

The Vault

An Anthology of Student Writing

Presented by the Writing Program of
Sullivan County Community College

Volume 2

2010

PREFACE

The Vault

Overview: The Writing Program publishes an anthology of student writing each school year. The anthology – called *The Vault* – showcases excellent writing created in our courses, offers models for current students, and creates a potential teaching tool for instructors. The writings come from a combination of Writing Program courses (Developmental English, Composition I, Composition II) and Creative Writing courses. The Editorial Committee selects the pieces for publication.

Procedures: Instructors select worthy essays, poems, or stories from their classes and, with the permission of the student, submit them for consideration to the Editorial Committee. Instructors must note that offering or refusing to offer submissions will not affect a student's grade in a course. Students and instructors should do the following if they wish to submit a piece:

- Instructors should select worthy pieces of writing and ask students to make any revisions that may be necessary prior to submission
- Students must fill out a Permission Form
- Students should give the instructor an electronic copy of the final draft of the writing and, if available, an earlier draft (preferably first) of the writing

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CATALOG COURSE DESCRIPTION

DEN 1000 Basic English

This course is designed for students who need work in the basic reading and writing skills. This course will review such writing skills as grammar, mechanics, spelling, sentence structure, paragraph development, and outlining; and such reading skills as comprehension and vocabulary. This course is required of students who do not demonstrate the minimum proficiency established for entrance into ENG 1001. This course may not be used to satisfy the English requirement at this college.

ENG 1001 English Composition I

This is a writing-intensive course in which students will draft and revise college-level essays. Students will study the conventions of academic prose, examine various methods of organization and development, and learn research skills.

ENG 2004 Creative Writing

A basic introduction to creative writing. Students will write poems, stories or creative nonfiction that will serve as the basis for classroom discussion and for conferences with the instructor. Prerequisite: ENG 1001.

ENG 2005 English Composition II

This course emphasizes analytical skills in both writing and reading. Students will write analytical and argumentative essays and a research paper.

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Shantel Bracey

Movie shot analysis
Fight Club

Director: David Fincher

Actors in scene: Edward Norton and Zach Grenier

Film editor: James Haygood

Music by: The Dust Brothers

Cinematography: Jeff Cronenweth

Control By Reason of Insanity

Fight Club, the 1999 film directed by David Fincher, is about a man battling with several problems, mainly himself. Edward Norton is the Narrator, a recall coordinator for a major auto company. His mundane job and insomnia cause him to wreak havoc on his surroundings. He has created an alter ego, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who is brazen, unpredictable, and likes to fight. Tyler is totally in control of every situation while the Narrator is just stuck in the rat race of life. In the scene where the Narrator approaches his boss, Richard Chesler (Zach Grenier), with an ultimatum, Tyler fully collides with the Narrator's work environment. Mr. Chesler represents societal conformity and authority, everything that Tyler wants to destroy and make pay for the Narrator's mediocre life. The cinematography, editing, and musical score in this scene clearly portray the uncontrollable, downward spiral of the Narrator and how he displays power and strength as Tyler.

As *Fight Club* opens, viewers learn that the Narrator hasn't slept in six months. Insomnia is starting to distort his perception of reality. "With insomnia, nothing's real; everything's far away. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy." The Narrator is clearly in need of an outlet. Here, Tyler's image is spliced into a frame for the first time. It happens three more times in the first hour of the movie. Tyler is soon in the forefront and not just a subliminal image. Since meeting Tyler, things have changed for the Narrator. The fight club has changed him. "How much could you know about yourself if you never been in a fight. I don't wanna die without any scars," Tyler says to the Narrator preceding their first fight. Bystanders get in on the action and fight club soon becomes a cult following. The issues of power and control are planted throughout the film. The Narrator is not only struggling to control his life but himself.

Tyler's shameless behavior starts to appear more and more through the Narrator, which is why the office scene is so pivotal. The Narrator knocks on Mr. Chesler's door and says "we need to talk." This is the day when all the fight club members have to start a fight and lose. The music briefly played at the beginning of this scene sounds like something from a digital circus. Perhaps it's an indication of the lunacy to come. The Narrator has a proposition for Mr. Chesler. He gives a scenario of him

telling the Department of Transportation about all the defective equipment his company uses in its vehicles. Mr. Chesler uses his ultimate power and fires him for the assumed threat. This does not deter the Narrator, however. Instead, he gives Mr. Chesler the alternative of keeping him on the payroll to not tell what he knows about the company's practices. He is taking control away from his boss. Mr. Chesler says, "Who the fuck do you think you are? You crazy little shit" and grabs the phone to call security in an effort to take back control of the situation. Yet, this does not last long. While Mr. Chesler is on the phone with security, the Narrator's hand begins to shake and make a fist. The camera angle is from below the desk, representing his insanity coming up from the depths of his psyche. At first, the Narrator looks surprised; this quickly changes to a demented confidence. The Narrator begins to utterly assault himself. The scene soon turns into complete pandemonium.

The Narrator is now taking full control of the situation and Tyler's volatility fills the office. Mr. Chesler stands there and watches in shock as the Narrator mercilessly beats himself. The phone drops to the floor from Mr. Chesler's hand. During the incident, the Narrator is talking to Mr. Chesler as if he is the one doing the brutalizing, saying things such as, "Why would you do that?" and "No, please stop!" Mr. Chesler has lost total power and control over the situation at this point. The Narrator pummels himself savagely. He throws himself into things and punches his own face several times. During a freeze frame of the Narrator flinging himself into a bookcase, he thinks how this reminds him of his first fight with Tyler. This is an epiphany during the movie. It reminds the Narrator of his first fight with Tyler because he was fighting himself then, too. The use of a freeze frame causes one to focus on what is said and not so much what you see at that moment. At one point, the camera is behind a couch in the office and the Narrator slowly comes out from beyond it as if a different person is emerging from the chaos. As the Narrator crawls toward Mr. Chesler, busted and bloodied, a montage occurs. The shot of the Narrator crawling closer and closer toward Mr. Chesler is cut with shots of Mr. Chesler's face, business cards, the phone off the hook and the regional manager nameplate. All these things that identify Mr. Chesler as the boss are useless and insignificant. All his fancy business cards and nameplate couldn't help him. The Narrator pulls himself up on Mr. Chesler's pant legs and makes his offer one more time. Then at their "most excellent moment," security walks in and sees Mr. Chesler standing over the Narrator who is on his knees crying and begging not to be hit again. The Narrator has simultaneously taken and given power. Mr. Chesler will be perceived as powerful and strong when word gets around; however, he'll always know he lost control of the situation.

Power and control are two of the key themes in *Fight Club*. The Narrator is a pawn in his own game. When Tyler surfaces everything seems to fall into place for the Narrator. He is strong, confident, and powerful. But the stronger Tyler gets, the weaker the Narrator becomes. With all of the Narrator's inner turmoil, he creates a world where taking control is his mission. He starts by controlling himself and then the fight club members who eventually become soldiers in Project Mayhem. Now, he tries to take control of society. The scene in Mr. Chesler's office displays elements of the Narrator and Tyler blending and shows just how far they will go to get what they want.

Susan M. Buzzell

Born for Love

The majority of us lead quiet, unheralded lives as we pass through this world. There will most likely be no ticker-tape parades for us, no monuments created in our honor. But that does not lessen our possible impact, for there are scores of people who will appreciate our compassion, our encouragement, who will need our unique talents, someone who will live a happier life merely because we took the time to share what we had to give.

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. It's overwhelming to consider the continuous opportunities there are to make our love felt.—Leo Buscaglia

I believe that every life has purpose. I believe, if you are lucky enough to know or work hard enough to discover that purpose, you have the opportunity to truly be happy. To put this purpose to work in your life or to find work that achieves this purpose is what brings satisfaction and fulfillment in what can be an otherwise challenging world. I believe my purpose is to love, bring love, and to be love to others.

Finding my purpose, discovering it actually, came as a result of the lowest point in my life. It came more from hitting the bottom of the emotional Richter scale than from any esoteric enlightenment spurred by meditation, as many new age gurus might have you believe. I had just lived through the worst eighteen months of my life. It started with pending layoffs at the company where I had worked for nearly ten years. Apparently, ten years is the magic number, and I was two months shy. It seemed there was no longer a place for loyalty in the world of business. By the time they laid off the seven-hundredth person, after four to five months of waiting, I was fifth from the bottom. I don't know if it was the stress of this time or if it was just time, but it wasn't long after the axe stopped swinging at work that I realized my eight-year marriage was on the brink of failure. This wasn't an easy thing to realize for a girl who had been raised to believe marriage is forever. After months of marriage counseling, my husband and I separated. I moved in with my father while I got back on my feet. I had lived with Dad for about three months when I found an apartment close to work. Dad and my sister, Cindy, helped me move in and get settled. I had only lived in my new apartment one week when Dad suffered a massive stroke. He ultimately passed away within six months of the stroke. By then I was an emotional zombie; I had lost all sense of who I was, what I was supposed to be doing with my life, and why I was even alive. How is a person supposed to survive after being

stripped of everything that had given her life any meaning? This was the question that was battering my mind. This was the question that was torturing my soul. This was the question that I pleaded with God for an answer to one day while kneeling in the dirt outside. It was then I got the answer, "to love." It's not like I heard a voice talking to me from the other side of the yard. I heard the answer in my head, in my heart, deep in every fiber of my being, and I couldn't deny it. The next question became how to honor it.

I turned thirty during those months, and my sister gave me a gift certificate for a massage. I had never had a massage before and she insisted on driving me to the appointment. When I came out of the office after the massage I told my sister, "wouldn't it be cool to make people feel this good every day?" Not long after my first massage, I started planning a career change. I quit my job and went to school to become a Massage Therapist. After eleven years of massaging and doing what I love, I can tell you that it is *very cool* making people feel that good. It never loses the power to make you feel like you have done something special when someone exits the massage room with a virtually indescribable look on her face of utter calm and peace. The sense that for this period of time no one wanted anything from her, all she had to do was allow someone to give to her. Even if it only lasts for a moment before they reconnect to the realities of their lives, my clients have had the moment and that is priceless.

I have found many ways to live out my purpose of love. I started attending church again ten years ago, after a fifteen year hiatus. As a child and teenager, I went to Sunday school and church every week. I was very involved in Sunday school, the youth choir, and eventually the adult choir. Church was a very active part of my life and has formed large aspects of my personality, but I don't think I was aware of the effect it had on me until I went back. If you are ever looking for a place to share love with people, the church is a bottomless well of opportunities. For that matter, if you ever need to find love to refill your own well, the church is a fountain of opportunities. I remember one little boy, Eric, who had all he could do to sit still during Vacation Bible School. He could focus just fine in all the physical activities we had planned, but when it came to sitting for the opening and closing of the day, he was a ball of energy. Some tried to help him focus by reminding him to pay attention. Some looked at him sternly. One day I just sat next to him and placed my arm across the pew behind him. After a while I dropped my hand to his shoulder and just let it rest there. It wasn't long before he asked me to rub his back and an amazing thing happened. As long as I was rubbing his back or his shoulder, he was completely focused on the program in front of him. The minute I stopped he would look at me encouraging me to continue. Too soon the week had come to an end, but I would see Eric from time to time at

church. One Sunday he came up to me with his Mom, and he was carrying a yellow porcelain rose. He held the rose out to me with a shy smile and gave it to me then ran away. His mom explained that they had been at a garage sale, and she had given each child a dollar to buy whatever they wanted; Eric had wanted to buy this rose for me. That is love. That is what giving love is all about, and that is the endless reward you get for the effort.

We have done such an excellent job at protecting our children from predators by teaching them about no touch or safe touch that we have become a touchless society. Ask a teacher and they will tell you they hesitate to even lay a hand on a child's shoulder or back as a form of encouragement or compassion for fear it may be misinterpreted. Touch is such an essential part of how we communicate wordlessly that I fear its loss is yet to be comprehended by society. It's not just children, though. Unfortunately, this aversion to touch has bled onto our elderly also. Simply laying a hand of love, compassion, or friendship on the hand or shoulder of an older adult is an act of love that often leaves them speechless or with a tear in their eyes. Take the time to sit and ask them how they are or what they have been doing and you are imparting more love than you may ever know. Just this week a young boy with mild autism came up to me and grabbed my arm to drag me to see something that just couldn't wait. There were wild geese in the yard beside the church. His questions were endless, and the entire time he asked about the geese and I answered, he played with the fingers on my hand. He interlaced his fingers with mine then changed their positions and relaced them together again. To understand the importance of this, you have to understand that this child shrinks from being touched. If you instigate the connection, he literally shrinks away from you by bending his knees, pulling back, and making a face. However, this time he grabbed me, he touched and retouched me. This was love, giving and receiving. I was just a vessel, and I was able to pour out love and be refilled all at the same time. This is how I love my church family.

