Preface

> *Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. The adventure is a metaphysical one: it is a way of approaching life indirectly, of acquiring a total rather than a partial view of the universe. The writer lives between the upper and lower worlds: he takes the path in order eventually to become that path himself.* (Henry Miller)

The other day, I had a near death experience. When I say near death, I mean I was so terrified I almost wet myself whether or not there was any immediate danger. As a writer I have learned that an arresting first sentence is very important. Anyways, my story begins flying from Cleveland to Chicago in a dinky little propeller plane which was probably not much more aerodynamic than an elephant. We had no trouble getting out because Cleveland, peculiarly, was sunny and warm. Once we hit mid Indiana, the trouble started. We started to hit bumps that practically sent us sprawling. Over Lake Michigan, they became frightening. Out of my window, several miles north, I saw lightning strike. That was when I became sure of my imminent doom. My mind began to race, as most people's do when death is upon them. Strangely, I began to pray. I promised I'd be a better person, be nicer to everyone, and stop worrying so much if I could just live. After praying came acceptance. *Well, if I die,* I thought, *at least I won't have to comp.* Then came the denial, *but wait,*

what if I actually want *to finish comping? I won't have a chance, oh please don't let me die!* Then, the woman next to me began to vomit.

Obviously, I survived. When the cabin doors opened, I stepped lightly over my unfortunate neighbor's airsickness bag and practically skipped off the plane. I was so happy to be alive that it took a few moments for the strange deflated feeling to set in. However, it set in eventually when I started thinking, *hey, the only thing I thought about when I thought I was going to die was my* comp??? I could hardly believe it. Upon further reflection, I have noticed something. My mood, no wait, my entire life has revolved around writing. This year, whether or not I had a successful designated comp time, was a critical player in my mood. On the lucky days when I had a "good" story day, meaning I wrote something, had a brilliant idea, or made useful corrections, my day would suddenly get better. The air would be a little warmer, the sun would shine just a little brighter, and I would feel a little more like a human being. On the "bad" days, things would get ugly. I would transform into a multi-tenticled, evil, sea creature hell bent on ruining the lives of everyone in my path. I mainly targeted people that smiled too much or were having great successes in their comps. I would trudge up the long and merciless hill of North Main, backpack bulging with my laptop and the pages of my stories and edits, thinking only of despair. Each step I took only served as a beat for my monstrous thoughts. *So here I go again, back to the campus center to get absolutely NOTHING done. I'm going to get a stupid hunchback from the*

seven pounds of laptop I have to carry every stupid day. I mean, at this point I might as well permanently strap that seven pounds to me as it's definitely going to my a@#% from all the emotional eating I've been doing. And this stupid project is responsible. You get the picture.

The point to all of this rambling is (yes, there is a point I just haven't quite gotten there) is that near dying or not, hysterical or subdued, writing has been with me through all of it. Even in those critical moments on the dinky plane I kept thinking, *gosh am I with it right now, too bad I can't write it all down and show it to everyone*. Considering everything I could write down including my brilliant brain would be destroyed in an air crash, I thought I was being pretty optimistic.

Writing, to me, has been a consistent force in my life. My career as a writer started in the second grade with the birth of my sister. Thus began the thrilling series, *Superbaby*. *Superbaby* was my debut as an author/illustrator and arguably my first experience using dialect. Eventually, the intrigue of my baby sister wore off (as she started getting on my nerves) and *Superbaby* disappeared. Later on, I dropped the title as illustrator (I was never that good anyway). Despite all of these changes, my passion for writing never seemed to wane. Once I had gotten my taste for writing in the epic tales of *Superbaby*, I was hooked for good.

My passion for writing did not come without a companion. From the ripe age of six when I learned my affinity for reading "Larry and Lenny go to the park." After the thrilling lives of Larry and Lenny, I moved onto the

Bailey School Kids and the Boxcar Children, then to Redwall and Harry Potter, then to icky teen novels, and the list goes on and on. All of these things (yes, even Larry and Lenny and all of the horrible teen angst novels I read) have influenced the way I write now, some more than others.

When thinking about this project and my influences, it was hard to think of just a few authors. I narrowed it down to the best, Dave Eggers, Markus Zusak, Maile Meloy, and Alice Monroe.

If I could somehow magically receive Dave Eggers' gift to be tragically hilarious, I would do it in a heartbeat. I would probably even sell my soul for it. I even thought about cleverly inserting a picture of a tape dispenser at the end of my preface to try and make it half as funny as his preface was for A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius. Alas, I have yet to reach that pinnacle of hilarity and any sort of gimmick like that coming from me would seem too contrived. However, there is no doubt that I [try] to use Dave Eggers' knack for making unfunny things funny and funny things tragically unfunny in many of my stories. For example, in *Lamplicity*, I try to use this type of humor to tell a story. Though this was quite a short story, I tried to implicate much of Dave Eggers' style into it.

I also used humor in *An Untruth*. This story is different from *Lamplicity* because not only is it longer (obviously), but it also takes on a slightly darker tone. Referring back to my favorite Dave Eggers book, Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, it is clear that he uses a dark humor to tell the story. Although many of the situations that narrator is in

are funny, there is a more sinister side to each occurrence. *An Untruth* is meant to be a funny story, I wrote it with the purpose to make people laugh. However, it was not simply meant to be just a silly work. I wanted there to be much more serious *stuff* at work there. This is not an easy task. I allowed my characters to be humorous and in ridiculous situations. The hardest part was creating the more serious undertones. Though the characters of this story were funny, they all held grudges or were caught up in their own flaws. This is what allowed the characters to live and breathe. Without anger or resentment, they were not human enough for me. I realized then that what makes Dave Eggers so brilliant was his ability to have real life characters in real life situations. I wanted the boat, more specifically the crow's nest, to be a highly charged atmosphere filled with judgment and resentment. As terrible as that sounds, it seemed like the only way to make these characters as real as they possibly could be.

My other big inspiration for *An Untruth* came from Markus Zusak's The Book Thief. There are always books that stand out for their unbelievably innovative ideas, and this is one of them. The Book Thief is told from the perspective of death which is just one of those ideas that makes you want to repeatedly bang your head against the wall for not thinking of it yourself. Unfortunately, these kinds of ideas only work once in a century I'd say. Zusak also employed another level of genius to this terrific novel. His narrator spoke in titles. This is a complicated thing to explain without a specific example, so I will provide such an example.

Why I think this is effective

It allows the thoughts of the narrator to be clearly expressed so the reader knows what is important without having to race back through the subtext.

I understand that this may seem like an overly obvious and gimmicky way of doing things. However, in *An Untruth*, I felt like it was an effective way to allow the narrator to step back and offer her opinions on things. It permitted the action in the story to stand out while allowing the inner thoughts of the narrator to come to light. It was with this technique that I found success in the “darker humor” genre. Throughout the story, the narrator is constantly using these titles as a way to open the reader up to her thoughts. These thoughts are witty and light, yet also very introspective and at times kind of sad. In this particular story, these titles allowed the narrator to open up in an intimate way that may not be seen with regular narration and dialogue.

