especially dramatic exit. I assume she'll hug me and we'll exchange e-mail addresses and, perhaps, phone numbers. After all, I have never before met an Australian and am not at all sure how they perform goodbyes. I rise to my feet and my shoulders loosen, ready to allow my arms full extension and embrace. She offers a soft wink and grin and rushes out.

I nod as if this behavior is acceptable, and then I go and sit with my friends.

“Wow, Susan is amazing,” I say.

“Who is she? Do you know her?”

“No. We just met. We talked about everything.”

Shadowed Snow

I was walking this morning, and I saw snow lay on the grass. The sun had so much shown through the morning's existence that the beams, coming through silently—like a dog whistle—seemed to wake all that attempted to rest on through the afternoon. The snow arrested me briefly because I wasn't cold. I didn't feel cold or even that I *should* feel cold. My hands dangled outside my pockets ungloved, and my ears, though they harbored small speaker buds, which may have offered a small bit of warmth, were not numb, nor were they even red I imagined. I wore a small unzipped coat that would only reasonably suffice in the spring and fall months—certainly not the winter ones. I wasn't wearing extra layers as I almost always do when it snows. I simply decided this morning, while dressing, not to consider another layer in between my blue jeans and my bare legs. In fact, I haven't worn my long Johns in several weeks, but I do especially love the way they feel.

Long Johns are basically the most available form of masculine tights. My favorite part of the day, when wearing long johns, is putting my jeans on over them. It's like I'm hiding something. I feel the normality of the common blue jeans and the rough texture only with a sense of blissful numbness. I feel the jeans just enough to know they're there and nothing more. They act like a shell

or some sort of protection. Certainly, they help block the winter wind, but also they help protect my insecurity. The covering blue jeans allow me to walk around all day in tights without being seen wearing...tights. I have three pairs of Long Johns: two blue and one off-white. The off-white ones were given to me by my brother, or I may have taken them without his knowing about it. Either way, they are completely amazing. I purchased the two blue ones only after experiencing the elation which occurred from my wearing the off-white ones. When I was at that store—whose name I won't mention—I remember it being a lengthy process and an incredibly difficult decision to make. Do I go with the Large, hoping that they'll shrink a bit and fit perfectly snug? Or do I expect that certainly all cotton products are now "preshrunk" and get the Medium? Hmm. What size are the ones I have? Crap! I'm not wearing them now or I'd look. If it'd only snowed this morning, I would've worn them. Let's see...those are Hanes, and this store doesn't have Hanes. They only have Fruit of the Loom. I don't suppose I *need* Hanes. I wear a Medium in Fruit of the Loom undershirts, so then Medium? But what if they're not "preshrunk?" Does it say "preshrunk?" I don't see it, but they have to be, right? Right? Gees! I know whatever I buy, I know I can't bring back. They're in that dang cellophane tight-wrap, and I can't replace that. What's worse: too baggy or too tight? Definitely

too baggy, right? They're long Johns; it's not like I'm going to wear them *over* my jeans.

Anyway, I decided against the Large and opted for the Mediums—two pairs in a single pack. They were inevitably not “preshrunk,” and after one wear, they fit disturbingly close. When I do wear them, which is not often, I feel like I'm wearing two huge condoms clear up my legs, my joints almost immovable. My legs itch from the compressed hair, and sometimes the hair protrudes through the fabric only to get caught and tugged painfully away from and out of my legs. And at the end of the day, when I'm finally able to take them off, the hair that's actually left still holding strong in my leg is painted on me like shattered glass, fine brown lines webbed all over—in circular ways, straight lines, and angled towards one another in ways that would seem offensive.

On the other hand, the off-white ones are simply majestic.

This morning, however, after my shower and before I dressed, I parted my thin, plastic blinds and glanced out my bedroom window. First, I saw the sun gleaming down and into my face through the window causing me to squint my eyes. Then, in spaces, I saw the snow. I studied the walkers by, and I saw students going to their places of study, of recreation, and of importance. A skinny girl wore a sweater—no coat—and was smiling, talking to the boy walking with her. He wore a green tee-shirt with a thermal grey long-sleeved

shirt underneath it. No coat. Every direction I looked...more people, no coats. So I put the back of my hand against the window and felt the warmth of the sun, which, by now, had overwhelmed the transparent glass pane. And I, for once, based my decision solely on those idiots who were striding through yards and parking lots; the same idiots that probably drank until they puked or pissed themselves the night prior. Ironically, those idiots had everything to do with what I inevitably decided to wear—no long Johns, jeans, long-sleeved shirt, and a thin, unzipped coat.

When I saw the snow lay on the grass, I looked ahead and then behind me, and I noticed that the snow only lay in a few spots, that the morning's bright sun had melted almost everything that had fallen. And then I imagined that the snow had fallen throughout the night, in the coldness. I'm sure the wind welcomed it and probably tossed it around a bit, but when morning came, the sun rose in an unforeseen way, heating the streets and avenues, the green and brown yards, and the tops of automobiles as well as apartment window panes, caring little about which month this particular morning fell nor the expected temperatures for the season. Nevertheless, the snow continued to rest in each shadow where the sun had not yet intruded. It rested comfortably and without interruption, and even though I never broke stride, I tossed in my head the thought of this beautiful thing that is so out of place, and I considered that

maybe the beauty itself somehow derived from this awkward placement, or rather something left behind.