Another opportunity to love is through my relationship with my two sons. I didn't give birth to them, but as I have told them both, I couldn't love them any more if I had. Misguided people have been known to ask why I didn't have a child of my own. I tell them I have two children that are very much mine. I have been with them long enough to help form and shape the men they have become. I think because of my belief in my purpose, I have no need to be a parent by virtue of chromosomes. With their father, I raised them from boys through their teen years and into early adulthood. I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly; I just never had to change their diapers. I never felt I had to bear a child to be a parent. In fact, I most often felt bringing another child into their midst would have been an incredibly selfish thing for me to do to them. This comment from well-

meaning adults usually came up during the ugly moments in the teen years and was quite often preceded or followed by, "it would be different if the child was your own." Would it, or would the fallacy of their belief become evident when their own children went through the ugly times of the teen years? If what they said about things being different with my own child was true, it horrified me even more. How terribly unfair to these two unassuming boys would it be to bring a child into their world that would be treated differently, loved differently? I sense I might not feel this strongly if I didn't believe my purpose is to love. If I were needier of love, then my view might align more with those of the well-meaning but, in my opinion, misguided adults who questioned me.

Because of my purpose, I believe I am one of a fortunate few who can say I have no regrets in life. Could I regret my lost trust in a company I originally planned to retire from if it meant I would not have become a Massage Therapist doing work that fulfills me? No. Could I regret the failure of my marriage if it meant I would never have met the three men who comprise my current family? No. Could I regret never giving birth to a child and being bonded by blood when I know a stronger bond built on trust, commitment, and love? No. Could I regret the loss of my father if it meant the final tie that bound me to the old me was never broken and I never found my purpose? It's a little harder to accept this truth, but no. Thanks to love I have no regrets and that makes me very fortunate indeed.

I believe my life has a purpose and that purpose is to love. If I may leave you with an act of love, it would be to encourage you to find, embrace, and live your purpose. I believe that in finding my purpose, I have found fulfillment and it is amazing.

Touching Our Way to a Happier Society

When I consider what could make Americans happier, I immediately think of touch. I am a New York State Licensed Massage Therapist, so this may come as no surprise to those who know me. Massage affects the body on physical, physiological, and emotional levels. It helps to reduce stress, aggression, and anxiety and increases the immune system and helps create an overall sense of well-being. While these attributes are commonly known to most people, what is less well known is the pronounced positive effects massage can have on children. Yet, if we were to take the time to really think about it, this makes perfect sense. Children are only smaller versions of adults and can benefit from massage in the same ways that adults do. So if I were to suggest a way for Americans to be happier through massage, I would suggest we start at the beginning with children.

The efficacy of massage has been documented in texts dating as far back as ancient China and can be

found in the writings of early Greek and Roman physicians throughout the Middle Ages and into the twentieth century. Massage is known to help with muscles that are too tight, sprain, strains, constipation, respiratory diseases, anxiety, depression, headaches, postural imbalances and even changing the position of an unborn child in the womb. The list is virtually endless. Most people are able to recognize the direct link between massage and its effect on muscles. What people are less aware of is the effect massage has on hormones and the circulatory systems of the body. When the muscles are being manipulated, there is an increase in blood and lymph flow in the body. As these fluids in the body are moved throughout the muscle tissue, an exchange occurs, bringing fresh nutrients to the tissues through the blood and carrying away waste products of normal cell metabolism through the lymph and circulatory systems. The central nervous system responds by activating glands to release pleasure hormones that increase relaxation, counteract depression, and boost immune functions. All of these benefits have been widely documented over centuries.

More recently, though, we are beginning to study, learn, and document the benefits of massage on infants and children. We commonly think children are happy-go-lucky, without a care in the world. We mistakenly don't consider the stress children experience regularly and, therefore, we disregard the effect that stress is having on their bodies and psyches. Children are under stress from the moment they are born. They go from the very insulated and isolated environment of the womb to the loud, bright, and harsh environment of the delivery room. To lessen this stress, hospitals have been developing quieter, more soothing birthing rooms for delivery.

Also, it's important to realize the skin of a newborn baby is very sensitive. The skin is the body's largest sensory organ and for a newborn it has never experienced touch until the moment of birth. Even the presence of air drifting across the surface of the skin can be profoundly disorienting for a baby, which is why most infants prefer to be swaddled tightly for the first few weeks of life. Massage on a daily basis will increase the babies' threshold for stimulation. They will gradually develop a tolerance to touch and stimulation, which in turn helps their brains to develop techniques to handle stressful situations.

Hunger and learning to cry to receive nourishment are also new and stressful experiences for babies. Developing trust in and bonding and attaching with their caregivers, mother or father, helps the baby to deal with this stress. This bonding and attachment process is crucial to the healthy development of a child into an adult. According to Vimala McClure, the founder of the International Association of Infant Massage, in her book *Infant Massage a Handbook for Loving Parents*,

Psychologists study the types of attachments we form in our infancy as predictors of the types of

relationships we will have as adults. People whose infancy was secure, who were held and listened to, who had good eye contact with their parents, and who were generally cherished tend to have healthier relationships with others. ... On the other hand, babies whose attachment bonds are insecure or anxious are less sympathetic to others and less effective in getting support and help from other people. (12)

Unfortunately, in America parents have been conditioned by society and successful product marketing campaigns to put children in carriers, to let them cry it out in cribs, and to let them entertain themselves with novel bouncy seats and activity centers. As a result we are steadily decreasing the amount of time we hold, carry, and play with our babies; the direct opposite of what has been proven to be not just beneficial but necessary to the healthy and happy development of our babies. Also, many parents need to return to work shortly after giving birth and have to entrust the care of their infant to a third party. However, parents can use massage to increase and enhance the bonding and attachment process. A parent can reconnect and reestablish his or her bond with the child every evening by massaging the baby during a diaper change, while feeding, or after a bath. This way the parent and the child get to touch and interact in a meaningful way that reinforces their connection with each other.

The health benefits of massage for infants are also well established. With daily massage the production of myelin sheath surrounding the nerves is increased. This sheath around the nerves speeds the transmission of impulses between the brain and the body (McClure 8). Massage also increases the functioning of the immune system in infants. Studies done at the Touch Research Institute in Miami by Dr. Tiffany Field have shown that premature infants who received three sessions of fifteen minutes of massage daily showed improvement in weight gain, motor skills, and awareness of their surroundings. The amount of time they were hospitalized was, thus, reduced by an average of six days, also lowering significantly the cost of hospitalization (106). Many children suffer with digestive distress during the first few months of life. They may have difficulty producing bowel movements, they may frequently spit up, or they may have colic. All of these ailments can be alleviated with the use of massage on the abdominal area or tummy. Each of these issues cause stress in the child and equally stress the parent, so if a parent can be given a tool to help ease her or his child's distress, it is a win-win situation for parent and child.

These massage techniques can continue to reap benefits in the older child. Current studies are showing that massage reduces aggression in school age children. In fact, in Europe many students are taught Peaceful Touch. Peaceful Touch is a program where preschool children are taught to massage each other. Peaceful

Touch was developed "based on research that showed that nurturing touch for children elicits a similar response as breast-feeding does in babies, releasing oxytocin, the feel-good 'cuddle hormone,' which promotes empathy, calmness and concentration" (LaPlante 76). The children are taught healthy touches to use in the classroom on each other and are encouraged to seek permission before touching. Massage is always a matter of choice in adults as well as children; the children don't have to be touched unless they want to, and they have the right to stop the massage at any time. Peaceful Touch can be an empowering concept for a child to learn. In an age when we are constantly vigilant about people approaching our children with malicious intent, we have the opportunity to teach our children from their earliest moments that they have the right to say "no, don't touch me," a lesson that can boost the confidence of a child who is uncomfortable when approached by someone who is perceived as an authority. However, as I wrote in my essay "Born for Love," "we have done such an excellent job at protecting our children from predators by teaching them about no touch or safe touch that we have become a touchless society," and this isn't necessarily good; lack of touch can be as detrimental as harmful touch is to the development of children (4). Unfortunately, while many are trying to bring the Peaceful Touch program to American schools, the atmosphere of fear of touch is so pervasive they are meeting with great resistance.

In my opinion, bringing massage to infants and children will bring health and happiness to children. If children are healthier and happier, it seems only logical their parents will be happier and less stressed. What's more, if parents are less stressed and happier, they will be better, more alert and focused employees because they won't be as worried about their children and will have less lost time from work caring for sick children. Society also benefits from this happier, healthier family because parents with healthy children don't use doctors or insurance as often and school systems will function more smoothly because children will be calmer, more focused, and less aggressive, leading to a better learning environment. It is often said "children are the future." what could be a better way of investing in a happier future for Americans than promoting touch?

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Michael Cortright

The Twelve Little Pigs

Once upon a time, there were twelve little pigs. These twelve little pigs went to school together at a community college. Most of the little pigs were very young and unfocused. It seemed that they were more interested in socializing and having fun than getting a good education. One of the pigs, however, was actually trying to improve his writing abilities and get a good grade.

At school, the pig keeper tried to control the dozen swine. Some pigs were disruptive, some pigs slept during class, some pigs were always late, and some listened to their I-pigs. The oldest pig felt like he was back at Hog High School.

The pig keeper warned the little pigs not to squander their youth and resources by wasting valuable time at college. But the lazy little pigs thought that it wasn't cool to read books and was too hard to write essays. They preferred to have their fun and slide by with substandard performance records. Unfortunately, they didn't realize that they were supposed to be building the foundations that would support the rest of their lives. Maybe nobody ever told them that they could have a future, or maybe they didn't believe them.

Meanwhile, the eldest pig student worked hard at building a strong support system for his continuing education. He found that it wasn't that difficult if he just did the work. He learned something in every class and was already applying the knowledge on a daily basis. This older pig warned the other pigs not to waste their time playing all day. They laughed at him and didn't understand. He said, "You'll see... when The Big Bad Businessman comes around!"

By and by the Big Bad Businessman did come around. He offered plenty of jobs, jobs at fast-food franchises and retail chains. He bellowed, "Work for me, and I'll keep you in green." But the piggies knew enough to be frightened by "The Man." They replied, "No fucking way, Jack!" To this Big Bad countered, "I'll give you stuff and more stuff if you just work for me!" And he showered them with electronics and fashion gear.

They ran to the older pig's place. Older pig told them about the downfalls of poor education and the inherent evil of big business. He showed them how to live "off-grid" and reduce their monthly expenses by ninety percent. After having such a close call with The Big Bad Businessman, the little pigs finally understood that it was important to invest time now to ensure a safer and happier future.

Eunice Hidalgo

Fly Away

Although it was the last week of June 2001, it was as if winter had moved into my heart and decided to send forth a raging blizzard. It was the beginning of summer vacation, and I should have been a very excited middle school kid. My brother, Misael, had just graduated from Rondout Valley High school a few days earlier and my dad, my mom, and I were all very proud of him. Now I was forcing myself to smile, feeling obligated to show my family that I was a strong, young girl and pretending not to care about my brother leaving home to join the military. Maybe I was only sleeping and this event of my brother breaking away from me was nothing more than a dream that my mind invented to prevent me from falling into boredom.

When I walked out of my room at the end of the hall next to the stairs, I saw Misael. I was still trying to remind myself that this was the day he would head out to be an Air Force soldier. There is a difference between seeing and observing: I have always been an alert, curious, and persistent observer. Looking up to my brother and watching him vigilantly taught me to understand beyond what my eyes saw. He roamed about the house trying to make that mask of emotional neutrality that he was wearing into a permanent expression. But I could see past it; he was scared yet excited, happy but also sad. His eyes were glassy, as if he was ready to cry. He also had an anxious shake in his hands.

Misael was moving slower than usual, taking his time with every action he put into play, choosing the clothes, packing his bag. He'd look around at the house he knew by heart, from the cobwebs in that one spot in the living room, to that crack in the bottom of the wall at the end of the hallway that looked like a spooky tree. He didn't talk much either; it was like if he did say something, his emotions would come crashing to the surface and his fear of the awaiting journey would be exposed. My brother opened the old white door to the bathroom and informed his family that he was now going to take a shower. Right before he closed the door, his eyes met mine. Suddenly I was three again, wanting so badly to stretch out my arms to him and silently plea for him to scoop me up, giggles bursting out of me as he spun my world round and round. But my brother was leaving today... and there was nothing I could do to change that fact.

He was in the shower for a very long time. I was actually beginning to wonder if he had fallen down the drain and made his getaway. When he finally got out and announced he was ready for the trip to the La Guardia airport, my heart sank. Although he was still here, already my life felt empty. Time was speeding by. My mother kept hugging him, showing that she was going to miss him terribly. My dad kept trying to make small talk

as if to keep him here a while longer. I just kept watching. The moment to start our drive to the airport moved us out of our off-white house on Maple Avenue and forced us into our blue Honda Civic. The entire way to our destination I tried to be myself, the silly tomboy kind of girl that everyone knew me as. During the drive we chatted and laughed at some jokes, but the atmosphere was so sad and heavy, I could almost taste the tears that were soon to fall. For now, I was treasuring every last second of being a family of four.

At last we arrived in Queens at the La Guardia airport. It was here where we were to bid farewell to Misael, to see him off so he could begin his basic training, or boot camp. My mother and father embraced their firstborn child and said their goodbyes and take cares. Of course they didn't rush to give me, his little shadow, a chance to say goodbye. She could wait a bit more. Finally it was my turn. I stood there looking up at him at the age of eleven thinking, "Who am I going to play video games with now?" I fell forward and hugged him as tight as my young muscles would allow.