As Henry Miller’s epigraph at the top of the page eloquently states, “Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery.” I have found much truth in this over the last semester. In the more depressing of my six stories, *Snow, Elm, and Queen of the Forest*, this has been especially true. I would start the story with no real idea of where I was going with it until around the middle. Then, as if I had planned it all along, I would insert

really twisted ending idea into it and finish. It was remarkable. I am not sure what trauma I experienced in my childhood that made me write such depressing things, but whatever it was, it definitely worked. After four years of being an English major and a psychology minor I guess it is no surprise that my stories took a turn down the road of psychologically disturbed. More specifically, I find that I have always been interested in child psychology. The protagonists of all of my stories are younger people. In the three stories listed above, they are all younger children. In Maile Meloy's story, *Red From Green*, the narrator is a young girl. In the story she has a bizarre sexual encounter with an older man and the way she deals with the guilt is fascinating. Her reaction to the event drives the story.

In my stories my characters were much younger than Meloy's. However, I wanted to create a world where the child's perspective and their reaction to the world around them is the main focus. These stories play a lot with the blurred line between fantasy and reality. In *Snow*, which I wrote first out of the three of these, I wanted to create a safe child's world. To breach that safety, I made the child's fantastical creations (the snow) into something more sinister, which in this case was blindness. As the narrator's vision slowly diminishes throughout the story, the more "snow" she sees on the ground. Finally, at the very end the snow swallows her whole and she can no longer see anything at all.

In *Queen of the Forest*, I employed some more of Meloy's techniques from *Red From Green*. I wanted to tap into the world of a child's guilt. Again, the protagonist in my story was much younger and her display of guilt was different. The guilt of a child is very different from the guilt of an adult and that is something that Meloy portrayed quite well. I used the wild imagination of a child to express this guilt. The narrator in this story begins to blur fantasy and reality, just like the narrator in *Snow*. However, it is due to the guilt and anger she feels about her parents' divorce. The different facets of the girl's personality are displayed through her imagination, first with the fairies, then her darker side with the goblins.

In the final story of this three, *Elm*, there is also guilt. This young girl, Molly, is dealing with the guilt about her younger brother's death. Through their dialogue, it is revealed that she was there when her brother fell and it was the fall that caused the fatal infection. Her vision of him in the tree is meant to confuse reality with dream as it is unclear whether he is an actual ghost or just a mere figment of her imagination. This is a technique I have learned over the years from several authors because I believe it makes stories more powerful.

Joey's was a story I wrote last semester. I decided that if I cleaned it up and worked with it, it could be much better. This story I wrote in the style of Alice Monroe. In the collection of stories we read as a class, Too Much Happiness, Monroe played a lot with memory. In this story, I tried to make the memories the working action in my story. The narrator and her

cousin are at dinner having pointless conversation yet the narrator's memories are what is working through this story. In Monroe's stories, not much action is taking place in the presence. The characters are mostly fixed on things that happened in the past. This intrigued me because I felt that it really captured the characters' motives better than dialogue or action alone. In *Joey's*, I wanted the reader to understand the relationship of the cousins and why that relationship has failed over the years. The memories of them playing together as children and being close were placed to make the dinner even more uncomfortable and awkward.

The work I have done this semester has been the most challenging for me than anything I have done before. Not only was it hard for me to manage my time well, it was also difficult to come up with ideas without someone telling me I had to. For this, I am proud of my work. This project has absolutely been a voyage and it is a voyage that I hope to continue on even long after I have graduated.

Snow

The night the big storm hit my mom made us steak and potatoes for dinner.

“Eat up,” she said as she pushed a knife and fork into my hands.

I guess it was meant to be some sort of special and delicious dinner, but I don’t eat steak so I wasn’t sorry to see it go. By the time she had served the rock hard, packaged, strawberry shortcakes without strawberries, the first flakes were beginning to fall, cutting silently through the still night air. I watched, transfixed, as the icy stars dove into the soft light of the street lamps. I slurped my whipped cream.

While I was brushing my teeth, there was already an inch of snow on the ground. I peered into the mirror. It was fogged up, as if someone had just taken a hot shower. I stared hard at my cloudy gray eyes. The kind of gray that the sky turns on a snowy day. When I glanced back on the window the snow glittered and shone, as if the ground were covered with flecks of diamonds. When I told my mother this, she shook her head sadly at me. I thought maybe my description was too *garish*, a pleasant-sounding word my mother used when describing the next-door neighbor’s hats.

I awoke late in the night to the sound of crunching. Thinking that a vicious monster was munching on my kneecaps, I sat bolt upright. I looked down at my kneecaps, there was nothing there. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*. I looked toward the window, and suddenly felt very afraid. There, looking

into my window, was my grizzled-faced grandfather, white beard and all. He beckoned to me silently. I didn't want to argue, as he appeared to be floating right next to my second story window. That to me was no laughing matter. There were icicles hanging from his beard. When I got to the window I nearly screamed. My grandfather was not floating, but perched upon a wooden sled on a mound of snow that sat just below my window. It was as if the whole world had landed on a cloud.

I opened the window, "Um…would you like to come in? It must be awfully cold out there."

"No way m'dear!" he said with a gruff laughter, "We're going sledding!"

"Are you sure that's a good idea? With your, you know…condition?" I asked awkwardly.

"Condition?" he asked, outraged, "And what condition would that be?"

"Well," I was unsure of how to phrase this, "You know, *Parkinson's*." Now, I didn't have a good idea of what Parkinson's was, but it was a smart sounding word that my mother often said in a grave tone. Much like the way she talked to my doctor about *retinitis pigmentosa* or when she'd whisper for me to get *hemmorhoidal* ointment at the store. I adopted the silky hush in my voice.

My grandfather boomed with laughter. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he laughed patting his stomach. “But your voice sounds funny, are you ill?”

“No.” I said, slightly offended.

“Then what are you waiting for?” he asked, “Get on! The night is young and the snow falls fast!”

It was then that I remembered a night a few years ago. My grandfather had come over for my birthday. It was a miracle he made it as the snowfall had become blinding and the streets were covered in a blanket of slippery white. He had brought me a beautiful wooden sled with a red trim. His cloudy gray eyes crinkled happily when I begged him to take me sledding. My mother begged us not to, as his vision was terrible at night and with my thick glasses we weren’t much of a pair. He took me anyway.

We walked to the big hill at the end of my street. The sky was black and the ground was white. On the top of the hill we sat down on the sled, him in the back and I in the front. He wrapped his arms tightly around my shoulders. This was the last time I remembered him doing that, before his bones grew brittle and his hands began to shake from disease. We flew down the hill so quickly we were blinded by snowflakes. All I could see were the faint, flickering lights on my street. It was beautiful.

“What are you waiting for? You can hardly see a thing!” my grandfather yelled. He was right, the snow was falling so thickly that I felt

like I was talking to him through a soft, white blanket. Flurries like swarms of white bees blew into my bedroom nearly knocking me off my feet. I heard him yell one last time, “Come on! Get on! Let’s get out of here!” before the wind bowled me over.

“Remember when we went sledding?” I shouted to him.

There was a gust of wind and a rushing sound and that was the last I heard of my grandfather.

I fought my way to standing and slammed the window shut. My carpet was dusted with at least four inches of snow. As I reached down to touch it my door burst open.

“What’s happening?” my mother’s voice broke through the dark, “I heard yelling. Did you fall?” I felt her come near me and I realized I was still on the ground. “Why is your window open? It’s freezing!”

She shut the window briskly and the brush of her nightgown signified that she had sat down beside me. She gently lifted me up by my shoulders and hugged me close. I could feel her hair on my cheek. I wanted to tell her about grandfather and the snow and the sled but all I managed to say was, “Do you see the snow? It looks like diamonds.”