Pondering this thought as I walked, I remembered one of my favorite memories: backpacking with my father. Just last year, my older brother and I loaded up tremendous packs, weighing between 40-70 lbs. each, and, with my father, headed about six or eight miles down a trail and spent the night there in the forest. We slept in a tent, and my dad cooked an amazing breakfast the morning that followed. The three of us talked some, but we were mostly silent, trying to take in everything that surrounded us. We had no use for fishing, but we did set up camp right on the creek bank, so we were able to jump upon the rocks that stood taller than the creek's surface and play guitar and sing songs, but mostly we were silent. Occasionally, we told stories and made noises that men make, and sounds and smells that men make, but mostly we were silent. I was astounded, not by the fact that this was the first trip that I'd ever taken with just my father and brother and not that my dad allowed us to impose on one of his known hobbies, but I was astounded by the atmosphere. I was astounded at the things I'd seemed to miss every day prior to that one.

The winter had not yet been birthed, but the autumn season had not quite expired, and we were left in that in-between stage that you can't really plan because you never know when the frost will come and kill the leaves. And even

then, it's another couple of weeks before they all fall from the trees, and of course they don't fall together, and one weekend might be rainy while the next might be snowy. And sometimes the most beautiful days fall in the middle of the week when God knows you can't get out, but he does it anyway. No matter what happens, experiencing that kind of stage between life and death can't be planned, and so I'll never forget it.

We walked miles, bearing weights I'd rather not discuss, and I can't remember a word we said because I was completely fixated on an unplanned moment between life and death. Millions of leaves lay seemingly dead on the grounds we walked and painted those lands with colors I'd never before seen. We trodden through them and over them, but they didn't make a sound. I thought they might crunch. In fact, I wanted them to. I begged them to respond, but they didn't. It seems that they were too newly dead to make a sound. They hadn't yet hardened but were still quite loose and flimsy. Some stuck to the bottoms of our shoes—greens, yellows, and reds all over, clinging to our steps. Others continued to fall as we walked out that morning. I watched a few fall like feathers to the ground around me, waving from one side to the next, and I knew that they, like the others that had already fallen, would soon harden and turn a dull yellow or possibly brown and would eventually offer an expected crunch when stepped on.

It wasn't until then that I realized that those falling leaves could not in fact be dead. But since they had only recently disconnected from their food source, they were probably very much alive. Everything in the world momentarily made sense. I had always thought of disconnected leaves as dead leaves but also questioned why they were most beautiful in the first stage of death. How could that be?

Much like those falling leaves clinging to their first and last breaths of freedom, the snow I saw in the shadows this morning seemed to relish in the damp remains of the a.m. And though I knew that the sun would eventually seek out every shadow and that it would inevitably melt every hiding flake, I grinned as I walked by, feeling a sudden urge to pull for the underdog in hopes that the snow would somehow hang on a little longer.

Vacation or Divorce

It's about 7:45, and I think it's Thursday. I'm not completely sure though. Let's see...meatloaf Monday, tator tots Tuesday...then, yesterday. What did we have yesterday? Oh, today is yesterday. I mean, Wednesday. Today is Wednesday. Why aren't we at church? Don't we always go to church on Wednesday? Of course we do, but I guess they don't know it's Wednesday. I'm not going to tell them.

"Hey Benj," Chad says, peeking his head in our bedroom. "Mom and dad want to talk to us."

Chad, my incredibly cool older brother, and I share this awesome room. Reddish, orange carpet. NFL covered wallpaper. We have bunk beds that aren't presently bunked. I'm on the right; he's on the left. We set them up this way so we could jump from one side of the room to the other.

"C'mon," Chad continues. "They want us in there now." Oh, crap! I wonder what we did. We never have family meetings. Ever. They must have heard me and Chad cussing. After school, we were practicing saying "shit." It sounded pretty cool. I was planning to say it at school soon, but last time my mom found out I was cussing, she washed my mouth out with soap.

As we head down the hallway, Chad stops me. "Hold on. We need to get Tiffani first," he says, putting his hand in front of my chest.

"Has she been cussing too," I ask.

"Huh?"

"I thought we were in trouble for cussing."

"No. No, Benj. It's not that. Mom said that dad needs to explain something to us, and we're going to sit down and talk. Like adults."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Now get Tiff and let's go."

As we walk through the short hallway, I feel a heavy coat of uncertainty fall on my shoulders. We only sat and talked once like "adults" and that was when Grandma died. It was horrible. Talking like "adults" really just means that mom and dad talk to us and we listen. We can't laugh or play or anything. Me, Chad, and Tiffani just sit, be quiet, and feel weird. Now, I feel weird.

Mom is sitting on the couch watching us walk down the hallway. She's crying. Dad is standing up facing her direction but not looking at her. I think he's looking at his own reflection in the window. When the three of us all sit on the couch about twenty seconds pass in silence, but it seems like twenty minutes. Dad starts talking about something I don't understand, and then Chad starts crying too. Chad never cries. One time I saw him fall out of our tree house, and

he didn't cry. He didn't even cry when mom whipped him with the wood spoon, but tears are pouring down his reddening cheeks, and I feel too stupid to ask why. Thankfully, Tiffani looks as confused as I am.

"And so..." My dad continues, stammering along, not looking at any of us. Mom starts to clutch me and Chad around the shoulders. "So...I'm gonna go away for a little while," Dad says as he drops his head.

Mom is now sobbing uncontrollably. And I'm thinking, "What in the world is going on? What is wrong with everybody? As far as I know, nobody died. We aren't getting our mouths washed out. Nobody knows that me and Chad have been cussing, and we can probably start saying the cuss words at school soon. So what's the problem? I mean, I guess dad just wants a little vacation. He'll probably be back in a week or so. Right?"