"Love you, Sis," was all he said. Then he vanished with the crowd of people sweeping him away from me through a portal to another world. My mom took my hand and we waved, although I couldn't see him at that point. Still, I guess it was better than just standing there with my hands falling down at my sides along with my spirit.

On our way back to the car, I didn't say one word. My parents stayed outside next to the car chatting about how they couldn't believe that their son, their oldest child, had taken off from the nest. I entered the vehicle and sat down not knowing which emotion to give in to: Anger? Sorrow? Confusion? He was joining the Air Force, so in a way, he literally flew away from me. The car was quiet with my mom and dad still standing outside comforting each other. I looked to my right and noticed just how pitiful the empty seat next to me was.

I stared out of the window to avoid facing my feelings. Just then, my eyes focused on two little birds pecking at some crumbs in the parking lot. One of them stopped, looked up at the sky as if a call was beckoning it away, and took off, leaving the other one behind, eating, alone. I cried the entire three hours back home.

Dorian Jennings

Exodus from Childhood

Since I have spoken these words several times in my life, I find it absolutely ludicrous and a bit frustrating that I have been sitting here actually petrified to write them. Writing has always been one of my favorite things to do; it has been my solace in troubled times and my outlet when angry; it has offered me the means to embrace most of the craziness that makes me who I am. However, until now I have never written about the day I became the little grown up, the caregiver by my own submission and the mom at times by default. The day that forced me to try and embrace the strange components that made me the child-adult I became on that sunny, summer morning.

I have never put together the sentences to describe how, on that beautiful day thirty years ago, I was forced to realize that life was not all about blowing big pink bubbles and playing hopscotch on my pretty rainbow-colored chalk squares, or how many brown-haired Barbies were in my big white and green doll house (I loved the brown haired ones; they were just like me). Writing has always seemed to be more intimate to me, probably because once in print, the sentences created are for me, my place to be real with myself. I can't fake it anymore with my outward smile or bubbly personality. Perhaps sharing it with you is my subtle way of having to finally, truly, share it with myself.

My Mom and I lived in a really big, one bedroom apartment. God, I used to love it there, I think partly because of the layout with its sunken living room that made me feel like I lived in a palace; the big beautiful claw foot tub in the bathroom, that made me feel like the little princess my mommy always told me I was. Maybe I loved it so much because of the big backyard. I can't forget the backyard. I was able to be so many wonderful things there; an Eskimo in my igloo, a magical fairy while twirling my white and pink umbrella, a princess in the tower when high up on my slide. Mostly, I think I loved it there because I got to sleep in my Mommy's big bed, probably not the best for her, but it always made me feel safe and loved.

The wisps of a summer morning breeze had the white ruffled curtains swaying a magical dance, and it was the sun peeking through the slight breaks in the sway that opened my right eye. I will never forget how bright the sun was that morning coming up over the horizon or how warm and wonderful it made me feel, because that was the last good thought I had for the rest of that day. As consciousness came to my six-year-old mind, I felt there was something wrong, I did something bad. "I'm wet; my nightie is wet. Oh no, I must have tinkled in my sleep." Then just as tears came sliding down my cheeks, I slowly pulled the covers back and turned over, putting my hand down gingerly on the mattress so I wouldn't wake up

mommy. I looked down at my now wet hand and all that registered was wet red, wet red; that was all I kept thinking, trying to understand what my brain was trying to tell me. Wet red was from Mommy. It was my mother's wet, red blood now covering the palm of my hand and nightie. I looked at her white, pale face and started shaking her with all my six-year-old might, screaming, "Mommy! Wake up. Mommy! Wake up, please. Mommy, wake up!" I ran into the kitchen and grabbed the odd yellow phone off the wall and dialed my Aunt Mattie. Standing in the kitchen doorway, my tears uncontrollable now in my wet with red, pink-flowered nightgown, I heard Aunt Mattie say, "Dorian, I need you to go back in by Mommy; see if Mommy is breathing." I must have started running back toward the bedroom with the phone still in my hand and extended the cord too much. I heard "bang" from somewhere far off and glimpsed yellow dropping to the light-tan carpeted floor. As I got to the bedroom doorway, the sun blinded me, the whole room now warm and awash with light. Yet, I can take no comfort, for I am frozen, just waiting, watching. I open my eyes real big, as big as I can get them and watch and wait for breath. It finally registers through the blinding brightness and my tears that her chest is going up and down, up and down. I shake her again, but she still won't wake up. I must have been yelling, "You're breathing, Mommy. Why won't you wake up?" because when I picked up yellow off the floor, Aunt Mattie was saying it was good that Mommy was breathing and she and the ambulance were on their way. I remember in some far away place in my memory changing my nightgown, but what followed is still vivid in my mind.

I walked back into the kitchen and put yellow back on the wall; it was then, in that moment as I stood there feeling all alone, that the realization of what disconnecting that call meant. My last bit of adult support had ended and with it went my big pink bubbles, my rainbow-colored hopscotch squares, and all my stupid brown-haired Barbies in that stupid white and green dollhouse that were really nothing like me at all. It was then I became the little grown up, the caregiver by my own subconscious submission and even the mom at times by default.

I dragged the black, ribbed stepstool over from the corner of our dimly lit kitchen and placed it in front of the sink so my short legs could reach and stepped onto my self-created platform of my child-adult self to do something I had never done before; I washed the dishes. Mommy always said she didn't want me to get hurt if something broke, so I could wash only the plastic ones. Well, Mommy wouldn't wake up and there were dirty dishes in the sink, so I washed them all, the plastic ones, the big tin ones and even the glass ones. I had to be so careful, the blue liquid soap made my small hands slippery, but you know what? It was the first time since waking up to wet red that I wasn't afraid. You know what else? I didn't break a one, not a cup, glass, or plate; I

didn't drop a spoon or fork, anything. I set them all very carefully one at a time in their designated places in the white sideboard drain. Then, I reached up and grabbed the coffee and measured how I remembered Mommy doing it, put the water in, and pushed the button so the light would turn red. I made coffee for the first time that day and wiped down the counters what felt like a thousand times.

More than any other firsts I did that day, I had my first real conscious feeling of fear, worry, and absolute isolation. Yes, I have written a lot in my life about makeup and boyfriends, dogs, my car, the universe, and other sad and happy times. But never have I inked the words of the day that made me an extra sensitive person; the one who even now cares perhaps a little too deeply for some and is a bit too controlling to others; the person who still has a hard time saying "no" and will stress out in order to make it all happen for those I love; the caregiver I always am; the little girl who never really got to be. No, I never printed the words to describe how angry I had become that my life was no longer simple, like the times I could just play in the backyard and be anything I wanted without worrying I would be left alone. I never wrote about the frustration that bubbles just under my mostly serene surface or the fact that I could no longer be anything I wanted. I needed to be the little grown up, the caregiver by submission to my fear of being left all alone and the Mom at times by default.

Unbeknownst to me, that terrifying summer morning was preceded by my mother enduring four failed procedures attempting to stop the progression of uterine cancer. I know it sounds crazy to say that she was fortunate to have a hysterectomy at the age of twenty nine, but that is what ultimately saved her life that day. I don't think knowing what the problem was would have mattered to my six-year-old self. However, I now try to embrace the notion that all things, whether trivial or tragic, have an underlying purpose. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that I was the one there to help her, but remembering all that blood and knowing how many women actually die from the disease, I feel it was my karma that caused me to be there with her to experience those crazy and scary moments; it was kismet, my universal destiny that I be the one there to be the grown up, the caregiver, the mom.

I guess you could say I had a hand in saving my mother's life on that summer morning. But while doing so I feel like I lost part of my own. I lost the childlike part of myself, the part that felt free to bask in all my imaginary splendor. I still wash my dishes or wipe down my counters what feels like a thousand times when I'm angry, fearful, or sad. I realize now it was the one and only thing I could control on that sunny summer morning. I'm also addicted to coffee. Is there any connection? Who knows?

I Believe in the Power of the Written Word

Do you remember your first true read, that one book you got to pick out all by yourself as a child, during a time in your life when your mind was still open to all realms of possibility? I will never forget where it all truly began for me. I was in third grade and, believe it or not, I was actually drawn in by the odd, musty odor as I walked through the huge, shiny wooden doors of the library, the place which held the beginning of my path toward self discovery. I can still visualize the open space with its brilliant green carpet and all the beautiful wooden pieces everywhere; long wooden tables and chairs, small intimate cherry and oak units in every corner illuminated in soft light to create my own little literacy havens, and shelves in every direction I turned. The shelves were from floor to ceiling; there were huge, beautiful wooden shelves filled with volume after volume of pages bound with leather, cloth, paper, and suede. This was the place that opened my imagination, my creative self, and allowed me to welcome the varying scenarios written by all those brave or fortunate enough to write them. It was in that beautiful library I picked out my very first book. I might not remember the title at the moment, but I remember the story and the picture my mind's eye created, how wonderful I felt when I sat down to form my own thoughts about that book.

It was in this same library that my predisposed views of family beliefs started to shift and change. My imagination opened wide after I had chosen a book for science and ended up standing in front of my floor-length mirror, wearing only my blue and white flowered undies and tee-shirt; book spread out wide in my ten year old hand, turning this way and that, trying to see all the different views of myself, attempting to compare my own likeness to the apes on the pages. After reading that book about evolution, I remember asking my mother if we evolved from apes because the reflection staring back at me looked a little like those images on the pages before me. I also recall that shortly after my ape episode when I was twelve I asked my mother if it was ok to believe in reincarnation because I had read about the concept and it absolutely fascinated my young mind. My innocent and naïve feelings were forever altered after a book on Harriet Tubman gave me my first glimpse of the word "segregation" and how the power of such a word can take on its own monstrous entity. This experience was my introduction to the sad truth of the lack of human value of the past and the horrors that humans can inflict on each other. However, Harriet Tubman's story also showed me how far one's strength, faith, and character can bring one. It is the true creative and imaginative power we get from these words; it's our own lives that can be forever altered through the ability to understand written words.

It amazes me that even now in our intellectually driven society there are still many written works that are

censored, banned, or even destroyed. In 1992 Stephen King addressed this issue when a few of his own books were removed from library and bookstore shelves. Something he said about book-banners is still clear in my mind: "remember that they don't believe in democracy but rather in a kind of intellectual autocracy. . ." . . . and, "good books -- books that make us think and feel -- always generate controversy. . ." (King). It is my belief that all banning, censoring, and destruction of books stem from a fear of the truth, a fear that the creative power of all things really does lie within the written word. Reading awakens our questioning minds; we question our parents' views, our clergy, our politicians and the views of all those in a position of supposed authority. More than anything, reading gives us the means to repeatedly question ourselves; it affords us the ability to learn, imagine and experience through others what we might not experience ourselves, and, most importantly, it provides us with the gift of the potential for unlimited growth.

Reading is universal; it does not matter what language you speak, what age you are, what country you're from, or what sex you happen to be, reading holds the same power for all. For those who are hearing impaired there is a means to learn, comprehend, and interpret the meaning of written works through gestures, movements, and hand signals. With the ability to read sign language, hearing impaired people's eyes provide them a way to "read and hear, granting them a mind's auditory picture" ("Read"); it allows the deaf to experience the sense of sound through someone else's ears. The same concept applies for those who have no sight and can read Braille; their fingers afford them the pleasure of a visual picture through the eyes of others. One of my personal favorite and most impressionable reads was the autobiography of Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*. A couple of Helen Keller's quotes have had a profound effect on me, have forever altered my sense of self and a recognition of my good fortune that my limitations are only those of my own creation: "Once I knew only darkness and stillness... my life was without past or future... but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living." Keller also said, "Literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourses of my book friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness" (Keller). As a deaf-blind mute, Keller's works are a true testament to the power of the written word; her courage and perseverance in learning to read and write through touch have had a global impact on how, even now, we view and treat those with a hearing or sight impediment. As sad as it is, "today in the United States alone there are approximately thirty million adults, which is about thirteen percent of America's adult population, that have 'below basic' literacy skills. This is equivalent to about one out of

every seven adults who cannot read or write" (Albom). They cannot tell their own story beyond verbal means; consequently, their creative expressive ability and their full growth potential are inhibited.

Since the beginning as we know it, the phrase "It is written" has been perceived as a strong and compelling statement that we respect. It is believed to mean "to exclusively transcribe" and perhaps bring forth realizations for some and a sense of awareness for others. "The Biblical claim is that what God has inspired was His written word" (Bennett). God secured and solidified his journeys and wisdom in ink. He was the very first to create a visual image for us when he inspired the written pictures he wanted us to see: *The Bible, The Torah, The Koran, The Sutras*, etc. It is also believed that it was he who gave us the ability to read and perceive those words in varying ways and degrees. Regardless of whether this gift stems from a person's religious belief or perhaps a less complex reason, I believe the true relevance is in our creative ability to read any picture written, to imagine and see what the words might mean to those who wrote them and to conclude what they mean to our own individual consciousness and subsequently our lives.