My mother made a funny sound and something warm and wet fell onto my shoulder. After a long pause she said, “Yes, yes it does,” and she pulled me closer. In her arms I stared at the window, waiting for the pane to fill and wondering if I’d ever see that little wooden sled again.

Lamplicity

It was because of a misplaced sweatshirt. I've never had very good aim so when I tried to toss it casually over my head and somehow missed the vast expanse of floor and knocked my Ikea lamp down. It fell in a graceful, yet sudden, arc that crashed quite hideously onto the ground. I was deeply concerned.

I then decided that there were three possibilities for such an occurrence:

a. I suffer from frequent migraines

b. I need to put my lamp in a better place

c. I suffer from poor aim

d. Both b and c are correct

If you chose d, then you are correct. The previous location of the lamp (current location being about 10 cm from my bed) was sitting precariously on my nightstand. The dimensions of the nightstand are eight inches by eight inches, in other words, a perfect square. It's made up of tiles that are approximately three inches by three inches. The lamp stood at the corner most tile on the right side. In addition to all of this, my room is on a slant and the lamp dangles quite uncomfortably on its base. In addition to all of this, it was quite a cheap lamp.

The instructions consisted of about five uncomplicated steps:

1) take out equipment

2) screw rod into base (excuse sexual connotations)

3) place lightbulb on top of base

4) put lampshade on

5) turn on light (this took me approximately seven minutes to figure out)

I bought the lamp on an impromptu trip to Ikea. My mom decided she was hungry but didn't want to make anything. In my opinion, cooking lunch would have taken a maximum of twenty minutes and the drive to Ikea was a whole 45 minutes (with traffic). This adds a whole other 25 minutes to the waiting-for-food process.

Note: this does not take into account the time waiting in line at the Ikea restaurant or the Swedish meatball preparation time.

I thought this was a waste of time but I didn't want to say anything. My mom is quite serious about her Swedish Meatballs and her aversion to cooking. I don't particularly care for Swedish meatballs.

While my mom stood in line for meatballs at the Ikea café (which I politely declined), I decided to wander around the store. After testing out at least 37 chairs (the most attractive of which being the most uncomfortable), I moved on to office supplies. It was there where I found the holy grail of all lamps. A perfect lamp with a white, papery shade, and

a sleek silver base. It was the ideal lamp for any room, and in my opinion, had great feng shui. About eleven minutes later, my mom appeared, wiping the Swedish meatball sauce from her mouth. I could barely contain my excitement while showing her the lamp.

“This?” she asked.

“Please? It’s only nine dollars,” I said, waving the price tag.

“It’s kind of ugly,” she replied, wrinkling her nose.

It did not take long to convince her due to the fact that she was well fed. I could hardly contain my excitement as we drove the long 45 minutes towards home. When we arrived I ran to my room opened the package, quickly followed steps one through five and bathed in the glorious light.

However, this was not a sturdy lamp. So when I threw my shirt in the wrong direction by accident and it happened to hit the already unstable lamp on the small bedside table it is no surprise that when this said shirt came into contact with the lamp the lamp fell. And then the room went dark.

Joey's

I ordered the three cheese ravioli. She, flicking her long, glossy, black hair behind her shoulders, ordered a house salad; no onions, no carrots, no peppers, and vinegar, *on the side please*. I looked down at my thighs that were spread grotesquely across the chair and suddenly felt fat. I had worn my nicer, more "stylish" shirt for the occasion. A light green scoop neck that I paired with a lacey white tank-top, so as not to expose my A-cups or my rib cage. She wore a beautiful gray cashmere sweater and expensive looking jeans. This was my mom's idea, as we were only in town for a few weeks.

"You should spend some time with your cousin," she had said in a soft, yet firm tone. I knew there was no arguing.

My cousin chose Joey's, an uppity Italian restaurant in a nearby town. Its dim lights were meant to give Joey's that sophisticated European look, however, it just made everyone's eyes look hooded and strange, like they were ghosts. I looked up from the menu and my cousin smiled as she tossed her long black hair again. I pulled uselessly at my curly, lighter hair.

"So, how are things?" she asked, still grinning.

"Oh, you know…" I said, though I knew she didn't really know.

"I have a boyfriend," she said, glowing a bit in the low-lit room.

"Oh, really?" I asked, desperately trying to look interested, "Is it what's his face? Finn?"

“Oh Finn, *puhlease*,” she said, flicking her hair yet again, “Finn is *disgusting*. No, this boy’s older, he’s *twenty*.” she said his age in a sort of hushed awe, as though it was something we should not be discussing in public.

“Oh. So what happened to Finn then?” Finn was the last boy I’d heard about. At a party in the eighth grade, she led Finn into a closet and let him feel her up. She also had said his tongue felt like a fish. That was four years ago.

“I don’t remember,” she said, idly, twisting her hair, “He kissed kind of like a fish. Not Jon though. He actually knows what he’s doing, if you know what I mean.” She then gave me a strange look. No I didn’t know what she meant. I wouldn’t even know what a twenty-year-old boy might look like, let alone know how to do. I suddenly felt very young and foolish.

She told me about Finn when we were sharing her double bed in her room, telling secrets about boys. This was her new favorite pastime since her parents had been divorced, but also something I could not follow. Our covers were up to our chins as the cold Cleveland air snuck past the crack in her window.

“His tongue just sort of…laid there,” she said, looking bewildered. I didn’t understand.”

“ I kissed a boy once,” I added, just happy to be a part of the conversation, “his tongue just sort of twitched a few times...but mostly just laid there. Sort of like rigor mortis.”

“What’s that?” my cousin asked blandly.

What’s that?” my cousin asked blandly when I told her about the book I was reading, A Raisin in the Sun.

“It’s a play,” I said, “A play about civil rights.”

“Cool,” she said, twisting her hair around her finger.

This was not going well. I mentally cursed my mother as I took a long sip of water. I tapped my nails on the table, so did my cousin, but her nails were much longer and rounded, so the sound was better. I scratched my arm, the tension was making me itchy. I tried a different approach.

“I saw Sindy yesterday,” I said at last.

“Did you?” my cousin asked, her eyes now narrowing with interest. Sindy was her father’s new wife, in other words, not someone we held with high regards in our family. Their illegitimate love child, Olivia, was now four.

“Yeah, at Aunt Sandy’s house” I said, “And Sophia and Max were totally being nice to her.”

“Ugh, what assholes,” she said, her nose curling unpleasantly.

“You know Ted and Sandy haven’t told them, right?” I asked her, starting to feel bad that I was bashing other family members for the sake of our dinner conversation.

“No!” she said, now looking completely interested, “So they know nothing about the affair?”

“Nope. I don’t know how it’s possible, because, I mean, where did they think Olivia came from? Thin air? Did they even realize when the wedding took place?” I asked.

My cousin sighed, she was beginning to look visibly upset, “I don’t know, I just don’t know.”

We were sitting in silence again. Except this time, as though on cue, the food was brought over. I looked down at my red mass of ravioli and suddenly realized I was ravenous.

As I was putting a piece of ravioli in my mouth, my cousin asked, “So have you ever given a blow job?”

The effect of the slimy, partially masticated ravioli now sliding down my throat was completely nauseating, “Umm…”

It was completely nauseating. I was teetering on a slippery rock when I found it. I called out her name blindly in the mist that surrounded the entire forest.

“Please come here, I think I just found a dead dog!” I shouted through the fog.

My cousin came bounding out of the brush she was currently exploring, “What do you mean?” she asked.