Penned Skylines

I think I turned my heart off, because I sat there for hours and nothing happened. I suppose it's a bit clichéd to refer to my emotions as my heart, so I'll say it, "Yes, I turned my emotions off." I didn't want to feel them anymore. They don't tickle. They're not fun. They're definitely not pleasant. I never even know they're there until they burn, and God, don't they burn? The only way I know I'm alive is because they burn. Yeah, I sat there outside that cheap motel, pen in hand. I didn't have any paper. I just thought I'd take down the notes on my arm and write the story later. I was almost certain I'd see something, you know, a boss and his secretary meeting for a matinee, perhaps two teenagers cutting class for the same reasons. At the very least, I thought I'd see a bum trying to sneak in for a nap, but no. Not a thing.

I'm pretty sure the Arabian guy behind the counter thought I was going to steal his television set. It was a small 13 in. with the spin dial type settings, and I thought "Why in the world would I want his stupid TV?" If I watched TV, would I be here right now?

I started drawing lines on my left forearm. They started to look like a skyline, but I didn't mean for them to. When I realized the lines started to form something sensible, I quit drawing them and started to sing songs in my head.

The first one that came to me was that stupid Josh Groban song, and so I started to hate myself because of it. Where in the world did I even hear this song? “You raised me up...” Oh, God. Oh, God (frantically)! Please stop. God, please take this song out of my head. I’ll leave now. I promise I don’t care what these people do on their lunch breaks. They want to have sex, so let them have sex. It’s none of my business. Oh, there it goes again. “You RAISED me up...” Please, God. I’ll become a missionary...or anything. I kinda always wanted to. I was kidding about hating myself. I know I come from you, and you are good, and so I am good, and you are the only one that can take this song out. Please take it out! “YOU RAISED ME UP...”

And so I punched myself in the face. I new that if I aimed for my amazingly large forehead, there was a small chance than neither my hand nor my head would be hurt. I was wrong. Of course, I didn’t get the knuckles turned down quick enough, and my fingers crunched inwardly, and I wanted to cry, but just then the Arabian man started to cuss at me.

“You! Get the hell off the property. I told you. You want the room. You pay for the room. You don’t want the room, get the hell off the property.”

I started drawing lines again, trying to finish the skyline, hoping the song wouldn’t come back, but it did. The same one, and I heard that sad, evil man crying that same line over and over and over again. I sang it loudly and then

louder and then louder, hoping that someone would swerve off of route 60 and put my face in their radiator, but that didn't happen. So I thought about what it might be like to be a missionary. I had friends who were once missionaries. I wondered if they ever got songs stuck in their heads. I figured they probably did but doubted that they were as bad as this Josh Groban song. But I remembered my friends who were growing up as missionaries in the Ivory Coast in Africa and how they really liked Michael Bolton. It was the only cassette they had access to, and then I realized that that was probably worse.

I Think I'd Rather Have Sweaters

Birthdays always seemed to conjure mixed emotions. On the one hand, of course, I was eager to receive presents and have people visit my home and make a big deal about me, about my birth, about...my mother's labor⁷? On the other hand, I hadn't yet accepted, in my teen years, the possibility that I might be worth celebrating or a stack of presents even, and I would embarrassingly thumb through—not reading—the stack of cards pretending not to feel a million eyes burning holes in me. I pretended, though, to read each one, and I would let out a giggle when I thought it appropriate or tilt my head to one side or the other and sigh, as to let my audience know that I had read something that made me think or feel something special. Opening presents somehow invited an entirely different kind of embarrassment. Each package, I labored through guessing the horrible things that could be inside, that could soon be staring me in the face: a

⁷I was never really sure about the purpose of a birthday celebration. I suppose I could trace this tradition back to the birth of Christ and the gifts he received from the travelers and astrologers, but he was a king, right? The messiah. Why did the tradition continue? I'm no king. When I was sixteen and everyone seemed to want to bring gifts to me, I wasn't altogether worried about the perverted tradition, but now it bewilders me. I cannot save you from your sins or perform miracles. I'm pretty sure that if you want wine out of water, then I am not the person to call, and yet you want to celebrate my life? I did not even have a choice in the matter. Being born was possibly the most passive act in my life. Two people had sex, and I was the result.

Honestly, I think we should celebrate the consummators, or at least the one to whom I was born. How about nine months of labor? That's worth celebrating. The essence of the word 'labor' suggests someone had to work. It screams pain and anguish, and, oddly, we celebrate the result or the cause of this pain.

How about we have one life celebration? No birthday parties. After a person has lived for 50 years, we should have one party. The size of this party would depend on how good or how meaningful the person's life has been. If you've accomplished many things—big, big party. If you have squandered all your worth and pissed away your talents—we'll send you a card, maybe a text message.

red turtleneck sweater, a zip-up turtleneck, any kind of turtleneck for that matter, any kind of sweater for the very same matter, a tank top or muscle shirt, sweatpants, cologne, razors, or anything that suggested ill hygiene. What's wrong with cash? Why do people insist on revealing the fact that they haven't shopped for clothes since 1984? The pressure seemed more intense than the laws of reality should allow. What's more, I had absolutely no talent for lying. I would raise the oversized rainbow graphed sweater all the way up over my face so my mother wouldn't see me mouthing cuss words, and then, from somewhere behind the hideously colored mess, I'd say, "Awesome! I can't wait to wear this," which really meant *I can't wait to have the crap beat out of me at school for wearing such an offensive piece of fabric.*

My sixteenth year pinnacled my birthday discomfort. I had just gotten my first real girlfriend in all my life. We were making out daily, throwing caution and tactfulness to the wind with passion and intention, like throwing darts without aiming. We had no respect for bystanders, or for anyone really. Any opportunity outside—or *inside*—our high school walls was a chance to jump each other's bones with vicious authority, an attack of flesh on flesh. We weren't having sex or anything that adult-like, but for the first time, I felt it my complete right and duty to unleash every pinned-up thought I'd had since my very first touch of the puberty plague. She, this new girlfriend, would be my relief. And

on this Friday night, as my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents began to fill my living room, and my mother started buzzing about the house, feeling good about herself as the helpful hostess, my thoughts awaited Amber, but she wasn't coming.