A statement in reference to reading, "develop a lively life of the mind," also written by Stephen King, reminds me how truly fortunate I have been to develop all facets of my own lively life because of the exposure to an array of different books I have read throughout my life, and an ability and freedom to explore them until my curiosity, desire, and satisfaction have been met (King). Reading allows us freedom of expression, the means to experience an escape when needed, a sense of divinity or love, heartache or acceptance; it invokes awareness by transformation through analysis and it gives us the mental stimulation needed to exceed even our own expectations. I believe in the power of all written words, for we know they all meant something funny, fanciful or profound to whomever wrote them; we can experience what they authors experienced, feel what they felt, which can bring forth powerful feelings of joy, happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, greed, love, pride, respect, kindness, gratitude, consciousness and absolution. The power of the written word can bring forth all the feelings that make us human and who we are. I couldn't image weaving my way through the extraordinary pathways of this life without the guidance and creative works of those who came before me, could you? This I believe.

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Joshua Jollie

Don't worry

"Don't worry Joshey, I won't die on your birthday."

As my grandmother choked out this attempt at reassurance, I just squeezed her hand tighter. I felt my chin start to tremble and knew I couldn't speak. I looked down at the withered figure that I could barely recognize as my grandmother and thought, "Just die." I'm still not sure why I thought that. Was it compassion because I didn't want her to suffer any longer? Or was it selfishness because I didn't want to suffer anymore?

The hour-long ride from her house, where she had been sent to die by the doctors, to my house brought a flood of images into my mind. I turned off the radio and saw her in every way I had throughout my life. I saw her strong, the backbone of our family. I saw her scared after her stroke ten years earlier. I saw her punching my arm at the Christmas Eve table. I saw her too proud to wear a scarf on her head after chemo. I saw her lying on the beach in New Jersey reading a smutty novel. I saw her weakened, accepting she was about to die. I saw her lying in her own bedroom, but in a hospital bed that had been brought in for her, uttering what turned out to be her last words. Why did I wish she would die? Why did she feel the need to offer me reassurance as she was dying?

I was her first grandchild and because of that we were very close. She was young for a grandmother, only forty when I was born. Every year she and my grandfather took my sister and me to the Jersey shore. They knew my parents couldn't afford to and thought every child should have a vacation. We would spend a week in Wildwood. Every day would be passed on the beach; we would go out for dinner fairly early in the evening and then spend all night on the boardwalk. Some of my best childhood memories are from those trips.

I remember when my mother called me to tell me that my grandmother had been diagnosed with cancer. I also remember assuming the worst. They told us it was only in one lung; I said it would spread. They said she would recover; I said she'd be dead in a year. They said nothing would change; I knew everything would. I wish more than anything I would have been wrong. The cancer spread throughout her whole body. She died ten months later. What once was one big family was now four small ones that met only at holidays.

I saw her as much as I could during those ten months, driving to her house every other night at first and later to the hospital. I didn't know how to handle her illness. Every visit was torture. I couldn't talk to her when I visited, but I never let go of her hand. I always sat on her right side; her left was too weak after the stroke for her to squeeze my hand the way I needed her to. Even though we never talked about it, she knew her dying was killing me too. We would sit in silence. I would squeeze

her hand and she would alternate between squeezing back when she had the strength and rubbing the back of my hand with her thumb when she was too weak to squeeze.

When I returned from the visit on my 22nd birthday, I was speechless. I remained silent for the next four days, not speaking to my wife, my son, or anyone else. Instead, I did what any other coward would do when faced with overwhelming emotions: I drank. I was drunk for the next four days. I couldn't believe I wished her dead. So I tried to drink away the guilt. On the fourth day I decided to visit her again. I was halfway to her house when my cell phone rang. It was my mother's voice, but it wasn't. "Nona died about a half an hour ago." I hung up the phone without saying anything and kept driving to her house. The rest of the ride was strange. My stomach began to hurt; I felt a strange pain in my throat. I wanted to cry but couldn't. I kept thinking, "Is this what you wanted? Why?" Mixed with the pain of knowing I'd never see her again was a strange sense of relief. Again I questioned myself. Why was I relieved? Because she would feel no more pain, or because I wouldn't? Was it because she wasn't sick anymore, or because I wouldn't have to see her sick anymore? The questions and the guilt they brought on continued until I arrived, when I buried them within and went into the house to console everyone else.

I spent a few hours at what was now my grandfather's house, I guess, with the family. As I left I told them to call me the night before the funeral, not before. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I went home and drank. All night I kept replaying our last day together. I discovered after her death that she had spoken her last words to me. That she had lost consciousness later that night and never regained it. I couldn't then and still can't now understand it all. The guilt of what I thought when she spoke. The pain of how I felt looking at her. The confusion of wondering why she felt the need to make her last words a reassurance to me.

I have never resolved any of the feelings associated with my grandmother's death. Every time I think of the last day I saw her I wonder what I meant by wanting her to die. I would really like to think it was because I wanted her to finally rest and stop suffering. But at the same I know how selfish people, especially myself, can be when something hurts them. Most people have difficulty looking past their own pain. I doubt if I'm an exception. Every year in March I ask myself the same questions I have since her death. I wonder if there are answers to be found, if I will ever feel any resolution. I replay everything, trying to recall exactly how I felt that day. Every year brings the same questions with the same outcome. The tears come but answers don't.

Materialism

I believe in materialism. Materialists believe that matter is the only substance; who you are, what you believe, and how you act are simply an interaction of material substances such as brain chemicals and neurotransmitters. Matter is everything that can be seen, touched, measured, or otherwise proven to exist. For example the chair you're sitting in as you read this can be seen, touched, measured and proven to exist. To take materialism a step further, I believe in the non-existence of God, of a soul, or of an afterlife because they are not material, they cannot be proven to exist. I do not feel it is one's responsibility to prove a negative like the non-existence of non-material things. The lack of evidence, scientific, philosophical or otherwise, for the existence of any of these immaterial items is my proof. Philosophical logic dictates that the simplest answer to a question is the safest explanation until evidence is presented to show otherwise. No evidence for the existence of God, a soul, or an afterlife has ever been presented that would make me question my belief.

Not only do I hold this belief, but my belief in materialism is very important for the way I choose to live my life. Materialism may seem like a purely philosophical concept, rather metaphysical and somewhat abstract. But this belief has very practical applications completely apart from philosophy and can be very useful in real life. In believing that this material body, this life, and this material world are all that I have, I feel that I approach life in a way that will make the most of all three while avoiding the trappings of hedonism. If an individual believes that there are no supernatural or non-material explanations to be had, it follows that that individual believes that there are answers to be found within this material world. Believing that answers are here to be found fosters a search for knowledge and wisdom that in a rational person can never be satisfied. The search for answers can never be satisfied because any rational person accepts the impossibility of knowing many answers but embraces the search. A materialist's desire to find answers will be stronger than a non-materialist's because the non-materialist will accept supernatural explanations such as "God's plan." The materialist does not accept such an answer because he believes the only answers can be found in the material world.

Aside from the overall search for answers due to an absence of supernatural explanations, this belief leads to a philosophy of personal responsibility. I hold myself accountable for every choice I make because there is nothing or no one else to blame. There is no such thing as "God's will," only my own. Personal responsibility affects my life in three major ways. Each of these three ways helps me make choices I can be proud of taking responsibility for.

My belief that this body is all I have leads me to be aware of what I put into it. It is important to me that I do

not poison my body in any way. I do not consume drugs or alcohol. Moderation in this area is ideal for the majority of people. Unfortunately, I personally am not in the majority and abstinence is the best approach for me. I try not to fill my mind with anything that I do not deem to be conducive to my search for knowledge. The mind and the body are inseparable and taking care of one and not the other seems pointless. Eating right and lifting weights then poisoning your mind with video games is useless. Reading and expanding your mind while eating poorly and becoming sick is equally useless. Physical and mental health must be a priority; this body is all I have.

Believing that this life is all there is has a great impact on how I approach dealing with people. I don't believe that I will be rewarded or punished at some later time by a parental figure. There will be no second chance, no opportunity to repent or make amends. I have to try to treat people the right way the first time. This means I don't judge anyone based on race, sexual preference, or past. My opinion of someone is, ideally, based on my encounters and personal experiences with that person. I am far from good at not judging people but continue to work on it. I have a bad habit of judging people's intelligence, though I am trying to break that habit. Treating people with tolerance and respect must be a priority. This is what I will be judged by; this life is all I have.

If there is no paradise to enter after death I feel compelled to do my part in preserving the paradise that is this earth. I couldn't imagine any paradise that could offer more beauty than this world already does. Appreciating the beauty this world has to offer makes it important to me to preserve this earth. Preserving the earth feels difficult to do on an individual level but that is the only place to start. I do my part in this preservation by recycling, conserving energy, and simply not littering. I want to make sure my children and my children's children will have the same chance that I do to enjoy this paradise. I must do my part to make sure this earth remains a paradise; this world is all we have.

My belief in materialism helps me keep one important fact in the front of my mind; everything can and will die. Your body, your mind, every relationship, this world, everything material, which is everything, will end. Keeping the fragility of everything material in mind helps me treat things in a manner that will prolong their too-short existence. A materialist and a non-materialist approach life differently because of the way they view this fragility. It's like the difference between the way an adult and a child carry a dozen eggs. The child doesn't appreciate or understand how fragile the eggs are, treating them roughly and breaking one or two before they can be used. The adult accepts the fragility of the eggs and prolongs their existence temporarily ensuring that each egg can be enjoyed or put to use before it is destroyed. A materialist understands that everything in this material world must have an end. The materialist

also understands how precious and fragile an item's existence is and treats that item accordingly.

Believing that this body, this life, and this world are all that exist, I try to make the most of each. I will not be given an opportunity to make up for wasting this life, this body, or this world. I have one chance with each and it is important I don't waste it. My belief in materialism helps me prioritize what's important to me in this life. Through it I can remain focused on what I can do to make the most of my life and leave behind a legacy my children will be proud of. I do not live up to the model I have set forth though I embrace the struggle to do so. Whether or not I ever achieve what I consider an exemplary life is of no particular importance so long as that is the end I am working toward. If by some chance I do achieve what I presently define as an exemplary life, I am sure that by that time I will have changed the guidelines as to what I consider exemplary, and again I will embrace the search and take responsibility for what I have done and will continue to do. My belief in materialism keeps me conscious of the fact that everything can and will die. That I can and will do the best I can to make the most of every opportunity I have and not take anything for granted.

Tracy S. Lahey

White Socks and Deep Thoughts

I woke up and slid my weary legs off the edge of the bed. The pins and needles were excruciating. "Maybe I'll sit for a minute," I decided, grumbling to myself. Suddenly something caught my eye. It was a sock. Now, I know what you're thinking: "Are you kidding me? This guy is writing about a sock?" But this wasn't any old sock because this one could tell a heck of a story. This sock walked the toughest quarter mile a kid could ever put it through. The dreaded march was made by me, twenty years ago.

The whole story is ironic because here I am at age thirty-two, a heights protection guy for the Manhattan Carpenter's Union. That means I make sure all the workers around me are safe. Safe from falling out skyscrapers, and safe from the buildings falling on them. I make big decisions that affect everyone around me. The truth of the matter is that I go where no one else can, or will, go in order to make sure it's safe for the rest of the crew. That's why I think before I move.

But I wasn't always this smart. That brings us back to the story of the sock. Long before the strains of my job hardened my outer shell, I was a timid, impressionable kid. If only someone had told me not to do it, that day would have gone a lot better for everyone.

One ordinary (or so I thought) day when I was 12, my friends Dan, Mikey, Dennis, and I piled into the car with my mother. She had a hair appointment in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, at the K-Mart Mall. Dan and Mikey were cousins. They had the same hair, build, and facial features. They could definitely pass as brothers. But their looks were just about their only similarity. Dan was loud and arrogant, while Mikey was quiet and reserved. Then there was Dennis, the kind of kid who would make you want to move out of the neighborhood, just so there was no chance of your kids learning any "useful information" from him, like playing with matches, or throwing eggs at cars.

My friends were loud during the car ride to the mall, so loud that they drove my mom nuts. I must say, when they got together, you could be three, even four mountains away from them, and still hear a faint "Ow!" or "Yo, dude, that hurt like hell!"

By the time we got to the mall, the sight of the salon had my mother hypnotized. When she caught sight of her little piece of heaven, I couldn't help but notice her face light up, as if the sun was shining just for her at that moment. Her escape from the ruckus was merely yards away, so she floated lightly towards the salon, while we broke off towards the arcade. The arcade was louder than the car ride. The sirens, the lights, I should have seen the signs. They were right there in front of me.

After growing bored with the arcade, we decided to walk to K-Mart. On the way, Dennis turned to me and

knavishly suggested that we head to the shoe department to switch my sneakers with a new pair and walk out of the store with them. He pointed towards the store like the Great Bambino pointing to the outfield for a home run. I thought about it for a second, and then foolishly agreed. We had an ongoing war of egos that just wouldn't quit. Sometimes it got a little out of hand. Maybe and usually, it even got a little dangerous - a tree to climb over here, a bridge to jump off over there. Usually one of us walked around nursing an injury.