I pointed at the river, and there it was. White and matted, blood trailing darkly out of the mouth. It looked like it was once some sort of retriever. One black eye was opened and bloodied. Its bloated body floated strangely in the stream, yet the water had not yet decomposed it to nothing.

“Oh my god,” she said, backing up. Our explorer-adventure game no longer seemed that fun, “We should go.”

We quickly backed up the hill, I didn’t think I could get out of there fast enough. We barely spoke as we climbed the slippery hill that led to the safety of her backyard. My foot failed me above the carpet of wet leaves. I began to fall back down towards the river. I screamed, imagining myself coming into contact with that horrible dog.

“Help!” I called to my cousin above. I felt myself becoming wet with the mud from the forest floor, but I didn’t care, I was desperately scrambling to stay away from the dog.

My cousin ran down the hill fast and grabbed my hand. To my luck, she pulled me up without a problem. We stood at the top of the hill for a minute, trying to catch our breath. We looked at each other with relief, and

then headed back up to her house. We would later recount the story with excitement and bravery. That was ten years ago.

I looked down at my ravioli with a newfound disgust. I ate it anyway, resigned to the fact that I had to pay for it. I forced each square piece down my throat as my cousin gushed about her sexual escapades with her new boyfriend between dainty bites of her house salad.

“Remember that time when we found the dead dog in the stream behind your house?” I cut in suddenly.

My cousin chewed thoughtfully, “Sorta…weren’t we like...six or something?”

“Eight,” I corrected, “I think we were eight.”

“Yeah…that was scary,” she said. “And you fell down! And I had to drag you out of the ravine!”

“Yeah, I think that was the worst moment of my life!” I laughed.

“We loved that forest,” she said, “Until that happened I think.”

That wasn’t why we stopped loving the forest. I remember when it happened. It was the winter her dog disappeared, and then not long after, her father did too. They uncovered her dog’s body months later, but her father was already remarried.

“Yeah,” I said, “That really freaked me out.”

Her phone buzzed. It was Jon. I watched her as she happily texted him back, her childish grin glowing in the dim light of the restaurant.

Queen of the Forest

The summer my mom wanted me out of the house I became Queen of the Forest. I fancied myself my own servant fairies, like Titania in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I would spend my mornings sending my fairy servants out to my bidding. First, they would slip through my window just as the morning crept through the shades and tell me the morning weather.

"Warm and sunny as usual today, miss," Peaseblossom would say.

"Yes, not a cloud in the sky," Mustardseed would add.

"Perfect day for a walk in the woods, miss," Moth would pipe up.

"Yes, I would set out at once!" Cobweb would chime in.

I would run downstairs to find my parents standing in the kitchen, a mug of coffee each.

My mom would always clear her throat and say "Sweetie, why don't you and Lizzie go get some fresh air."

Before my father could grunt his agreement I was already shouting Lizzie's name all over the house, jingling her leash and collar. Then I would pack a quick lunch and be out the door.

My day would usually start in the treehouse where the fairies and I would talk about our daily plans. This usually consisted of eating my cold pasta and peaches then hopping down the ladder and heading for the stream. We would then spend the rest of the daylight hours poking around

the slippery and glossy stones for salamanders. Sometimes I would be successful and catch one or two, but I'd always come home empty handed, wiping my muddied hands on my shorts. Before I slipped through the screen door I'd whisper good night to Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed, and Peaseblossom in turn.

When I'd get home the fighting always stopped. My dad would shake his head and "go out" while my mom stood red-eyed over the stove cooking dinner. I was always afraid to comfort her so I'd take the excitable Lizzie upstairs. She'd pace my room, wagging her tail as I would try to pry the secret door in my closet.

When I was seven, I managed to open the door and climb up the ladder. I discovered a room all to myself that was lined in pink fluff that looked like cotton candy. Unfortunately, my dad had come in to take my garbage out and discovered the door open. He climbed up the ladder and pulled me out by the arm and told me I could inhale something bad up there. He shook my arm again for effect and then trooped back downstairs. I hadn't tried again until this summer. I figured it was all right since my dad was never home anymore and I got infinite amounts of free time in my room or by the stream.

One night, while I was practically bending my nails back trying to force open the secret door, my mom called me down to dinner. Annoyed, I crawled out of my closet and slowly descended the stairs, one by one by one. On the landing, I paid an extra glance to my mom's painting, the one

she painted in college. It was of a foggy forest scene, dominated by green and gray. Weaving in and out of the trees was a terrifying creature. My mom told me it was a wolf she saw while hiking in the northwest, but I always took its gnarled and evil face as something more sinister. Like an ogre with the body of a dog, perhaps. When I entered the dining room, both of my parents were seated at the table, a pot of spaghetti between them. Neither of them had touched it yet. I sat down. I wanted to help myself to some but since no one else had I was afraid to.

“How was your day?” my mom asked me, stiffly.

“Fine,” I said, wondering when they were going to serve dinner.

“Your father and I…” my mother started.

“No Jan, I’m going to tell her,” my father cut her off, ”Look, sweetheart, your mother and I, we’re not getting along like we should. I don’t want you to be alarmed when you see me sleeping in my office,”

“How could you tell her that way, Rick?” my mom cried, “She doesn’t need to know where you sleep!”

“Well, she’s almost nine and she’s old enough to understand,” my dad said, beginning to raise his voice.

“Well *I* think it’s inappropriate!” my mom yelled, they were both standing now.

“You need to stop treating people like children!” my dad said, turning on his heel and storming up the stairs.

My mom's lip trembled. She spooned some spaghetti onto my plate and took her and my dad's clean plates into the kitchen and began to wash them. I took a bite of the cold spaghetti and realized I was no longer hungry. I quietly scraped my chair back and walked towards the stairs. I glanced at the painting again, the evil face of the wolf ogre glinted mockingly. At the top of the stairs I pressed my ear against the office door. I couldn't hear anything.

I woke late the next morning to find a heavy and humid August sky with suffocating gray clouds. None of my fairies were around to tell me the weather. I called to them, quietly, as to not wake my father in the next room. Almost at once, four miniature figures flew through my window.

"It's gotten quite bad, miss," Peaseblossom said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up quickly.

"The goblins are coming in from the north," Mustardseed panted.

"They're trying to destroy the kingdom," Moth said.

"They want to fight!" Cobweb piped up.

"What do they want?" I asked, now quite frightened.

"They want the forest, miss. They want control of the land," Peaseblossom answered.

"What terrible creatures they are!" Moth squeaked.

"Well then I guess I'd better go out there…"I said.

"I don't think that's such a good idea miss," Cobweb said, suddenly sounding quite frightening.

“Why?” I asked.

“Too dangerous, the goblins always win,” Peaseblossom said, in the same dark tone.

“Well I won’t let them win!” I shouted, “I have to be stronger!”

“Suit yourself, miss,” Mustardseed said.

They flew away. I was left to ponder all of this new information. However, as ruler, I knew I needed to do this. I put on my shorts and tee shirt and headed downstairs. The kitchen was empty which I regarded with suspicion. I had grown so accustomed to my mom kicking me out of the house early on in the morning. For the first time all summer, loneliness began to sink in.

“Lizzie? Lizzie!” I called. Thankfully, I heard nails click on the wooden floor and Lizzie came bowling down the stairs.

“Come on girl, we’re gonna go outside,” I said as I patted her soft black head.