"Family only." My mother said.

In a way, I was relieved that my friends were disallowed to come. I wasn't quite ready to expose the inter-workings of my insanity. I treated my family like a certain stuffed animal that your grandmother got you when you should have been entirely too old for it, yet you continued to sleep with and fancy it. I loved my family in my own extraordinary, teenage way of course, but I still didn't really want anyone to know that I actually had one.

The thought of kissing that girl and being kissed back infatuated my brain like a cancer, and for brief moments, here and there, throughout the evening, I wished she were there among us like a pill swishing in my mouth. I held the thought of her in my head along with the hopes that this insanity could be cured with a swallow. My grin never left me though, and as my grandfather, my most favorite person in the world, joked, "Sixteen and never been kissed," I blushed. So much blood filled my cheeks that I thought I might explode, because I *had* been kissed. I wasn't quite sure if my papaw was just trying to embarrass me or if he really thought I'd never before kissed anyone, but I entertained his thought.

“Yeah, that’s right, papaw.”

He was already facing the rest of the room and not listening to me.

My grandfather was an alcoholic. I was never quite sure what that meant. I assumed he drank alcohol and wanted to drink alcohol and, perhaps, *needed* to drink alcohol, but the entirety of the sickness remained a mystery to me. I did, however, learn that he had recently stopped drinking, and somehow I knew that that must be difficult. My mother mentioned something of the sorts. I had seen my grandfather drunk, though. I had seen him sober. This night, though, was something very different. I had never, ever seen him deny himself something that he needed or *wanted*. My grandfather was very powerful. He worked from age twelve on farms, and here, and there and all with distinct determination until he had created three thriving businesses of his own. Everything that he truly wanted, he earned. He worked for it and received it. This was how I knew my grandfather, and so his depravity confused me.

His body twitched continuously, and he disposed awkward comments all throughout the evening, one embarrassing joke after the other. I could tell he was uncomfortable although he tried to hide it. His wife, my now step-grandmother, also seemed nervous. I assume she was only caring for him and knew what only a few others, my mother included, knew: that her husband was a wreck. His withdrawals were physically overtaking him. He couldn’t sit still.

He couldn't listen. He couldn't focus. He was disinterested in our company but knew he should be there. He wanted or at least knew that he should want to be there.

"Time to open presents," Lou announced.

Lou is a close *friend* of the family. Apparently, she didn't receive the 'Family Only' memo. In fact, I wondered as she announced again, "Presents," if that memo was only intended for Amber and I had, by a misunderstanding, passed it on to the rest of my friends. Did I miss the opportunity to equal some of the sweatpants and cardigan sweater gifts for some cool CDs or posters? Why is Lou here anyway? Is it because every time she sees me she reminds me how she babysat me as a child and rocked me to sleep? Had she reminded us this story over and over to retain her Taylor Family Pass? Is there a way that I could have gotten Amber one of these passes?

"If you don't open these presents, I'm going to open them myself," Lou said.

In hindsight, I wished I would have let her. She'd have been much more fit for the task. Instead, I came to that corner of the room where my gifts were stacked. I hadn't yet, at this stage in my life, learned how to open gifts without hurting feelings. This simply meant opening everything while people were talking and eating and not paying attention to me and gracefully thanking them

collectively as the cake was dispersed. This technique, sadly, was not devised until about my 19th birthday. Nevertheless, at 16, I stood like an enormous idiot and came to where my presents were, where Lou pointed with her long boney fingers. Her hair surrounded her head like a smoke cloud above a destroyed piece of land and reminded me of the only picture I'd seen of Hiroshima, her curls all matted against one another, hanging on for survival. If I could, I would have whispered to them that none would escape alive. Lou's lipstick, aggressively red and odious, smeared on and around her lips and constructed the design of fright on her mouth. Those red lips bounced off each other and smacked as she kissed the air between us.

As Lou settled in her seat, I settled in mine, and I grabbed the first gift I touched. What do you know...a sweater. I opened a few more, and as my hands tore through poorly taped wrapping paper, I tried to think of places I could be seen wearing the sweater. The only place I could think of was church. I could wear just about anything to church. Amber didn't go to my church nor did any pretty girls my age. In fact, hardly anyone under 35 attended my church on a weekly basis, and those were the people that thought this sweater actually looked good.

A few *more* sweaters later, I found myself thankfully nearing the end of the pile. Since my mother had given my present to me on my actual birthday, I

figured there was little hope of getting anything really cool before I opened the last one: my grandpa's gift.

I worked my way through the last few, opened the boxes, gave a smile, offered an insincere "Thank you," and repeated the process. Purposely, I avoided my papaw's gift until now because I knew he would have the goods. He always had the goods. For my brother's 16th birthday, my papaw bought him an outrageously large pistol. An actual gun! A real pistol you could kill real people with. For my mother's 16th birthday, he bought her a car. His gifts were always monumental, the definite highlights of any evening, and everybody knew it. He liked the attention, and I felt that this night, with or without the alcohol withdrawals, would not be any different.

Finally, after all the crap gifts had been exposed and I had, with the best of my ability, pretended to enjoy each one in there own disturbing way, I reached for my grandpa's gift. But first...a card? "Why is there a card," I thought. My papaw never gave us cards. In fact, he told us once, "How about I don't get you a card and I just give you three more dollars?" This sounded perfect to us, and so he'd kept doing it through the years. So why a card now?