As we walked into K-Mart, I went right for the shoe department, my heart in my throat. Looking at the shoe racks I felt my stomach twist into a knot. I felt like Houdini gazing upon a chest he was about to climb into and lock. One problem- I'm not Houdini. He probably would have performed the shoe trick better than me. After looking around for a few seconds, I found a pair of shoes, put them on like I owned them and put my old ones on the rear of the bottom rack for no one to find. I turned to my friends, and with a cocky but shaky voice chuckled, "Now I'm out of here." The paranoia built as I got closer to the front of the store. "There it is, the front door," I reassured myself.

Then suddenly, from out of nowhere, I felt a strong hand with stubby fingers like Vienna sausages reach around and grasp my arm firmly. A strong, low pitched voice that I could now see belonged to a fat, middle-aged security guard, demanded, "Don't you move. You don't want to make this any harder on you than it already is." I remained motionless, my heart pounding, my face as hot as lava.

"Where are your parents?" he demanded. I raised my only free arm and pointed, reluctantly, to the salon. I knew that my mother was sitting among her friends, dishing it out, as well as taking in all the bingo-type gossip possible. And here I was on my way to break up the whole party. All I could think about was how embarrassed my mother was going to be when I came through the door.

"Hands at your sides!" the guard pressed as he led me to the salon. The two-minute walk felt like an eternity. The whole way, parents whispered to their kids while pointing at me, "You see what happens when you get caught stealing?" I felt like I was on death row, on my "last walk." The only thing missing was someone yelling, "Dead man walking!"

As we walked into the salon, the stench of perms, nail polish, and perfume hit me in the face like a sack of marbles. Actually, I don't know if it was that or my mother's "stare of death." Either way, it wasn't a very comfortable feeling. My mother turned a shade of beet red that I had never before seen on her face. She then grabbed me by my free arm, due to the fact that the security guard was not letting my other one free. He reminded me of a hunting dog who was anything but willing to give up his catch.

The walk back to the office was weird. While my mom tried to sneak past all the customers to avoid embarrassment, the guard made it all too clear with his pompous strut that I was in trouble. There was a method to his madness. By doing this he would thwart any future attempts at his iron curtain of defense. When we got back to the office, he sent me to find my old shoes. They were gone. I knew exactly where I put them. "They must have gotten up on their own and walked out," the guard sarcastically poked with a grin.

So, with nothing but white socks on my feet, I marched out of the store and across what seemed like the rockiest parking lot in the world. The entire fifty-yard trek to the car was filled with the sounds of my mother screaming at me, while my friends laughed from behind - way behind. What an embarrassing day it had turned out to be.

Now, twenty years later, I wonder, why did I take that dare? Probably because I feared losing my friends. I have grown a lot since then. The job sites I work on are like a still pond, my decisions like a big rock. No matter how gently I place the rock into the water, it causes a ripple from one side of the drink to the other. If someone approached me with the same trivial challenge today, I would tell him to get bent.

Through the years, I have learned that misery loves company, so when someone approaches you like my so-called friends did me, he is just trying to make you look bad so he can look better. With friends like that, who needs enemies? Needless to say, they aren't my friends anymore. I've moved on - well at least most of me has.

It's hard to believe that just seeing a sock can spark nostalgia and such deep thoughts. Now, if you don't mind, I've got buildings to climb and decisions to make; just another day as a heights guy for the carpenters.

William MacLeod

First Snow

In the early morning half light I can begin to make out the familiar shapes in our yard. I hear the neighbor's rooster rousing all within ear-shot of his ancient crow. The tea kettle is on the flame, and Duncan is telling me that he is eager to go for his morning walk. Duncan pulls me out the front door with a tremendous yank, and the heels of my boots slide across the inch of fresh snow on our deck. The first snow fall of the year! I can see now that the forest has been transformed into a delicate lace-work of white, and the grassy lawn has random patches of snow. The old-timers will tell you that "the ground won't freeze until the swamps are full." Who could argue with that logic? On our mountain top, we're surrounded by temperate woodland swamps, eerie places, very still and solemn, with dead gray spires of hemlock jutting up from half solid ground. One has only to notice the muddy paws of our dogs to know where they've been and to realize that the swamps aren't frozen yet.

There's snow on our pumpkins, and the air is fresh and cold, mixed with a potpourri of forest scents: evergreen, loam, and decaying leaves. Our cats have decided to join me on our morning stroll, each on its own erratic path, each sniffing at the ground in turn. I wish I could suspend time and live in this half light dawn for a while. It's very early for our first snow; we usually don't expect it until after Halloween, and it is now just mid-October. I believe the woolly-bears may be right; we're in for a long hard winter in the Catskill Mountains!

In 2001, I took a job in South Carolina that kept me down south for three years. I lived just inland of Hilton Head Island in a town called Bluffton, about fourteen miles north of Savannah, even though I worked in Richmond Hill, Georgia, which is nearly half-way to the Florida border. That part of the coastal Carolinas is known as the "Low-Country," thusly named for its flat and low-lying terrain, mere feet above sea level and dangerously susceptible to storm surges during hurricanes. Bluffton is virtually surrounded by salt water estuaries and marshes, salt swamps if you will, which permeate the air with the sickly-sweet smell of salt and rotting corruption.

I had left New York as the sugar maples were blazing yellow and beginning to cover the roads and the geese were busy forming their squadrons out in the freshly cut corn fields. As I began making my way south through Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and Virginia, I noticed the mercury rising again, the tree foliage increasingly more dense. I was leaving fall and winter behind for warm sub-tropical breezes, a second crack at summer! "Truly, I am cheating nature," I gloated to myself as a toothy grin began to cascade over my face. September 11, 2001 had way-laid my travel plans by a month. I had intended to leave within a day or two of the attacks, and

found myself wondering if I should leave New York at all. But here I was, on my way!

South Carolina was all I expected it to be, Humidity, cotton fields, antebellum homes, tobacco barns, and road side shrimp stands. Christmas Eve of that year found me phoning home from the beach, a clam rake in one hand, and my cell phone in the other, looking very like Huck Finn with my cut-off shorts, floppy hat, and bare feet. "Merry Christmas Mother" I said, "Give my love to all." Christmas 2001! It didn't seem like Christmas though, as I stole a voyeuristic peek at the bikini'd sun bathers nearby. What did that matter anyhow? I'm barefoot and livin' large! South Carolina's winters are like New York's summers, and the summers are akin to equatorial Africa; hot, brutally humid, and the stench of fetid salt marshes hanging in the air like a pall.

The seasons passed by in The Low Country with unremarkable occasion. In the autumn, most of the trees retained their leaves, while those that didn't were so full of Spanish moss as to mimic those that did. And it was normally warm enough year round for shirt sleeves. It was here in this beautiful place, this pseudo-paradise, that I learned something very fundamental about myself, something primal. I was born during January in Hartland, Maine and was raised from the age of three on the Canadian border. Snow has been a huge part of my life, as have been all the four seasons. What imagery the aroma of burning leaves evokes for me! My father would rake and burn the leaves in our yard while wearing his black shirt and clerical collar, looking somewhat out of place. I, by the light of a street lamp, would watch from our bedroom windows as the snow piled up, hearing the scrape of the plow truck as it made its way along our road. Maybe, just maybe there won't be any school tomorrow! And then there's March's final fury, making those first warm days of spring so fine. I recall the day when one of my Georgian co-workers jokingly called me a "Yankee son-bitch," and I retorted "No, I'm a God-damn Yankee son-bitch, and don't you forget it!" That was a galvanizing moment for me. It was time to go home.

It was two weeks before Christmas 2004, and I was traveling north on Rt. 81. I was in the midst of the Pennsylvania dairy country and the sky was fast approaching twilight. On the ground and the great barn roofs was beautiful snow, silhouetting the dots of grazing cattle, looking more violet than white in the failing light. It was the first snow I'd seen in three years. So, I've learned that there are two types of "first snow," the one that we have all taken for granted, perhaps even breathed a sigh of dismay at, and the "first snow" that we are fortunate enough to see with our second set of eyes, our retrospective vision.

I began making a wish list of the things I'd do in the snow when I got back, skiing, tobogganing, winter camping, but mostly watching it through my window panes, along with all the other changes in our environment. I didn't anticipate missing the winter as

much as I did, or the mountains that I call home. And on a morning such as this when the two of them—mountains and snow—conspire to create this splendid tapestry, I am grateful for this place and this season, as I am grateful for the far off places that lead us home.

Healing American Health Care

My mother related a story to me about an elderly widowed woman she had known. I feel it prudent to protect her anonymity. This woman had suffered a heart attack, was hospitalized for some time, and was ultimately discharged. Admittedly I don't know all the details of this woman's ordeal, save for the fact that she was in the position of having to pay for many of her prescriptions out-of-pocket. Money she didn't have. She was also burdened with a hospital bill that I can only speculate would be in excess of \$100,000. Being a woman who had been fiercely independent and responsible all of her life, she was understandably under a great deal of stress as to just how she could possibly meet all of her medical expenses. She grew up in a time when frugality was a virtue and you paid your bills on time, indeed, early if at all possible.

This woman passed away within a year of being discharged from the hospital with a second heart attack. It is widely felt by all who knew her, family and friends, that she died of worry, that all this internalized stress was directly responsible for her death. One could argue that it was inevitable, that she would have died regardless of these pressures. But this begs the question, why should anyone in this position be saddled with any worry at all, other than that of regaining her health? Why would the world's "greatest nation" be so broken as to allow this to happen to any of its citizens? But it does! America is eerily similar to the Roman Empire in that it is gradually and inexorably collapsing under its own weight. Hers is one story, and hers is a thousand stories. Largely it's the elderly, the homeless, and the lower and middle classes that get kicked to the curb, left wondering what do I do now? Who can I turn to now?

On September 24, 2005, I awoke in the morning with gripping back and chest pain. Being a carpenter, it's not unusual to experience this type of discomfort. In this industry we place demands upon our bodies that most other professions don't require, as any carpenter will tell you. The day prior, I had been carrying 80 lb. rolls of roofing material up three flights of stairs. Many rolls, many trips. That must be it! As the morning wore on, however, it became evident that something was terribly wrong. Without getting into too much detail, I had suffered a heart attack. I was transported by Ambulance to Catskill Regional Medical Center and then flown by Medi-vac helicopter to Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, New York. Valhalla! Isn't that where fallen

Vikings went to be with Odin? That's a bit of irony that wasn't lost on me!

I think it would be a fair assessment to say that the vast majority of independent carpenters don't have any health coverage, myself included. We can't afford it. We work in an industry that is either driven by the economy or stymied by it. We either have so much work that we physically can't do it all or there is little or none. Feast or famine! Most independent contractors are covered for basic liability, tool theft, and home damage; this coverage is a requirement. The cost of this coverage is negligible; however, a personal health care policy is a different matter entirely, and given specific conditions such as age, health, and occupation, medical insurance very often becomes cost prohibitive.

Upon my release from the cardiac ward of Westchester, I was given a two-week supply of free samples of the several medications I had been prescribed, Plavix, beta blockers, and others I can't even pronounce. Hopefully by then my Medicaid would be approved and all would be right with the world. Right? After all, I had largely lived from week to week for a very long time, hardly solvent. By this time all of my medical expenses, hospitals, medi-vac, ambulance, surgery had totaled out in the \$100,000 range. My prescriptions were in the hundreds per month range. And so I began my arduous and futile journey into the American health care system.

I filled out all of the obligatory paperwork, attended all the necessary interviews, and endured all the contrived humiliations. Medicaid, I have decided, operates under the directive of humiliation. Embarrass the masses enough and a large percentage of the applicants will be inclined to drop their claims. Hell, it works! However, I have a thick hide, and regardless of my efforts, I was denied. Medicaid allows applicants to appeal their decisions within a certain period of time, which I did, only to be refused again! I was told that I had made \$10.00 too much that year. Ten dollars—Jesus! I knew I shouldn't have worked in the rain that one day. I have also become convinced that Medicaid's social workers operate on a bonus-for-denial system, just as the insurance companies do.

I was told by my physician that I shouldn't lift anything heavy; I believe he said nothing heavier than twenty pounds. Not a very optimistic proposition for a carpenter. But I was forced to resume building and repairing houses again out of necessity. So it has become my sense that on top of being refused aid, Medicaid had funneled me back towards the very type of physical activity that my cardiologist bade me not to do.

In depressed Sullivan County it is said that the men are either tradesmen, corrections officers (law enforcement), farmers, or retired, and the women are homemakers, waitresses, teachers, or health care workers. I admit that's broad-brushed, though I believe that's a reasonably accurate cross-section of this

county's populace. There aren't very many options for a person who is forced to embark on a new career path and expect to make a living wage. It's probably worth mentioning that the nurses' aides employed at the Roscoe Community Nursing Home are not provided with health coverage. Go figure! This is why at age 49 I am a student again, trying to reinvent myself as a health care worker, oddly enough.