I felt brave going down to the woods that day. Lizzie and I marched past the treehouse and straight down to the stream. The stream looked muddied and slow and there was a sleepy and dead smell to the forest. I began to feel a prickle of fear starting at my toes and radiating to my skull. At the base of the stream squatted the ugliest creature I had ever seen. It had a brown, mushy face, with a ripped and dirty green cap topping it. He had a ratty red scarf tied around his arm. This creature came no higher than my knees, but I sensed a great power in him.

“Is this your land?” he asked me in a terrifying, scratchy voice.

“Yes, it is,” I said, standing up straight trying to be brave. “I own this land, I am *Queen*.” As soon as I said these words I felt a strange sense of foreboding.

“Oh are you?” he asked with a laugh, “Then where are your subjects?”

I looked around. I realized that my fairy friends were nowhere to be seen.

“Lizzie is my subject,” I said, gripping Lizzie’s leash firmly, “She’s all I need.”

“Is she? I thought there were more, it seems that they have abandoned you,” he said mockingly.

Lizzie began to bark and he kept laughing, “You’re fighting a losing battle my dear,” he said.

“I know I’m not!” I shouted, starting to get angry.

“You’re just a child,” he said smiling. As he smiled he bore his horrible green teeth. Then suddenly he moved toward me.

“You’d better go now,” he said, “I need this forest more than you do.”

“That’s not true,” I said, backing up, “It’s mine, I have just as much of a right to it as you do.”

“Do you really? Where are your fairy friends? Where are your parents?” he began to cackle horribly.

“That’s enough, stop it!” I was really angry now. I picked up the nearest rock and threw it in his direction.

“Oh, is that how you want to play?” he asked, suddenly glowering. He whistled and suddenly twenty other goblins just like him came from under the ground. I began to back up slowly while Lizzie started barking. They surrounded us and I was knocked over by a strong force. I struggled for breath as tiny fists and feet punched and kicked. I flailed madly in the mass confusion but I couldn’t seem to break free. After a few minutes of this I was left alone in a cloud of dust with the first goblin I spoke to, only distinguishable by his red scarf.

“Where’s Lizzie?” I asked, still dazed.

“She ran away, she’s safe. As for you…that’s another story,” he said, an evil glint in his eye.

“What do you mean?” I asked, alarmed.

“This is our forest now,” he said, “I’m a merciful goblin and I will let you go. However, if you ever come back, I will kill you.”

I ran. I became aware of how steep the hill was going up from the stream to my house. I was out of breath by the time I reached the treehouse but I knew I couldn’t stop. Tears streamed down my face as I ran in my screen door. My parents were waiting on the other side.

“Sweetheart, why are you crying?” my mom asked walking towards me slowly, “Why is your mouth bleeding?”

“I fell. Where’s Lizzie?” I asked, trying to keep the calm in my voice.

“She came up here about ten minutes ago, where have you been?” she asked, starting to sound concerned.

“The stream, I tripped over a branch on the way up,” I said, looking away.

“Well, your father and I have to talk to you about something,” my mom said, suddenly looking very uncomfortable.

***

By the time school had started two weeks later, my father was gone. The forest was dying. When I felt brave, I would open the back door and call to the fairies, but they never came. I longed to see their small wings flutter over to me with the morning weather, yet they did not return. I feared the goblins had captured them and I could hardly imagine what their prison was like.

As the summer lazily came to a close I would watch the forest begin to wilt from the back windows. The green leaves were curling into brown and the grass was patchy and rough. The goblins didn’t care for it like I did. Sometimes, I would think I’d see one of them doing their evil deeds, but at second glance it would be a light rustling of leaves or a particularly gnarled tree or even Lizzie, darting in between the trunks.

I came home after school one day to a quieter house. Both of my parents were usually at work at this time so I was used to being alone, but this quiet was different. There was a certain emptiness, something missing. The deafening sound of someone’s forgotten footsteps or the

smell of all of their things being gone. At the foot of the stairs I looked at the picture of the ogre-wolf. It seemed to be grinning at me horribly. Mockingly. I shuddered and walked softly up to my dad's office, where he had been sleeping the past few months. His laptop was no longer on the desk and the closet was empty. All that was left was the fading imprint of his sleeping form curled up under a thin wrinkled blanket on the green leather couch. He had also pulled over a chair to use a makeshift nightstand. A clock and a picture of my mom were all that was left. A graveyard of forgotten things.

I heard a noise at the door, it was Lizzie.

"Hey girl," I said waving for her, "Come here," I let her curl up with me on the rough white rug. After a few minutes there was another noise at the door. An awful noise. It was the goblin from the stream. He was still wearing the red scarf.

"Where's your dad, *Queen*?" he said in a taunting voice.

"Go away!" I yelled. "I've done what you've asked."

"You have, but *she* hasn't," he said, pointing to Lizzie.

"She's a dog! I can't tell her not go into the forest," I argued.

"Well you'd better start, or you're going to lose her too," he said, with an air of foreboding.

"How can you be so horrible?" I asked, feeling choked by the sudden urge to cry.

“I think the power has gone to my head,” he snickered, “As I am the new *King* of the forest.”

I felt my breath stop. This evil creature had stolen my throne, *my* forest.

“You’re a liar and a thief!” I yelled.

“You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” he growled. He reached a filthy claw out to Lizzie.

“Wait stop!” I shouted.

He stopped and smiled, “You don’t want me to hurt your precious dog?”

I swallowed painfully, “Fine, I’ll do what I can, just leave her alone,” I said, protectively putting a hand on Lizzie’s head.

“How do I know I can trust you?” the goblin asked, suddenly looking quite evil.

“Well, I haven’t come back to the forest, have I?” I asked, suddenly feeling very afraid.

“I need to be sure,” he said, a wide grin spreading his malicious face. With a sound like a whip he made for the chair, knocking the leftover things askew and shattering the picture frame with my mother in it. With another *crack* he tore the blanket to shreds and *crack* broke the vase on the table and *crack* kicked the desk and knocked several pens on the floor. I tried to yell at him to stop but the noise was too great. Soon he was gone, and I was left in a room of ruin. There were footsteps on the stair.

Worried that the goblin was back I slammed the door to the office. Unfortunately, I slammed it in my mother's face. When she stepped through the door her lips tightened and her face grew white.

She uttered one small word, "Why?"

***

After the "incident," my mom decided nine years old was too old for tantrums and started making me go to weekly dinners with my dad to learn to "accept the loss." Every Sunday at 5:00 pm, he would pick me up in his green Volvo and take me to the nearest Friendly's. I would tell him about school and homework but I would never tell him about the forest. I would think of the dying forest all the time, knowing the demise was my fault and the loss of my fairies were too. I now walked Lizzie everywhere because I was determined not to lose her too. It was getting much harder because the days were getting colder as October slowly faded into November.

At the end of November the snow began to fall. The trouble was, it didn't stop falling. It was a Thursday late afternoon and I was curled up with Lizzie on the couch reading a book when there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find my dad on the front step.

"Hey, kiddo, I thought we could get a milkshake or something," he said with broken speech. I agreed only because I thought I was supposed to. At Friendly's we sipped our milkshakes, mine strawberry, his vanilla, and we made the standard small talk we always do on these outings.

"I'm leaving town on Sunday," he said between sips.

“Oh,” I said.

“With a friend,” he continued. He looked at me imploringly as I merely sipped my milkshake. He sighed and then, “How’s Lizzie?”

“Fine.”