Even more astounding, I opened the card to find twenty five dollars inside. I looked up, confused, at my papaw and his wife who sat diagonally from me, and I offered a curious grin. Twenty five dollars was a great gift from

an aunt Peggy or a cousin Jimmy, but from papaw, it was almost insulting, and so I knew that it must not be true. I started imagining suitable scenarios.

Perhaps, in the box was, for me too, a pistol and this twenty five bucks was for all the ammo I wanted. Maybe...maybe in the box were keys to a new car, and this twenty five bucks was to be used for my first wash and wax.

I thought of all sorts of ideas that seemed more realistic, each one a bit bigger than the one that preceded it. As I reached for the final box, that one marked, *From Papaw*, I heard that deep voice in a laughing quiver, "Look at this." He wanted everyone in the room to take notice. I looked up at him, and his smile spread across his face all at once. He nudged his wife with his fidgeting elbow and reseated himself. He nodded at the unopened box and then at me. My excitement grew and nearly exploded. I started to wonder what could be bigger and better than a car. Just as I took the first stroke with my fingernails down the broad face of the tiny box, I heard my papaw laugh again. He did so in a guilty way. It didn't seem now that he was laughing in a you're-not-going-to-believe-what-I-got-you kind of way. Instead, his laugh was more like a joke's-on-you kind of laugh.

I looked down to see the small box branded with an offensive blue color and Oreo logo. The title read *NEW! WHITE CHOCOLATE COVERED OREOS!* I was in disbelief, so much so that I opened the bag of Oreos in a fury right there

in front of him as if I actually thought he had put the car keys inside and somehow resealed the bag just the way they do in the Nabisco factory. I looked inside, expecting to see anything but...

“Oreos? Really?”

Everyone in the room shot awkward looks right at me, and I took them in and harbored them all. They were as confused as I was. I started eating the cookies right away. I assumed that if my mouth was full, I couldn't answer any weird questions. I packed my jaws so full of Oreos that I couldn't hold any expression on my face either.

Soon, the house emptied, my grandfather among the first to leave. He didn't feel well, he finally admitted, and he left almost without saying goodbye. That was unlike him.

Four days later he died, my questions unanswered.

Fresh Mints and Cold Coffee

I hadn't imagined myself, before today, ever having a real job, but sitting here among these living things, watching them perform their small duties, I start to feel as if I, *too*, should be working. In Mrs. Laura Stuart's fourth grade class as an outsider, I watch her blabber on and on about social studies or something less earth shattering, and I observe her techniques and gestures, studying her commands and the responses to those commands, and I make notes on them.

I have only begun my clinical study and will need just three more hours after today to complete my substitute teacher training. I have absolutely no desire to teach elementary students or substitute for those that do, but I've heard that subs make great money, and all you need is a college degree to qualify.

This whole experience, I assumed, would be a bit ridiculous and...well...elementary, but now I'm starting to think that I belong here. Mrs. Stuart seems so in control and intentional. Her students respond to her as if she is queen or *more*, and I, for a moment, envy the plump woman. She corrects them on each little thing—handwriting, spelling, talking, whispering—but kindly, as if she genuinely cares, and I almost cannot understand her sincerity. It seems especially foreign to handle kids in this way who are not your own

biological children. It *is* foreign but quite desirable. The class operates like a family but more mechanical.

A neighboring teacher, Ms. Runion, comes across the hall to chat. Mrs. Stuart silences her class. The two teachers speak quietly, and I listen in. They nod and grin and both agree that Ms. Runion has inherited the rowdier class. The students grow restless but not impatient. They, too, begin to chat amongst themselves as I wonder how often these brief meetings take place in a given day. To feed my curiosity, I carve the number "6" on my paper and trace over it a few times. I scratch it out though, and, assuming I could find a more traceable number, I make two circles, one right below the other, forming an "8," and in one continuous motion, I trace over the "8" again and again until a large disgusting black spot remains on my paper, right in the center of my notes. Now, I wish it weren't there.

After turning the page, I make a few comments in my notes about how I'd like to have this kind of respect in a classroom or in any part of my life. I find myself daydreaming about being a school teacher...perhaps fifth grade, instead (ten year olds might offer a more attractive balance of entertainment and manageability). After the thought entertains me for a few trance-like moments, I laugh at the absurdity and take a sip of coffee. My mother, this morning, made this coffee for me and twice reminded me to turn the pot off before I left her

house. The second note⁸, in fact, was taped to the front door on a red piece of scrap paper. She wrote the note in marker, plastering her graffiti in her own annoying way all across the sheet. The purple marker and red paper mixed to create some specific shade of evil. The note, however, reminded me that she loved me and to have a nice day. “How affectionately persistent,” I thought.

The school that I am now observing happens to be located closer to my mother’s neighborhood, so I thought I would stay at her house risking the emotional punishment I would undoubtedly suffer. The coffee, however, tastes completely amazing and has stayed warm for hours since she has supplied me with this nice thermos. Generally, I am not a thermos coffee drinker. I am, though, a Starbucks coffee drinker. The difference here is that one (the thermos) suggests a sort of addiction or commitment to the habit, while the other (Starbucks) suggests that I have expensive taste. Well, I do unfortunately have expensive taste sometimes but not necessarily for coffee. In fact, I only *buy* coffee because I love it so much, and I do not trust myself to make it. And if I did make it, well it wouldn’t stay warm unless I put it in a thermos. Then, where would I take it? To work? To class? To me, this kind of behavior seems peculiar. Toting around a cylindrical billboard for your addiction, letting the world know that

⁸ She will later remind me for a third time in a phone conversation and ask me if I saw her note to turn off the coffee pot.

you've found a more efficient way to stain your teeth and curve your emotions. Anyway, I seldom buy coffee out of necessity or for some caffeine fix and more often buy coffee to enjoy the taste and feeling, not the thermos. I also buy coffee *because* of the throwaway cups and for the convenience, and not just expensive coffee. I especially love gas station coffee as well. The gas station near my apartment sells you any size for \$0.88. The real Colombian Bean stuff too!