I listened to President Obama's first State of the Union address, and not surprisingly, his speech was largely dominated by health care reform. As I understood it, he is focusing on mandatory health insurance for individuals, not unlike having to carry motor vehicle insurance. Isn't that what's fundamentally wrong in the first place? If people could afford insurance they'd have it already. How is getting water from a stone a solution? What underwriter would even want to carry a person with my medical history anyway? Would I not fall smack-dab into the unacceptable risk category? Obama went on to say that he would hold each and every insurance company accountable to meet their claims responsibilities. At least he acknowledges that that's also a broken American institution.

Why are we unable to learn the lessons of our neighbors and allies? Is it pride? Is it greed? Why not model a socialized medical policy upon Canada's, Britain's, France's, Australia's, and dare I say it.....Cuba's? Great Britain began forming its socialized medicine policy around the multitude of coal miners suffering from Black Lung and other associated maladies. At the close of WWII, England was overwhelmed by the thousands of wounded and maimed soldiers returning from that conflict. Parliament took what it had learned from the coal miners and applied it to those soldiers, indeed, the entire country. Their government made itself responsible for the well being of its people. Of course this system is bank-rolled through taxation. But it works. It's flawed, but it's functional. British citizens don't worry about how they will receive health care. It's a given!

I've heard the term "sick-care" used as of late to describe the state of America's health care. We spend money on the very infirm and little or nothing on prevention, cancer screening, more aggressive information campaigns, and so on. This is a lesson that Canada and Europe have learned and implemented with surprising success.

I am not a socialist by manner or deed, but capitalism by virtue of its very nature breeds greed. This is manifested in our country through the insurance companies, the grossly over paid physicians, and let's not forget about the gluttonous pharmaceutical companies. Britain's physicians receive incentives for successful health intervention while earning considerably less than their American counterparts. They still manage to rank highly as wage earners in their country. Rewarding responsible policy, now there's a concept!

On the other hand, American insurance firms receive incentives to deny claimants, worrying more about enhancing shareholder profits. It's an ideological contradiction.

I truly believe that we as a nation have enough social conscience to make the right decisions regarding our ailing health care system, although it won't happen without sweeping reforms and if we are not prepared to follow the lead of other western nations. We fight and die for our country! Shouldn't our country fight for us as well to provide us with unconditional access to health care regardless of age, income, or medical history, so that our citizens no longer have to ask themselves, what do I do now? To whom can I turn? Can we apply realistic prices to prescription medications so our people won't have to choose between medicine or food? These are all achievable goals if we maintain open minds and educate ourselves as to the political mandates of our candidates. Health care reform will be lost or won in the polling place. "We the people" still have a voice!

William Nestman

Changing Tides

The year was 1969. I was about eight and a half years old and to date had not had a real Christmas. I knew what Christmas was, of course. We had a small tree in the classroom at school and gave each other gifts, usually some small handmade classroom projects that all the kids were involved in. But my family didn't have a tree or gifts until this particular year.

I saw the Christmas that was supposed to be; I saw it every year. It was on every Manhattan street corner. I remember the feel of the season, the look of it. Even today, I can see the view out the window of the fourth floor New York City apartment that we lived in. It's a memory that will always be a part of me, forever in my mind and my heart. Through the window I see the street in front of our tenement, the usual grey concrete of the sidewalk covered with snow, pristine white in some areas and a brown muddy mess in others where the people walked, smiling salutations for the holiday season like some mantra practiced over a lifetime to perfection.

For most this salutation appeared to be genuine, and probably was. It was a different time in the 60s, especially around the holiday season. I remember a particular view of a New York City avenue between 29th and 26th Streets. Walking home from the Boys Club of America when I was about 12 years old, I would see the vendors selling Christmas trees. Each vendor had a tree in full dress to show off their wares, shiny silver and gold ornaments and brightly colored lights blazing for all to see. The tenement buildings, mostly four-story walk-ups, had brightly colored lights in their windows as if they were in a competition for best in show. These displays spoke of community pride and holiday spirit. Many years later I had an opportunity to walk down the same avenue at about the same time of year, and it was much different. The windows lining the avenue were no longer bright with holiday color. No mantra of *MERRY CHRISTMAS* was heard; it was more like yeah, merry Christmas. This change in attitude seems to parallel changes in my life.

The year 1969 was one of beginnings and endings for me. It was the beginning of my journey down what was to become a very destructive path and an end to my innocence, because it was the year of my very first drink. It was Christmas Eve, my first real Christmas at home. This was a time for celebration but looking back it was also a time of change.

On this Christmas Eve my mother's sister and her husband were visiting to aid in the celebration of the holiday. Looking back I can see that it was simply an excuse for my Uncle Louie to come over and get drunk for free. We were put to bed earlier than usual, still restless with excitement over the prospect of getting a new toy to play with and sugared up from the cookies

that we had gobbled up, a rare treat for us indeed. Being the precocious boy that I was, I figured that I would attempt to get a look at how many gifts were under our brightly lit tree so I could guess at how many were for me. So I lied about having to go to the bathroom, which would take me straight through my parents' bedroom where the tree was set up. This strategy worked to a degree. I was taken right past the tree, but my mother placed her hands over my eyes so I could not see the gifts. I did, however, see the shiniest object that I had ever seen to that point in my life. So shiny that I can never forget it.

On my way back to the kids' room, I walked past my Uncle Louie, who was sitting at the kitchen table still drinking. He grabbed me up and sat me on his lap, and, being a child, I attempted to get hold of what he was drinking. I don't recall why, maybe I, too, wanted to be happy like he appeared to be. He aided me in my efforts to reach this shiny can.

Certain moments stand out in a person's life like time itself is forever frozen; that's how this time was for me. I can't remember my first kiss. I can't remember my first love. I can remember my first drink. It was on Christmas Eve in an apartment building on east 74th Street in apartment 4A at the kitchen table sitting on my Uncle Louie's lap.

I remember the look of the can, shiny silver and gold with interlocking rings that surrounded the can. I remember the name "Schaefer" and the song from the commercials; "Schaefer is the one beer to have when you're having more than one." I remember the taste as I took a large swallow. Most of all, I remember wanting more. Like the changing of the holiday cheer, so my life had changed. In that one moment all changed for me. I spent the better part of my life attempting to reach that can again, that feeling.

Had I not had that "first Christmas" I would not have had the experience with my uncle. I've often wondered if maybe, had I not had that drink, things would have been different for me? Would I have really wanted things to be different knowing today how many people's lives I help to save every year? Was this an inevitable path for me? Some people believe in God and suggest that he had a plan for me, and I did exactly what he had in store for me. I don't know. We all make choices and life tends to change so we change with it, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. I do, however, like to think that things tend to happen for a reason.

Stephanie Ortega

Pro Undercover

Started early today.
 Got that itch,
 To watch you
 Cough up the profit
 For fifteen minutes.
 No one's lasted longer.
 Nothing is used in those elating minutes.
 Doesn't matter,
 What pathogen or bump
 Grows in or on me.
 Ended late that day,
 One more itch.

I slip the gold
 On the hand
 That declares
 I'm untouchable,
 Or should be.
 Walk past the picket fence.
 Make him drink
 My sour milk.
 He wonders why I won't kiss him.

James Paterson

**When You Don't Know They are Watching, Know
 They are Watching**

One thing I've learned over time is that my children see me much differently than I see myself. As a parent, I see myself as a brave guardian and teacher, someone who is trying to teach them to be good, decent people. I sometimes feel that they see me as an obsolete relic, something they keep around mostly for amusement and still occasionally useful as an ATM, cook, or unpaid taxi driver. I'm sure the burden of keeping around as grumpy a resource as I have become has been hard on them. It was easier, I'm sure, once they realized they knew everything about everything. It meant they could ignore my endless nagging and lecturing. I find myself wondering if I had ever been relevant or if anything I had ever tried to teach them had actually gotten through.

It was during one such period of self-doubt when the insanity that comes from repeatedly banging your head against a wall of teenage stubbornness and indifference had overcome me. This followed my recognition that the time I had spent trying to teach them to have strong morals and good values might just as well have been spent sitting alone rocking to-and-fro, alternately mumbling incoherently and laughing maniacally.

Just when I had all but resigned myself to the fact that my children had learned nothing from me and I had failed in my job as a parent, my daughter came to me to tell me that she had written an essay about me in her creative writing class and asked if I wanted to read it. I immediately searched her face for some tell-tale sign that she had devised some new and cunning way to torture me using the written word, not unlike the time when she was 14 and wrote in her diary how excited she was that she was carrying triplets and how sure she was that her lover would quit his job as a Wal Mart clerk and leave that nag he had spent the last 20 years with as soon as his rock band took off; before leaving it where I was sure to read it.

It was with a certain amount of reluctance that I began reading how as a child and young adult she had watched with great amusement as the holidays drew near each year when I would begin the yearly ritual of "Holiday Fudge." She described how I would start checking and stockpiling supplies like an obsessive and compulsive hoarder. Marshmallow Fluff, chocolate chips, canned milk, sugar; did I have enough canned milk? She told of how she and her siblings were forbidden to go near the pantry and threatened with pain and death, unimaginable by their young minds, if I found the chocolate chips open or so much as a fingerprint on the Marshmallow Fluff container. Her literary effort went on to describe me as resembling some kind of mad scientist, wielding kitchen gadgets instead of beakers and flasks or demented sorcerer standing over a boiling

pot with a wooden spoon and mumbling to myself of softball stage temperatures and the like amid the mess and chaos I had created; how despite my best efforts and fanatical obsessing, more often than not, all I had to show for all my preparations was a pan full of goo or a dark substance, hard as granite. It was then, as I felt resentment rising in me that she and her siblings, and now her classmates and teacher, found my trials and tribulations such an easy source of amusement; that I took pause to remind her that some of my more recent attempts had almost been edible. She laughed and urged me to continue reading as I was almost to the end.

She concluded her essay by putting into words how much she admired me for my determination in trying year after year despite my many failures, and how she understood that it wasn't the fudge I wanted to give them, but the tradition that was important.

As that sank in, she told me her assignment had been to use humor to describe a quality she admired. She kissed my head and thanked me for helping her get an "A" and then wandered off about her business. I was left there alone, shaking my head, rocking slightly to-and-fro, and I'm sure, mumbling incoherently.

Joseph Perrello

Mother Nature's Divine Ways

The snake attacks with a vicious bite.
The slow tortoise finishes last,
While the squirrel puts up a fight.
A jackrabbit proves to be fast.

The slow tortoise finishes last.
Only his first time around the track
A jackrabbit proves to be fast.
The racecar breaks from the pack.

Only his first time around the track,
As the beautiful robin sings a song,
The racecar breaks from the pack.
A house doorbell is rung.

As the beautiful robin sings a song,
The little pyro needs to be tamed.
A house doorbell is rung,
And the forest bursts into flames.

The little pyro needs to be tamed.
While the squirrel puts up a fight,
And the forest bursts into flames,
The snake attacks with a vicious bite.

Andrew Reno

Mineral and Land Rights

The separation of the surface and mineral rights of a piece of land is a barbaric and primitive practice that has been carried out for centuries. Since the beginning of human kind, if a person owned the land, he owned everything on or under the land. It was always this way until an early English king came along and decided to change that. The separation of surface and mineral rights was first issued under early English law so that the king would have exclusive rights to any precious metals or saltpeter found on English estates. This law wasn't made because the king was money hungry, it was made so that the king could pay and maintain an army to protect the people of his country. The English laws were carried over to the Thirteen Colonies, and after their split with England, the Thirteen Colonies kept many of the English laws including the separation of mineral rights and surface rights. Now, in the twenty-first century, this law has come to haunt the American people because our land is being taken away by major corporations who want the natural resources for themselves with little or no profit to the people who own and pay for the land (Hill and Rippley). I feel that if someone pays for a piece of property, that person should have the right to enjoy the property and to refuse oil and natural gas drilling on that property.

Major corporations such as the oil and gas companies lease land for drilling purposes. Sometimes government-owned land is used and sometimes privately owned land is used. Problems arise when private land owners who refuse drilling on their land are forced to allow drilling on their property. This happens because of a number of complicated factors that involve the separation of land into two sections, the surface land, and the mineral resources below the land. When one person owns the surface land and another person or the government owns the minerals under the surface, it creates a situation known as a Split Estate. Oil and gas companies can buy or lease the rights to the mineral deposits from the owner or the government and then drill on the property with little or no consent from the owner of the surface land. The owners are compensated, but the consequences of drilling are often not worth the monetary benefit (OGAP).

Landowners are strongly encouraged to negotiate an agreement with the oil and gas company to help protect their interests. Landowners who do not have mineral rights have less say on the drilling process and are more likely to succumb to the oil and gas company's terms of land use. A landowner who has the rights to the minerals below his land is in the best position for negotiation with the oil/gas company because he has the ability to sell or lease these rights to the oil and gas company or refuse the drilling altogether. However, most properties in

America don't include mineral rights; to purchase the mineral rights, negotiations with the state or the person who owns the rights are needed. The book *Oil and Gas at Your Door* states, "It should be noted that even if you own your land and the minerals beneath it, there are times when you may not be able to prevent exploration and development from occurring on your land" (I-5). Situations where a landowner cannot prevent the drilling of oil and gas on their land is most likely the result of force pooling.