“Mom says you walk her every day, isn’t it a bit cold for that?”

“No. And she’s not safe in the forest anymore,” I said, but immediately regretted it, as I knew I had said too much.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“It’s slippery this time of year, and the stream is too cold for her,” I said quickly.

He took me home an hour later and the snow was beginning to fall thick and fast. On the street leading to my house my dad slowed to a crawl, anxious about the white and soft roads. When we arrived I said a quick good bye and ran up the steps to my house and shut the door hard.

“Is that you?” my mom shouted from upstairs.

“Yeah,” I said back.

“I let Lizzie out, I can’t find her anywhere.”

I felt as if I had been plunged into an ice cold bath. My chest froze and I was unable to breathe. My mom appeared on the stairs.

“You let her out?” I gasped weakly.

“Yeah, she was pawing at the door, I never thought the storm would get this bad,”

I begged her to let me look for Lizzie, but she said no. She said I could get hurt. When I asked her how hurt Lizzie could be she didn't answer. Hour after hour crawled by and Lizzie had not yet returned. I couldn't wait any longer. While my mom was upstairs in the shower, I quietly got together my things. I slipped my winter boots on, grabbed my flashlight and jacket and gently slipped out the back door. Outside, the wind and snow served as an impenetrable fortress. The wind howled and, like a school bully, knocked me backwards. My flashlight escaped my grasp and rolled away into darkness. The strong wind continued to slap already cold stung cheeks. I pulled myself to my feet as the back door swung open.

"I told you not to go out here!" my mom yelled angrily from the door, "Get back inside right now!"

My mom sent me to bed early, even before they announced on the television whether or not school was cancelled. We knew it would be. In my room I laid in the dark, the porch lights illuminating the white snow. I called softly to the fairies, but there was no answer.

In the morning I looked out the window to find the ground hiding under a thick blanket of snow. School and work was cancelled, and Lizzie was still gone. My mom and I ate a quiet breakfast and then I retreated to my room. I got dressed slowly then hunted for all my essentials; the granola bar in my socks drawer, a new flashlight, a map. I wore several

layers, thinking it would be substantial as body armor. I walked downstairs to find my mom sitting on the couch, reading a magazine.

“I’m going to look for Lizzie,” I said.

“Ok, be careful, honey,” she said, not looking up.

I said I would be, and I closed the back door behind me. The weather was frighteningly calm. The snow on the ground in a peaceful, yet almost sinister way. As I approached the beginning of the woods, I heard nothing. My treehouse was there, but buried in a thick coat of white. I took a deep breath and began to walk down towards the stream. I held my head high, just like a queen should.

Elm

I awoke suddenly at 3:27 am to find a boy sitting in the elm tree outside my window. He was an unremarkable looking boy, of average height for his age, straight, mousy brown hair, and dark eyes. Yet, I could not deny that he looked strangely familiar.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello,” he said.

“Are you trying to get in?” I asked. I remember my parents concern when they gave me the room.

“Someone might try and come in through the window, using the tree!” my mom had exclaimed.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my father said, “Who would climb up a tree to get in here?”

He had a point. Our house was small and completely devoid of valuables. There was one small, boxy TV in the family room and an old Dell computer in my parents’ room.

“No,” he said, “Are you trying to get out here?”

“No.”

There was a pregnant pause. He seemed completely unconcerned by my presence and began to explore a scab on his knee.

“Why are you here?” I asked him.

“Why are *you* here?” he asked.

“Well, I live here,” I answered, “Do you live in there?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why are you here?” I was getting confused.

“Why am I here? But who am I anyways?” he asked.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, shaking my head.

He scratched at his knee. “Well, how could I know where I am if I don’t even know who I am?”

“You don’t know who you are?” I asked, standing up and walking towards the window.

“Jake,” he said holding out his hand as if to shake mine.

“Molly,” I said holding my hand out. He withdrew.

“It’s Peter,” he said.

“Nice to meet you Peter,” I said.

“It’s David,” he said, eyeing me curiously.

“What’s your name, for real?” I asked, starting to get quite frustrated.

“You see, I don’t know. I don’t know if I feel like a Jake, Peter, David, or even John,” he said, hanging his head.

“You could be Elm,” I offered helpfully.

“Elm?” he asked.

“Like the tree, the one you’re in,” I said, pointing to his resting place.

“Oh yes, I think I could be Elm!” he said joyously, dancing precariously on the branch, “I feel much better now!”

“Would you like to come in Elm?” I asked, thinking, it must be awfully cold out there.

“Oh no, I couldn’t do that,” he said fearfully, I don’t think I’ve ever done that before.” He was itching his knee again and it was beginning to bleed.

“Why not?” I pushed, keen to invite my new friend over.

“It’s not safe for me,” he answered gravely.

This was curious, as being in the high branches of a large elm tree didn’t seem that safe to me. When I was a little younger I would try and cling to its lower branches, while my two-year-old brother sat below, wishing he could be big like me.

I would call down to him from my lofty perch four feet up, “Don’t worry, when you get older you can climb this too!” It was all I could do to feel more important.

The higher branches were a completely different story. It was something my parents certainly wouldn’t allow but something my older brother had done several times. Late at night he would creep into my room, push his finger to his lips, slip out the window, climb down the elm and into the night. I would never say anything anyway.

“Did you sneak out of your house?” I asked, wondering if he was anything like my older brother.

“What’s a house?” he asked.

“This is a house,” I said gesturing to the space around me, “It’s a place where you go to get out of the bad weather.” Judging by his confused expression, it became clear to me that he didn’t know what weather was either. I sighed and smiled, and began to tell him everything I knew. I told him about the rain and the snow and ice. I told him about how I used to take my brother out in rainstorms while I jumped through puddles. I told him about the day he fell, hard onto a ground wet with old rainwater. I told him about sunny days and days that are cloudy. I told him about the oceans and the rivers and the animals that live there. I told him about trees and how they make paper and wood for furniture. I told him what a hospital looks like and how it smells like the school gym after someone has thrown up in it.

“What happens in a hospital?” he asked, wide eyed with fear.

“It’s where you go when you’re sick,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Oh,” he said, looking slightly uncomfortable, “Have you been to one before?”

“Yeah, I have,” I answered, “My little brother fell down in the rain, and…well, he couldn’t get better.” I wished I hadn’t answered.

Elm clasped his knee, “I fell down once too,” he said quietly, “It was wet outside.”

I didn’t answer. I stared at him long and hard, taking in everything I could. I looked at his hair, his face, and his unblinking eyes. I looked at his feet, dangling quietly in the tree. I tried to imagine whether he felt the cold

air or not, whether he could possibly be real. When I looked back up at his face, I realized I had only been looking at his knee, which looked worse than it did a few minutes ago.

“Tell me more things!” he said suddenly, with a smile.

I told him that my favorite animal was an Alpine Ibex because they could climb really steep things like the dam in Italy. I told him about Ferris wheels and cotton candy. I tried to explain music to him but he didn’t quite understand so I began to sing.

“*Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey, A kiddley divey too, wouldn’t you*?” I sang, trying to remember the song my dad used to sing to my little brother and me.

“I’ve heard that before!” he said excitedly, dancing on the tree branch again, “I remember that one!”

“Really?” I asked, starting to jump up and down eagerly, “My dad used to sing that to my brother and me!”

“I know what a brother is! And a sister, you’re a sister!” he cried.

“What else do you know?” I asked, I was practically hanging out of my window at this point.