However, this morning I chose the coffee completely out of necessity as I had to wake uncharacteristically early. My alarm sounded about three and a half hours after I set the thing, and so here I am with my habit-suggesting thermos load of coffee, and I know I'll never finish it while it is still warm and desirable.

I continue to take notes about certain techniques, writing about the things I assume I am supposed to be writing about. Eventually, though, my mind trails, and I start paying less attention to teaching methods and more attention to human interactions, teacher/student relationships, and student/student relationships. I see a very qualifying mullet-in-the-making and feel proud of the youngster for his, or *her*, courage. Beside me, another boy reads, what seems like a very adult book, each chance he gets, avoiding conversations with his peers. Surveying the room, I wonder who is mistreated at home. The percentages tell me that at least one person in this room is often sexually molested or beaten or mentally and/or emotionally abused. I hate these thoughts and random

unproven percentages but feel they must be true. All of these small people, to me, seem innocent and reasonably healthy, but I know their truths are quite disguisable.

Another teacher, whom I have not met, comes into our room and talks briefly with Mrs. Stuart. "I just can't imagine what happened to my scissors," the lady says in a sound state of distress. Mrs. Stuart has a student fetch a tub of scissors from the cabinet beside me and offers it to the lady. They chat some more about scissors and other things. The lady in distress promotes an especially odd hairstyle common among women much older than she appears to be. The poof is tall and spherical and shakes when she speaks. It's brown and nearly the size of a basketball. I imagine shooting the poof-do through a hoop. I imagine bowling it down a greased lane and sending marked pins about, but this poof bounces more than I thought it might. It floats in a way with syllables and complaints about children, complaints about the third grade, complaints about "the ones you're glad you don't have in *your* room." After mocking the poof-do, I decide that I want it atop my head. I want to shake it at strangers and rub it on girl's chins of whom I fancy. I entertain and then commit to the idea that I'd like to live at least for a day in this imaginary place with this lady's imaginary hair. Realizing that this hairdo is not fictional, though, greatly diminishes my interest.

My coffee tastes thick. Its strength fills my throat and warms the insides of my chest briefly as it goes down. Then the feeling disappears, and I am left with an almost bitter aftertaste but something quite agreeable. I take another drink to cover that taste that remains, each wet sip overshadowing the dry moment that exists before it. This coffee, in all its bliss, is now beginning to grow cold, even inside the cast-iron thermos, and so I find myself taking more frequent drinks and bigger drinks, trying anything not to waste the coffee. The one thing I hate more than cold coffee is wasted coffee. Also, my boredom sets up arms against me as I drink not out of thirst but habit. I need to feed my fidgety fingers and continue drinking for at least one thing to do. It is now a race to the bottom. Luckily, I find that mints aid the flavor. I pop in the tiny Icebreakers between and during drinks, during gulps. The perfectly shaped mint balls come loaded with a squirt of what tastes of mouthwash, and they're ready to puncture your halitosis with a heavy dose of satisfaction.

The class and students and whatever teacher is now a blur around me, colors fading into one another, muffled sounds and motions. They continue buzzing along with responsible things and quests, commands and responses, questions, permissions, assignments, flirtations, and chasing games while I suffer through each cold gulp of the black liquid. In a fury, I grab two more mints to

cope with a recent swallow, and suddenly, as I aim for my mouth, one disappears. I feel the ball hit my face somewhere just above my chin, then again somewhere near the side of my neck. I check my surrounding area: under my chair, under my shoes, beneath the table. I search more and more in places I have already looked. I feel the kids in the row next to me move their attention to my spectacle, but I continue. I know I don't need the mint, but I need to solve this improbable mystery. I lift my shirt and do a little shake. Nothing. I consider the possible distance a mint such as this could have traveled by way of the bounce-and-roll, and then I do one more search. Still nothing.

Another gulp. The flavor reminds me of warm beer and the unthinkable difference temperature makes. I assume I can finish with the next drink, so I bear it and feel a mild sense of accomplishment with the final swallow.

Coffee, cold coffee, and pretty much anything edible has a tendency to give me gas, and I knew this as I raced to the bottom of the thermos, but I assumed that this could be deduced to mathematics and that the quotient was in my favor. You see, it is now about 10:35 a.m., and I am set to leave at 11:00. The pressure in my stomach is indeed increasing but at a rate at which I had figured I could make it home and find rest and toilet before explosion hits. The trouble is...everything is built upon my assumptions. I *assume* my stomach won't explode before I can get home. I *assume* that this swelling pressure won't exceed

my allotted time, and I *assume* I don't crap my pants right here in this room.

However, I can't be certain about anything. My equation, then, seems unfortunately more theory-based than mathematically sound.

Putting away my notes, I count my final seconds in the classroom before darting toward the principal's office. The Kanawha County Board of Education requires his signature and proof that I was here today. So here I am, 26 years old, once again sitting, awaiting the principal but with quite a different view of my surroundings this time.