"In most states, something called force (or compulsory) pooling exists" (OGAP I-5). For force pooling to begin, an oil and gas company must first buy or acquire permission to use the majority of mineral rights in a spacing unit. A spacing unit is the distance between wells allowed by state regulators. Spacing units are necessary because "a productive well will capture oil and gas which has accumulated in an underground rock formation or reservoir. A well may capture oil or gas from more than one property" (NYS DEC). Once an oil and gas company owns or has permission to use the majority of mineral rights in a spacing unit, a landowner who doesn't want drilling done on or under his property will be forced to give the oil and gas company use of the mineral resources, even if the landowner owns the mineral rights. When an oil and gas company does this, it is called force pooling (FitzGerald).

The oil/gas companies think that force pooling is a fair and necessary arrangement. With the United States consuming more than 23.5 million barrels of oil a day in 2005, we are essentially setting ourselves up for the spreading of oil and gas wells on privately owned land. The Oil and Gas Accountability Project says that:

It is reported that 6,400 new [natural gas] wells must be drilled each year to keep [gas] production stable, but America's demand for natural gas is not stable. . . . [C]onsumption of [natural gas] is forecasted to rise 2.2 percent every year. So, even if we continue to increase our drilling of natural gas wells, we are not going to meet our needs. (I-3)

It is because of this high demand for fossil fuels that oil and gas companies feel that they have to expand to meet the demand. However, having oil or gas drilling rigs on a piece of private property is a huge problem for the people who own the land because they are not only paying taxes on their land, but they also have to deal with many of the harsh repercussions of the drilling. OGAP says, "Oil and gas development continues to occur at a rapid pace across the United States . . . Not surprisingly, in many regions of the country this form of industrial development has increasingly come into conflict with other land uses [including] ranching, farming, recreational activities, and the enjoyment of private property" (1). With oil and gas development spreading the way it is, more and more people will find themselves faced with the onslaught of big corporations forcing them

to allow the oil and gas companies to drill on their property.

The destruction of land and deterioration of health are some of the problems associated with oil and gas companies drilling on private property. In the book *Oil and Gas at Your Door*, Rancher Tweeti Blancett says:

We once ran 600 cows on 35,000 acres. Today we can barely keep 100 cows. Grass and shrubs are now roads, drill pads or scars left by pipeline paths. We have trouble keeping our cows alive because they get run over by trucks servicing the wells each day, or they get poisoned when they lap up sweet anti-freeze out of unfenced compressor engines. (IV-18-19)

Destruction of property and violation of landowners' rights are common problems when a big company comes, takes private land to drill on, and then trashes it just because the landowner poses no threat to the oil and gas company whatsoever. It has been proven that horizontal drilling is not environmentally safe, and if it is not safe for the environment, it is not safe for us. The oil/gas companies' processes for natural gas drilling involve the use of chemicals, water, and sand in what is called a fracking fluid. This fluid is used to help extract the gas horizontally from the ground. Several people have done independent tests on this fracking fluid and found that it contains several cancer-causing substances including benzene, toluene, naphthalene, and xylene. Because fracking fluid is not subject to the Safe Drinking Water Act, the American people are at risk of well water contamination, and they can't do anything against it because the oil/gas companies are exempt from the law (Brian).

In *Oil and Gas at Your Door*, resident Ron Moss says, "I had good [well] water for over ten years. I started to get methane in my water after they started drilling [nearby]. Coincidence? I think not" (IV-3). Methane was only the start of Moss's problems. The methane kept building in his pipes until it would blow out every time he turned the water on. Eventually the State of Wyoming came and told them not to light any matches near their water. If they did, they would explode. The second of Moss's problems came when the oil and gas built a huge compressor at the drilling site. Moss comments, "The noise was so loud that my dog was frightened to go outside . . . the noise sounded like a jet plane circling over your house 24 hours a day." Moss goes on to say that, "The noise drives people to the breaking point, and [the noise was so bad that] my neighbor fired 17 rifle shots towards the station. Unfortunately he received a lot of grief for his actions" (IV-3).

It is problems like contamination, noise, truck traffic, and the total disrespect for people by the oil and gas companies that make me so irritated at the oil/gas companies. The oil and gas companies may be trying to save the American people from an energy crisis, but that pales in comparison to the negative effect that they

produce on the environment and humankind. People should have the right to deny drilling on their property, to protect themselves and their families from the adverse side effects of careless drilling, and oil and gas companies who don't care for the individual. Thomas Jefferson penned in The Declaration of Independence that we are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Being forced to have oil and gas companies drill our properties is clearly going against not only the wisdom of one of our founding fathers, but also it goes against what the people of this great country of The United States of America believe in. Now in the twenty-first century, the time has come for the American people to destroy the barbaric and outdated principal of the split-estate and combine the surface and mineral rights into a single, united piece of land.

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Kelsey Riley

Black Eyes

Wind freezes the joints in my bones.
 Cries from a cradle,
 pushing through the tree tops.
 My eyes stitched shut
 like a door with no passage.
 The bark striping away from the trees,
 masking reality.
 Cradle teeters
 on the edge of night,
 lifeless drops of tears
 in her black eyes.
 As I reach out
 illusions disappear.
 It was too late.

Anthony Romano

For Better or Worse: Gas Drilling in Sullivan County

Natural gas is important for the energy needs of our country, especially as we transition from dirty fossil fuels to clean renewable energy, but at what cost? Natural gas is used for the production of electricity, hydrogen, home heating, hot water and, of course, gas stoves. Gas companies have been drilling all over the U.S. in places such as Texas, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. Gas companies have proposed drilling in the Marcellus Shale - a subterranean layer of rock curving northward from West Virginia through Ohio and Pennsylvania to New York's southern tier ("Shale and our Water").

The proposed drilling in the Marcellus Shale includes drilling right here in Sullivan County. New York State legislators have recently passed a law preventing any drilling in the New York City watershed. However, a recent 809 page document known as the Draft Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (DSGEIS) from the Department of Environmental Conservation states specific guidelines that must be followed by the gas companies if they wish to drill in the watershed area. Drilling for gas is a very dangerous process from beginning to end. Drilling here in Sullivan County will be devastating to the area and the New York City watershed, and the gas companies will not be held accountable since they are exempt from certain laws.

In order to harvest the gas, the gas companies must drill for it. Before they begin the drilling process they first must level the land they are proposing to drill on. The next step is to build the actual rigs that create the well. The Marcellus Shale in the New York area lies miles under ground, much farther down than any other area in which drilling has been done, which raises a lot of questions. If dangerous accidents happen in other areas where the shale is closer to the surface, might the depth make accidents worse?

In the first step, where the gas companies level the area where they plan to drill, they must remove any objects that are in the way, such as trees, hills, grass, and other living matter. The area is now referred to as the "pad". The pad is layered with dirt and gravel to support the heavy weight of the equipment. During this part of the process the gas companies destroy the land, environment, and animal habitats by clear-cutting forests. Not having plants and hills to hold it back, the rainwater run-off will flow directly into streams and rivers, causing flooding and polluting our surface water. The pads also need roads to get the trucks and equipment to them. These roads are created in the same manner as the pads and will become a permanent access road for the pads. The pads and access roads are areas that will never be reclaimed (Le Roux).

The next step is to bring in the giant rigs to begin the drilling process. The process for extracting the gas is

called hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking.” In this process they use a liquid they call fracking fluid. This fluid contains mostly water and sand but also some highly toxic chemicals (Le Roux). The exact chemicals used are not known to anyone but the company drilling. So no scientific evidence can show the dangers of these chemicals. The recent DSGEIS document released by the Department of Environmental Conservation part 5.4.3.1 shows there are hundreds of different chemicals that can be used. However the combination of these chemicals remains unknown. This is probably the most dangerous part of the drilling process. The fluid is pushed into the shale at extremely high pressure to create cracks and crevices in the rock. The space it creates is filled with the sand, which stays when the liquid part of the fluid is drawn back. Only a portion of the fluid is pulled back out, leaving toxic chemicals in the ground. A May 2009 report published by the U.S.

Geological Survey states:

Whereas the percentage of chemical additives in a typical hydrofrac fluid is commonly less than 0.5 percent by volume, the quantity of fluid used in these hydrofracs is so large that the additives in a three million gallon hydrofrac job, for example, would result in about 15,000 gallons of chemical in the waste. A single horizontal gas well may use up to 6 million gallons of water and 30,000 gallons of chemicals every time it is “fracked” and most wells are fracked multiple times (Soeder).

Since the shale sits below the aquifer which provides Sullivan County residents, who mainly rely on wells, and New York City with clean, fresh drinking water, this leaves a lot of room for errors and contamination of our fresh water supply. Take into consideration a family from Colorado who had gas leak into their water supply. In the 2009 documentary *Split Estate*, one family was able to light the water on fire and the flame sustained itself from the methane in the water. However, this is not the only point at which fracking fluid can contaminate water supplies.

An article in the *Times Herald Record* printed on October 18, 2009 spoke about Dimock, Pennsylvania, the most recent town to allow drilling. An accident in Dimock leaked fracking fluid into a nearby stream, killing 161 species of fish and wildlife. An entire ecosystem was destroyed from this fluid. The gas drilling companies, though, still stand by their words that the fluid is not harmful (Israel).

Nonetheless, allowing drilling can have some positive economic benefits. The drilling has brought new jobs to this little Pennsylvania town that has a thirteen percent poverty rate. However, the residents are not the ones working at the wells; these jobs were filled by people from places such as Colorado and Texas. The residents of Dimock, Pennsylvania speak of how their town has changed visually as well as economically and how the

people’s health changed as well. The drilling in Pennsylvania has only been active for two years and the town has already seen three major accidents, one involving the leak of fracking fluid. The residents have also seen growth in their economy, as stated by one shop owner who runs a little breakfast diner. He sees all the gas drilling workers every morning for breakfast. On the other hand, the quiet street his store used to occupy is now overrun by huge semi-trailers with gas drilling rigs and tubs full of the toxic fracking fluid. Jim and Victoria Switzer, residents of Dimock, spoke about their financial boost and the troubles that came with the gas drilling. When the gas company first came to them offering to lease their land for twenty-five hundred dollars per acre and a sixteen percent royalty, they saw this as a great opportunity to make some extra cash. The amount of money they get paid is now dwindling, every month that check is smaller and smaller, due to the decrease in the amount of gas that can be harvested from their land. Now they have almost no money coming in from the gas drilling and they deal with gas rigs and fracking fluid holding tanks all over their property. Even more disturbingly they now have to buy bottled water because the water that comes from their tap bubbles due to the extreme amounts of methane it contains. Victoria Switzer stated, “We gave up our water and property values for what?” (Israel).

The dangers of drilling in the Sullivan County area not only affect the Sullivan County residents but also the nine million residents of New York City. Because of the depth of the shale, much more water and much heavier doses of the toxic chemicals are required to get the gas flowing. The aquifer (where all the drinkable fresh water lies) sits above the shale that must be broken to release the natural gas. Gas drilling companies insert metal and concrete cylindrical castings into the ground down into the shale so the gas will travel straight up (Le Roux). However, a leak in this casting will go unnoticed; it could be leaking into the fresh drinking water supply making it extremely toxic. If New York City had to build a treatment plant to purify the contaminated water, it would cost the city over ten billion dollars. As for Sullivan County residents who depend on wells for drinking water, if New York City gets a treatment plant it will not purify water for Sullivan County. Sullivan County residents will be stuck with the toxic water.

Since the gas companies are not allowed to build on state or government owned land, New York has been buying property around reservoirs to create a buffer zone around the watershed. This will help prevent contamination of the extremely important aquifer. However, over seventy percent of the land in the New York City watershed is privately owned, and New York State cannot prevent those owners from leasing their land to the gas companies (“Shale and our Water”).

The last part of the drilling process is the storage of used fracking fluid. The fracking fluid is pulled out and

put into a holding pond. Some of these ponds are left unlined and toxic water seeps into the ground contaminating drinkable water supplies. In the ponds that are lined, the toxic water will sit for months, sometimes years. Usually they are set up with misters to mist the toxic water into the air, promoting evaporation. Instead of drinking these toxic chemicals, we are now breathing them in (*Split Estate*).

According to the 2005 Energy Act passed by the Bush administration, the natural gas drilling companies are exempt from three specific laws that all other companies in the U.S. must follow (*Split Estate*). These laws are the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act. They do not have to monitor whether any toxic substances are being leaked into the water we drink or the air we breathe. They do not have to take responsibility for their actions.

Another disturbing fact deals with property ownership. Although a person may own a piece of land, the land below the surface, or the mineral rights, is still up for sale. Now although gas companies are required to ask permission to drill on a property owner's land, if the owner refuses the companies can still come in and drill anyway because the owner does not own the mineral rights. One family in Colorado, as seen in the 2009 documentary *Split Estate*, who did refuse the drilling on their land, now has a gas drilling rig just one hundred and fifty feet away from their house. They have no legal recourse. They must move or deal with it, and who would want to buy a house next to a gas rig? Once a gas company begins drilling on or near a person's property, the land values decrease dramatically. One family in [Split Estate](#), unable to sell their house and needing to move due to health issues caused by the gas drilling, just walked away from their dream home, losing all the time and money they put into it. Who's responsible for their loss?