“ I know what a mother is and a father. I know what bedtime is. I know what milk and bananas taste like. I know that this is my head,” he said, patting the top of his head, “I know where my knee is and what the cold air feels like on my skin. I know what it feels like when it’s wet outside

and what happens when you get an *owie*.” He gripped his knee instinctually.

I was very impressed. “See, Elm, you *do* know things!” I practically yelled.

There was suddenly a bump from the other side of the wall. It became clear to me then that I was probably being quite loud, and it was the middle of the night.

“Elm, *quiet*!” I hissed, “My parents are coming!” I leapt into bed.

“Molls?” my dad called.

“Yeah dad?” I answered.

“Why is there shouting in here?” My door opened and I was surprised by how concerned his voice sounded.

“I was dreaming,” I said, simply.

“Well, are you sure?” he asked sounding puzzled.

“Yes, I woke up and I was shouting,” I said, “it was a good dream though, don’t worry,” I added, thinking that would appease him.

“Uh huh…”he said, walking towards the window.

“No really dad, I’m fine. I think I’m going to go back to sleep now, I’m pretty tired.”

He didn’t listen. I held my breath, waiting for the moment in which he’d find Elm and yell at me for talking to friends in the middle of the night. Or yell at me for finding strange friends in trees, as I know he doesn’t like it when I talk to strangers. He looked out at the tree, straight through

where Elm was sitting. Elm didn't move and neither did I. My dad squinted his eyes hard at the windowpane, and then to my surprise turned around. He checked in the closet and under the bed. I sat there, trying to be as still as a statue.

"Well go back to sleep, okay hon?" he said distractedly as he kissed the top of my head.

"Good night dad," I said.

He stopped at the door, "Molly?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"I had the strangest dream," he said, but his voice was distracted, almost like he was just talking to the dark room.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Your little brother, he was much older. He was climbing a tree I think," he said, his voice sounding funny.

"He used to watch me climb trees," I answered.

"I remember that," my dad said, "But sometimes I can't remember anything at all."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

There was a pause. "I don't know," my dad said, suddenly sounding much more alert, "It's late, good night sweetheart."

He closed the door.

"Elm?" I whispered into the dark, "Are you still there?"

"He didn't even see me," he said darkly, "Why didn't he see me?"

“Who cares!” I said, getting back up, “Now we can still talk!”

“He doesn’t even know who I am,” Elm said, clearly not listening to me.

“Why would he know who you are anyway?” I asked.

“My leg hurts,” he said softly.

I looked out at him, “That’s because you scratched it. It’s bleeding now see,” I said pointing to his bleeding knee, “You shouldn’t do that, you could get an infection,” I offered helpfully.

“What’s an infection?” he asked glumly.

“It’s what happens when you have an open cut too long and you touch it,” I said with uncertainty, “you can die from them.”

“You can die?” he cried.

“My little brother had an infection in his leg,” I started, but realized I didn’t have the words to finish.

Three weeks after the fall he couldn’t walk and his face burned with fever. My mom cried silently the whole way to the hospital. The doctor said he had a bad infection and then wheeled my brother upstairs to another room on his bed. I never saw him again.

“Molly?” Elm’s voice emerged from the tree, I had almost forgotten about him.

“Yeah?” I answered.

“I had a dream about you,” he said.

“Really?” I asked. I found this strange because this was the first night we talked.

“Yeah, you were climbing a tree. You told me I could do it when I got bigger like you.”

“You are bigger like me now,” I said.

“I would be, wouldn’t I?” he asked thoughtfully.

“I think so,” I replied, “Can I ask you something, Elm?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

“In your dream, did I make it to the top branches, just like you?”

“No, but I think you could have, had you been bigger,” he said.

We looked at each other, words stuck in our mouths.

“My leg hurts,” he whispered.

I looked outside and saw him there, holding his leg with an expression I couldn’t quite place.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I really meant it.

“It’s ok, you didn’t know,” he answered.

“I guess not,” I said, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

“I think I’m tired,” he said, “Maybe I’ll get some sleep.”

I wasn’t at all surprised when he climbed through the window. I stood back as he climbed into my bed and pulled the covers up all the way over his head.

“Good night, Molly,” he mumbled through the blanket.

“Good night, Elm,” I replied softly.

I waited a moment and then pulled the covers back. He was gone.

But I knew that would happen.

An Untruth

Behind her back, we would always call her Skindy. This is not to be confused with ‘Skinned-Knee,’ Skid-Nee,’ ‘Skinty,’ (which in England would be an overzealous and overly descriptive way of telling someone they were quite broke) or just plain old ‘Skinny’ because that would ruin the play-on-words effect. To me, Skindy (real name Sindy Samuel West) looked like an over sexualized cross between Skeletor and Kermit the Frog (minus the greenish tinge and the weird cape).

A well-known fact about Sindy Samuel West

She was in fact quite fertile

A not so well known fact about Sindy Samuel West

She told my uncle she was not, in fact, fertile.

So there we all were, in the crow’s nest of the ms Eurodam wearing our powder blue ‘Happy Birthday Billy!’ shirts, donning white letters in the goofy Comic Sans font that my Aunt Pam made.

A tidbit about the birthday shirts

It was meant to be a joke. We thought it would be funny if we all wore matching shirts to mock the obnoxious families that wore matching family

reunion shirts. What we didn't realize was that we *were* in fact the obnoxious family wearing matching birthday shirts with script in Comic Sans.

The ms Eurodam was clearly drunk, because on the tenth floor she couldn't stop swaying. I watched the window, where the blue water would come closer, then further, then closer, then further, to the window. I felt nauseous. The over 21's were drinking, possibly to feel just as pitch-y as the boat. Skindy ordered a martini.

"Extra dirty," she said, sticking out her collagen injected lips until she resembled a skinny platypus.

"Sindy loves her martinis extra dirty," my Uncle Dan said. Uncle Dan was Skindy's fortunate 52-year-old husband. I swallowed vomit. She grabbed his knee with her magenta painted claws.

How I feel about magenta

I don't like it.

My mom ordered a Jack Daniels she, too, looked nauseous. My grandma ordered a cosmopolitan, which was odd considering half a glass of wine made her sway in her seat. In typical birthday boy fashion, my grandpa just ate peanuts. I had given up after several fruitless days trying to order alcohol.

A conversation between a bartender and me

Me: May I please have a cosmopolitan?

Bartender: May I please see your ID?

Me: I think I forgot it.

Bartender (winking): How about a *virgin* cosmopolitan *young lady*.

Me: Go to hell.

Maybe I made that last part up.

Stupid American property laws. It was like being on the Mayflower. I resorted to the idea that I was much too seasick to drink anyways. However, it was humiliating to be under the same laws as my eleven-year-old sister and my five-year-old cousin who also had ordered a virgin strawberry daiquiri to split. I looked over at my parents with a sullen expression.

"No, we will not order you alcohol," my mom said. My mom's drink sat untouched, as she was far too seasick to even pretend to drink it.

"I don't want any, anyway," I responded airily, looking back out the window. I wondered what would happen if I vomited in the crow's nest.

"I propose a toast for Grandpa Billy!" Skindy said in her annoyingly perky voice. "Ah yes," Dan said, obviously enamored in his 36 year-old wonder.

Skindy smiled her horrifying Kermit smile that my Uncle Curtis would mock by pushing his nose down with his finger and using his other two to spread his mouth wide. The effect was quite frightening, and accurate.