Across the room, two unattended computers idle. On one of the computers, a picture of a baby's face performs as a screensaver. A circle moves about the screen, bouncing against the top, bottom, and sides, distorting different parts of the baby's face. The oddity of the situation, for a moment, steals my attention, and my gas pains subside. I count six vents in the room, all around the upper back corner. Three ceiling fans disturb my thoughts with their uneven rotations. An oversized fish tank houses only three fish: two gold and one unidentified. The pressure resumes now in such a way that I think my calculations might be totally off. Much to my surprise, I feel pockets of air secreting down below. The pain increases. Sweat beads on my forehead and hands. More air moves out of me unauthorized even though I clench my

muscles in every place. I rise almost to a crouch somewhere above the wooden chair in attempt to stop the emissions but to no avail.

When my legs grow tired enough, I fall from the crouch back into the chair and feel a cool wetness under my buttocks and am perplexed. I *have* crapped my pants before. In fact, I have crapped my pants quite a few times, and it has generally felt damp and/or wet, but never *cool*.

Twenty minutes disappear before the principal accepts me into his section of the office. I follow him into his distastefully decorated space and make small talk while he types my letter. A poster that reads, “Dogs aren’t my whole life, but they make my life whole,” grabs my attention, and I celebrate the joy of such a find and rate it up near the mullet sighting from earlier. Now in his slightly newer wooden chair, I feel the same coolness against my underside. When he dismisses me, I decide that my personal problem has now exceeded any portable cure, and my only hope is to return home at the quickest rate possible to evaluate the damage.

Whatever has left me has done so without relieving any pressure whatsoever, so the ride home—steering, switching gears, PRESSING THE CLUTCH—becomes an entirely new challenge. At about 45 mph, I pull in my mother’s driveway and sprint into my *own* distastefully decorated space, unbuttoning and unbuckling the whole way. The immediate explosion brings

about an indescribable joy. It's almost orgasmic and tiring. "Ahhh...wow!" I pronounce to no one.

I pull my underwear back up to my knees and take an investigative look. The dark color of my boxer shorts makes it difficult to see any spots, wet or dry. I rub the outside of my index finger down the center of the fabric and indeed find a cool, damp spot the size of a quarter. The spot is still not visually noticeable, so I bring the garment a bit closer and take a sniff. An astounding dash of peppermint whisks up both nostrils, and in an instant, I remember the mystery of the unfound breath mint. In the same instant I feel joy and pride and relief. I am relieved to find that I did not, at least this time, crap my pants. I feel joyful to have such a matchless story to tell to you, *now*, and forever, but above all, I feel tremendous pride for this small gush of mouthwash, and I sing my praises to you. You've traveled so far, accomplished so much in a morning's time. Your spherical shape, unlike the scissor-less woman's poof-do has sacrificed itself for me. You have become the temporary source of my joy and created a scent that has never before existed in my underpants. And from the depths of me, I thank you.

My God, Your Cockroach

Sometimes, like an overdramatic teenager drowning in self pity, I feel like I could drive a stake in my chest. I'm old. Well, I'm 26. I'm old enough not to worry about acne or school dances or being 'pantsexed' in the lunch room. And you know, most nights I lie in bed and think how nice my life ticks away, how easy things are for me compared to those in poverty and those in the midst of suffering. Comparatively speaking, I live comfortably and satisfied, but some nights I'm tortured and wrecked by reality, and I feel as if I definitely could drive a stake right into my chest. Puncture my skin, slowly. Then, through the bone with the rusted metal, I would slide into my heart with anger, hating that ball of red beating flesh for the wounds it bears, hating it for the cliché, that a heart could actually be "broken." I think I want to break it for that very reason. I think maybe I already feel it. It does, for God's sake, feel broken, so what would it feel like to put a stake through it? And why a stake? Doesn't that sound a bit too vampire-ish?

I don't know why this would be my weapon of choice. I don't know why I'd kill myself this way, but...wait...no, no, I do. I do know why. Pills are such a copout. Jumping off a bridge or a mountain cliff would be adventures, sure, but there's something a bit too romantic in that. Why kill myself beautifully? I don't

need romance now. Every time I've chosen romance, that has usually been the death of me anyway, figuratively, and I know how *that* feels. The last I want is romance to kill me. I want to do it—myself. I want to see it just to know I could, or *can*, go through with it. By my own hands! If I *were* going to do this, if I were really going allow myself get to a place of such absolute hopelessness, I wouldn't want to fall or jump or pull a trigger, wondering or swallowing, guessing. I think I would want to see the skin dimple and give way. I'd want to hear the bones crunch. I'd want to see the blood rush out of my body—this body that so often feels blood-*less*—to cover my weapon and hands, my knuckles, fingertips and drip to my naked toes. I'd watch myself in the mirror to see if the pain would show in my face or just anger. Would sadness come? Would I miss myself? Miss life? Would I mourn my family even before I was gone? I don't know.

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I'm really not this dramatic, nor could I ever conceivably kill myself, but sometimes in this life, living like dust, I cannot hide my curiosity for what lies ahead, whatever that is. I'm told three things, and I believe a million others, and

some days I wonder what it might be like if nothing at all happened after death, in which case I would be most disappointed. Of course no one, including me, would know I was disappointed. Honestly, hell, as I believe it to be, is the worst place one could fathom, but even that must be better than nothing. Aren't your worst days still better than your best naps? At least you're living, right? I'm not sure that I would consider hell living but at least going there would briefly satisfy my curiosity. I assume my hell experience would be something comparable to having anal sex. I wouldn't ever *really* want to experience that myself, but I would like to know how it must feel. The feeling of hell, on the other hand, does not quite stir my curiosity like the look of it does. Perhaps, then, experiencing hell would be more comparable to seeing an elderly woman having her diaper changed. I would not ever want to see that...EVER, but I do wonder how seeing that would make me feel.