The most dangerous fact that has yet to be addressed is that the Marcellus Shale is scientifically known as black shale. Black shale usually contains small and sometimes unmanageable amounts of radioactive material. New York's Department of Environmental Conservation analyzed thirteen samples of wastewater brought thousands of feet to the surface from drilling and found that they contained levels of radium-226, a derivative of uranium, the fuel used for nuclear power plants, as high as 267 times the safe limit for discharge into the environment and thousands of times the safe limit for people to drink (Lustgarten "Marcellus Shale"). This is a problem that would affect everyone, even if drilling does not occur on or near their property. Radium is released in a colorless and odorless gaseous form known as radon and is a carcinogen known to cause bone, liver and breast cancers (Lustgarten "Marcellus Shale").

Chesapeake Energy (the gas company proposing to begin drilling here in Sullivan County) has stated publicly

that they will not drill on any of the leases they hold in the NYC watershed. However, they still continue to hold those leases. There is nothing stopping them from selling those leases to another gas company or in a few months changing their minds and drilling on those leases. Gas companies such as Chesapeake will do anything to get public support, even if it includes lying about the big issues they face. If the state gives them an inch, gas companies will take a mile.

At what cost is it beneficial to allow drilling in our backyard and the watershed that provides clean drinking water to New York City? Pro Publica, an independent nonprofit group that produces investigative journalism, has written extensively on hydraulic fracturing, including on the Garfield County, Colorado study. Pro Publica states that more than one thousand cases of water contamination near areas of gas drilling have been documented by courts and government agencies across several states. Pro Publica reported:

In one case, a house exploded after hydraulic fracturing created underground passageways and methane seeped into the residential water supply . . . In other cases, the contamination occurred not from actual drilling below ground, but on the surface, where accidental spills and leaky tanks, trucks, and waste pits allowed benzene and other chemicals to leach into streams, springs, and water wells.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of each contamination, or measure its spread across the environment accurately, because the precise nature and concentrations of the chemicals used by industry are considered trade secrets. Not even the EPA knows exactly what's in the drilling fluids. And that, EPA scientists say, makes it impossible to vouch for the safety of the drilling process or precisely track its effects (Pro Publica, as quoted in Kenworthy).

Drilling may bring some temporary positive economic benefits but also long-term negative health consequences. Drilling for gas is a dangerous operation and even though it is essential for energy in our country, the risks outweigh the benefits in this case. By drilling in this area the gas companies are putting the health of more than nine million people at risk. No product is worth the health of U.S. citizens. Gas drilling in the Sullivan County area will be detrimental to Sullivan County and New York City and, therefore, needs to be outlawed. The gas companies should be taking the billions they are spending on drilling for an antiquated technology—petroleum—and put the money towards the research and development of clean, renewable energy. There are a lot of promising technology advancements in solar and wind systems, and with a little bit of economic help we could be on the brink of eliminating carbon emissions and looking at a brighter, healthier, cleaner future.

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Ian Roosa

I Am A Mother; I Must Push On

I wake to my alarm and quickly hit the snooze button.
The thought I went to sleep with pushes its way back into
the front of my mind.
It pushes,
and shoves.
It tugs,
and pulls,
until my face gives way to my despair.
I have to pay the electric bill. I close my eyes and toss
and turn in my sheets trying to go back to sleep as if
sleep could save me from debt, but my alarm goes off
again.
The ringing lifts my eye lids.
I throw the covers off me and sit up
in my bed, and stretch out. The fracture
in my back is stiff, and I feel my age as I stretch it.
I creep through the dark, quiet sleeping house. My room
into the kitchen is like
a journey now. Still half asleep I start brewing coffee.
Fucking smuck, deceitful asshole, I hate you, why did
you bother coming back.
I stare at my gray shadow as it falls on the kitchen table.
I rest my brow on my hands. The only sound in the
house is the pitter patter of my morning coffee pot. Two
wasted years. I should've just stayed away after the first
split.
In fact, I should've never gotten remarried.
Sorry excuse for a husband. I'm glad we're over, You
paid the bills when it was convenient for you, and
stashed the rest out of spite and greed. You ignored me
on my birthday, you left me all alone and went to your
mother's
then bought me a cake as if that would make it all better.
Fuck you. And our anniversary was a nightmare. All I
wanted was a little romance, which you gave to your
daughter instead of me. I found this disturbing.
You think that after three years of being separated you
would have figured out what you were missing, but you
didn't.
All you did was play head games and make things harder
for me and my boys. Driving me into debt, causing me to
foreclose on the house. After years of fighting for what
my heart wants I am tired and ready to forget, if only to
start all over. I don't
want to see or speak to you or hear from you.
You're almost as bad as my boys' abusive, sex addicted,
druggy, fucked-up father. But he didn't even make me cry
as much as this. Are you proud of yourself? You
probably are.
This is all coming to an end now, I don't care if I have to
be alone. I still have my kids and they have me and I've
done a damn good job providing for them over the years.

Even if it did mean working two or three jobs, if it means I don't have to deal with you.

I slowly drink my coffee as Aaron comes into the kitchen and pours out some cereal for his school breakfast.

"Come over here and give me a kiss." He reluctantly gets up and slowly walks over and gives me a hug. I kiss him on the cheek and tell him I love him and his brother very much. I tell him that I have to go to get my back looked at again but after my appointment I'll pick him up from school.

He barely hears me; he's too busy eating to listen.

I stop talking and drink my coffee. The house, my home falls silent.

Crystal Young

Endurance and Perseverance

I did not grow up in a strictly religious home; in fact, I can only vaguely recall entering a church before I was eight years old, and I remember that only because that is the year my life changed drastically. On September 23, 1988, three months before my eighth birthday, my brother Dustin was born. I was thrilled to be a big sister. I had all sorts of dreams about how it would be. Nothing, however, matched the reality. Dustin was born with a rare heart condition that caused the left side of his heart to shut down immediately after birth. He was with us for only seventeen months, enduring two strokes and three open heart surgeries before he passed away on February 18, 1990. It was at his funeral that I was told "God never gives us more than we can handle" for the first time.

The time I got to spend with Dustin was a gift; he taught me to take nothing for granted because you never know which day will be your last. Dustin embraced the world with a smile that could illuminate even the darkest of rooms and had a laugh that was infectious. I would come home from school and sit with him; holding his hand through his oxygen tent, singing him songs, or reading to him whichever book was my favorite at the moment. He would grin back at me as we lay there for hours on end.

Nothing was the same after he died; I felt like the world had been tipped upside down. My mom spent a lot of time crying and I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house. I asked everyone to buy me helium balloons so I could attach a note to them and send them up to heaven as a way of communicating with Dustin. I never expected a balloon in return, but the fact that I was sending them to him brought me some comfort. At nine years old, I was very much aware of the fact that death was forever.

Time seemed to go by in a foggy haze. My next reality check came on January 23, 1991. That night my grandma passed away in the home that had felt like my refuge. She was born with spina bifida and later had developed diabetes and was practically confined to a wheelchair at the time of her death. However, none of these things resulted in her death – she was fifty-nine and died from gall stones because she had gotten so stubborn after years of surgeries on her back that she refused to ever go under the knife again. At the funeral I was absolutely numb. It was like *déjà vu*; had I not been here only eleven months ago? Once again between hugs and tears I was told "God never gives us more than we can handle."

I only vaguely recall the next year and only in very brief snapshots. On January 23, 1992 my sister, Devan, was born. She was born a year to the day, to the exact minute that my grandma had passed away and was

named after my brother – Dustin Evan. I was happy to be a big sister again, but I was reluctant at first as well. I was terrified that something would happen and she would be taken away as well. I was beginning to develop a sense that everyone who mattered would eventually leave, sooner than I would like them to.

One day after school in September of 1994 my grandpa came over to our house. He wanted to talk to me, to tell me that he would be going to the hospital in New York City to have some tests done and might have to stay there for a little while. I was afraid of the answers to my questions, so I did not ask them; I just hugged him and said OK.

During this period, I became “the little mother.” I missed a lot of school that year to stay home with Devan so that her dad and our mom could go the hospital to visit grandpa. I was not allowed to go see him until February. The sight of him lying in that hospital bed still haunts me. This was not my grandpa who was larger than life and could build anything imaginable from wood and nails. In his place was a man who looked pale and skinny and was just a little too tall for the bed he was lying in. As I leaned over the side of his bed, the eyes that matched mine caught me in their stare and the familiar laugh lines deepened as a smile broke across his face. I held his hand, told him that I had missed him, and kissed him on the forehead. I updated him on silly nonsense that had occurred in my life and showed him a book that one of my poems had been published in recently. He told me he was proud of me, and I beamed. The moment was broken when his face contorted and he began to yell for the nurse to bring him morphine. My aunt ushered me out of the room as the nurses rushed in to ease his pain. That is the last thing I remember of that night; I do not remember telling him goodbye, although I know I did.

I did not see him again until he had been moved to the hospital in Middletown a couple of months later. During those visits he looked and acted more like MY grandpa. We would hang out and watch *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune* until my mom and I left for the night. I dared to allow myself to believe that he was going to be OK, that he was going to come home. I should not have done that; I should not have gotten my hopes up. My grandpa passed away on June 5, 1995, not from the stomach and esophageal cancer that he had gone to New York City for in the first place, but from a staph infection that he contracted in the hospital. His funeral numbed me to the core; at fifteen-years-old I was tired of the funeral parlor. I was tired of being told “God never gives us more than we can handle,” because I was starting to believe that was an absolute lie, something someone made up somewhere along the line in an attempt to ease someone else’s pain. Someone should clue that person in as to the reality that God does in fact give us more than we can handle and sometimes expects too much of us. I wanted to be a “normal” kid

again; I did not want to keep burying family members. I decided that I was right; everybody does leave long before you want them to. Hold on as tight as you wish, but they will slip out of your grasp and you really do not have much say in the matter.

Time trudged by slowly but surely. Over the next two years I slipped into a deep depression. I did not care about much of anything; I let my grades slip and barely managed to graduate high school. I preferred the fictional characters that I found in books to the real life people who I was sure were about to leave me anyway. I barely spoke, and when I did, the tone was angry and resentful. Life did not make sense anymore. However, one day the thought popped in my head that this was not how my grandparents and my brother would want me to be living my life. They would not want me to be a loner who shuts everyone out.

I slowly came out of my shell again, embracing new friendships and relationships. Devan and I have become inseparable over the years. Sometimes people think that we are mother and daughter, which outrages me because that would mean I had given birth to her at eleven years old. We are best friends and sometimes it feels like we are the only ones there for each other.

After the deaths of our brother and grandparents, our mom developed severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although a lot of time has passed since the deaths, our mom still cannot cope with the emotional stress which resulted from experiencing such a trauma, and she has become reclusive and angry. Sometimes I think that a piece of her died with my brother. She will never be whole and complete again, which leaves me and Devan to pick up the pieces. This can be extremely stressful and challenging in and of itself.

I am still not entirely sold on the concept of “God does not give us more than we can handle.” I cannot understand how, if that statement is true, so many challenging experiences still seem to present themselves; after all, everyone has a breaking point. My mom has reached hers. She can no longer carry out “normal” every day functioning. The simplest decision now creates an anxiety-ridden frenzy. I have coped fairly well with these early experiences of death, but it has taken me a long time to do so. However, while I’m not home bound and reclusive like my mother is, I have developed trust issues with people. I am still terrified of people leaving me, so I keep myself slightly guarded, never fully allowing someone to know me until I have reached a point where I am sure they are not going anywhere. I envy Devan. I feel bad that she never had the opportunity to know our brother or grandmother but I am thankful that she never had to experience what it was like to lose them. I know that if someone else close to me were to die, I would be able to cope with it in the sense of maintaining my daily life activities such as work and school, but my spirit would be broken. I would become a

ghost of my former self; here but not quite at the same time.

History is plagued with violence, death, and despair. Did the Native Americans believe that God was not giving them more than they could handle when the Europeans invaded "The New World" and took over their land? As their friends and family lie beside them dying from wounds created by weapons they had never seen before, could they possibly have been thinking, "It is okay, we can handle this," or was it more like "what have we done for God to punish us in this manner?" I believe it was the latter rather than the former.

Currently women in non-industrialized countries are frequent victims of sex trafficking, rape, honor killings, and forced prostitution. As these things are happening to women, could they possibly be thinking, "It is okay, I can handle this," or is it more like "why is this happening to me?" Again, I believe the answer is the latter. In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and many people lost their homes and way of life, it can also be assumed that they were not feeling that God was giving them no more than they could handle. So yes, I do believe that on occasion we are given more than we can handle and that the expectation of how much we can endure is set too high. Perhaps if that bar were lowered there would not be so much despair in so many parts of the world today.