"We all love you so much Grandpa Billy! Happy 80th birthday!" Skindy said.

"Here! Here!" Dan exclaimed, raising his glass.

Gosh, couldn't have put it better myself, I thought. I caught my Aunt Pam's eye and we rolled them in unison.

"I would like to say something," my grandpa said, "I love you guys all so much, thank you so much…."he didn't finish. Fresh tears leaked out of his eyes.

"Oh dad," my Uncle Teddy said, standing up to stand near him, "No need to cry."

"Your father is a crybaby," my grandma said, a little loudly. Maybe the cosmopolitan was a bit much for her. My phone buzzed, text message received.

What the text message said

I miss you. What's up?

It was the boy from school. Never mind he spent the last week before the winter holiday ignoring me, I still blushed. I looked over at my dad, then at my phone where the black R on the screen meant roaming or

don’t-even-think-about-it, then decided to quickly orchestrate a response. *Just one*.

What I said back

Haaa nothing on this lame boat. Sup with you?

Why I didn’t say ‘I miss you too’

I wanted to appear cool and collected. I wasn’t.

My grandma handed me her leftover cosmopolitan as I furiously responded to the third text message. My Grandpa Billy was blowing his nose.

“Where is my martini?” Skindy asked.

“Maybe they forgot about you,” I said.

“Where did you get that cosmopolitan?” My mom asked me.

“Grandma,” I replied, simply.

“Are you texting?” My dad asked. *Busted*.

“Geez, guys, cool it,” I said, draining the glass.

“You know that’s a dollar a text young lady,” my dad said.

“I’m not texting!”

“You sure drank that fast,” my mom said.

“It’s very sweet,” I said, “there’s hardly any alcohol in it, don’t worry. Besides, I’m practically an adult, I’m nearly *twenty.*”

An irrelevant peek into the future

I would eventually get caught binge drinking by my parents, but only because I would develop a strange allergic reaction to Svedka vodka and my ears would swell until they felt like rubber.

I looked over at Skindy. She was still groaning about her absent martini. My uncle's hand was on her thin, perfectly tan thigh. She was wearing a leopard print dress that was shorter and tighter than anything I owned and she was seventeen years older than me. I did the math once when I was bored. Her size-five foot donned a four-inch clunky cork heel. Around her, I sometimes felt like Bigfoot.

Two facts about Sindy West

-She was five foot one, so she wore heels so she could at least break five foot four.

-When she wore a bikini, everyone developed a complex.

Two facts about me

-I can't wear heels without making more noise than allowed.

- My butt's too big to wear a size small bikini bottom.

“Does anyone else feel dizzy?” Skindy asked, holding her head. We all raised our hands.

“Well sweetheart, do you want to go downstairs to bed?” her loving and loyal husband asked her.

“Oh no, I want my martini first,” she said, flashing her winning smile.

“When are we meeting Amanda?” my Aunt Sandy asked Dan.

Amanda was my cousin, one of Dan’s children from his first marriage. She had strategically planned a trip with her friends to Puerto Rico at the same exact time as our cruise. She said she made these plans ages ago. We knew she was avoiding seeing her stepmother in a bikini. But, she had grudgingly agreed to meet us when we made port in San Juan.

An excerpt from Amanda’s diary that she read me when we were 13

Everything in my life is going wrong. My sweet puppy Lucia has been gone for two weeks and is probably dead and my dad is having an affair with a thirty-year-old slut.

When I returned home from Amanda’s the next morning I had asked my mom if it was true. She looked at me sadly, yes was her answer. Almost a month later we learned Skindy was pregnant. Nearly a year later they were married. My mom went to the wedding alone, she wouldn’t let the rest of us come. It took me one minute to learn to hate

Skindy for being a liar. It took me almost six years to learn why they were both liars.

What happened at the wedding

It was a small ceremony at their new condo. They had decorated it beautifully with flowers and lies. The two families sat on opposite sides of the fireplace. The Samuels were angry because none of the Wests seemed particularly joyous about the matrimony. Nobody seemed to care or notice that my cousin, Amanda, silently wept through the whole thing. My mom got drunk. When she called me to tell me they were married, I was at a friend's house. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried.

The drinks finally arrived.

"Thank god!" Skindy cried.

My sister and cousin, Olivia, grabbed their virgin strawberry daiquiris hungrily. I took mine irritably. I felt too nauseous to drink it now.

"This tastes funny," my sister announced. Olivia had left hers on the table and was now contently coloring.

"It tastes totally normal," my cousin Sophia said, sipping Olivia's. I took my sister's. It didn't taste normal at all. I tasted mine hopefully. It tasted like a strawberry slushy.

A dialogue

Me: There's rum in this.

Sophia: There can't be.

Me: There is, trust me.

Mom: My god there is!

Skindy: They served my five-year-old daughter *alcohol?*

Note: Olivia had taken exactly one and only one sip. Sophia was enjoying the rest.

My thoughts

This is bullshit.

There was an uproar. Skindy marched over to the bar and shouted at the bartender. He was trying hard not to be amused. My sister spun around in circles, clearly trying to be drunk. My Aunt Sandy hurried to Skindy's side, trying to calm her down. My Aunt Pam, Aunt Abby, and my mom all suppressed giggles. I was still mad that my eleven-year-old sister and five-year-old cousin got served before me.

How I would introduce my Uncle Teddy and his wife, Sandy, to a friend

Me: ____ this is my Uncle Teddy and Aunt Sandy. Teddy and Sandy, this is my friend, _____

How I would introduce my Uncle Dan and his wife, Skindy, to a friend

Me: ____this is my Uncle Dan and his wife, Sindy. Dan and Sindy, this is my friend _____

Luckily, the drink fiasco got sorted quickly. Olivia and my sister were fitted with brand new, non-alcoholic smoothies and Skindy was sipping her extra-dirty martini, her face slowly turning the same color as her magenta nails.

"Did everything work out OK Sindy?" My cousin Sophia asked, a look of concern plastered onto her face. I wondered if it was genuine.

"Yes…" Skindy began, but Olivia cut in.

"Mommy, why doesn't anyone call you 'Aunt Sindy?"

There was an incredibly tense moment. I picked at my thumbnail. My dad looked out the window and my mom stared pointedly at her dad.

What everyone was probably thinking

Shit.

What Grandpa Billy was probably thinking (because he was smiling)

Something about his favorite joke, which is the Jewish vampire joke.

What happens in the Jewish vampire joke

A woman visits Transylvania. The locals tell her to beware of vampires, and give her a wooden cross to show to any vampire that may cross her path. One night, she is in bed in her hotel. A vampire shows up at the window. She springs out of bed and shows him the cross. The vampire laughs and says: Lady, that von't vork for me. You see, I am a Jewish vampire!

An unfortunate truth

This was not the time for the Jewish vampire joke.

The awkward silence continued. I hadn't gotten a text message and I was getting agitated. My Aunt Pam was pulling at a loose thread on her 'Happy birthday Billy!' shirt. My sister had stopped spinning around.

What I wanted to say to my cousin Olivia.

We don't call your mom Aunt Sindy because she's a stupid home wrecking whore. Oh, and your dad's an asshole.

But I didn't say anything. My grandpa told the Jewish vampire joke and we all left the crow's nest. The boat continued to pitch, back and forth,

back and forth. I could hear Skindy's heels, *click click click* on the staircase.

What my grandma wanted to happen on this trip

For us all to get along and become really close

An untruth

We were all happy before Skindy came along.

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