Hell, as described in the bible, is a physical place of screaming and gnashing of teeth. However, if hell truly is the worst place one could fathom, hell for me could be several things. If I were locked or tied to a chair in a pink padded room while Barbara Streisand took turns reading elementary school text books and singing to me her greatest "hits," I might gnash my teeth and scream. If I were asked to be the guest bell-ringer for the stock market or journalize the

every move of the “Internet creator” Al Gore or be the sole judge of the next pregnant Chad incident, I think I might lose my curiosity for hell.

I do wonder, though, if hell could be specific to the individual. Perhaps my hell would be Barbara’s pink singing room. But to her, it might be heaven—a captivated audience.

Life seems a bit more serious to speak of hell in such a playful way. What about heaven? Could I kill myself for heaven? Do my thoughts of heaven make me suicidal? I’m so eager to experience heaven, I would love to take that rusty stake and plunge it through my skinny body, but I don’t think it works that way. It doesn’t seem like heaven is the type of place and God is the type of god that would hand out express tickets. You know...skip to the front of the line type of situation.

I think of God sometimes as the Monopoly guy with the single eyeglass. I feel like we are all just playing some game, going around circles. If we make it all the way around we get 200 bucks, like a birthday present or something. We collect rewards. We’re punished. Some have houses and others live on Chance. Some of us are grossly in debt while others reach great success, and there is little communication between the two. Some of us lose out completely. And I feel like he’s sitting in some amazing wood chair watching, being somewhat amused but somewhat bored. I imagine he laughs when we do things like trust infomercials

or answer calls from telemarketers. I imagine he gets angry when we give money to TV preachers and have anti-gay or anti-anything marches. He probably laughs when Christians get cussed out for being Christians, and even more when Christians lose it and cuss out non-Christians for just not cooperating.

I can't imagine him not being amused by his creation. I suppose that's why he came down here once to see what all the fuss was about. He probably holds our universe and studies it like we would a model airplane or a painting, something we made, something we're proud of. I'm told and I believe that he desires us, that he has some quirky affection for us, and to be honest, I couldn't imagine why he wouldn't. If I painted a picture with people and families, I would want to talk to *them*. I would want them to be my friends. I would want them to live, interact, and respond. I would offer guidance because I could see the whole picture: the front and back, the end before the beginning. Like God, I would probably try to convince them of my knowledge and be a bit confused when they did not understand or trust me. I'd probably come into the painting and physically show them, if I could. I would teach them and care for them much the same as I would my own real family.

The church that introduced religion to me doesn't see God as a personal god. They're fundamentalists and republicans. They desire rules and

boundaries and societies that act within them. They prefer organization over chaos and silence over noise. From them, I learned stories from the bible like Noah's Ark and David and Goliath. I learned to respect people, especially people older than me. I learned to cooperate and not to challenge. I learned how to be patient and accepting and tolerant—all great virtues.

When I started really liking God and really believing his story, I started pitying these people. I began feeling like they had gotten everything wrong and created their own God and made him fit into their manmade walls. I thought they had thrived on religion and forgotten about spirituality. But the truth is...God's story is big. It's difficult to see and know. It doesn't make sense, and no matter how many different ways he tries to explain it, we still don't get it. CS Lewis⁹ said that God trying to communicate with us is like trying to explain your thoughts to a cockroach, and I think he's right, as if I tried to jump in my painting and explain a purer life, a better way to live. I cannot escape the fact that their lives are two-dimensional, and mine isn't. No one can grasp the idea of God, his bigness, his mystery. And trying to will drive you nuts.

Those conservative religious types are trying, I believe, to understand him, just like I am. They're just trying different things. And I don't so much think that they're wrong anymore and I am right. In fact, I love them for their

⁹ From Mere Christianity

efforts and for their persistency. Without such virtues, they would be lost and wondering and couldn't rightfully call themselves fundamentalists anymore. Then, who would we make fun of? I guess we could make fun of Democrats, but I'm pretty sure they're just republicans who believe in abortions.

When I started liking God and becoming interested in his story, I really considered ideas of suicide. Truthfully, believing in God, accepting him, ignited something inside me. I began feeling an uncontrollable affection for him and a desire to physically see him, so much so that I thought I could die for it. As it grew, I found it really difficult to live on earth and fill my days with normal events and meals and walks. I believed that suicide, by its very definition, is taking one's life into his own hands, the most extreme faithless act, and by a very, very small chance could merit a pass into heaven. But I *was* interested in the "very, very small chance." In fact, I was almost willing to take the chance.

Hmm...drive this stake into my chest vampire style and have a one in a millionth chance of meeting God right now or spend at least sixty more years down here with these people. Democrats, republicans, liberals, pagans, and Christians. All the same people calling themselves different names. It reminds me of rock bands who invent new genres every week to separate themselves. It's pathetic. Punk, Hardcore, Metal, Post-Metal, Post-Punk, Post-anything else, Garage, Gothic, Grunge. Anything to be different. Anything that says you

haven't conformed. The truth is, I love them too. I love those stupid identity starved musicians just like I love the religious fundamentalists and the gay pride marchers all in their own goofy ways. Everyone passionately believes he and she has found the right way, and I love them all for their efforts.

. . .

So I'm left floundering somewhere in the midst of my indecision. You have the tiny fragment of curiosity about the feeling or the sight of hell on one hand. On the other hand, you have this *undying* desire to experience eternal joy in heaven, and somewhere in between, you have real life with all its struggles and sadness and naps and tiny glimpses of hope. I'm old. Twenty-five. My adolescence has expired, and my high school problems are over, so nothing is too difficult. Nothing is truly unbearable, but when I die, either exactly what I have believed all my life will happen or something very different, and when it comes down to it, I'm dying to find out.

thank you for reading.