

Birth of a Princess
by Mark Nibert, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Jerusha McClendon

On a hot June day just after my 42nd birthday, my girlfriend and I were having a get-away weekend at Kings Island Amusement Park just north of Cincinnati, Ohio. We had gone to the park early to have some fun time before the temperature rose too high for old people like us. That afternoon we went back to the hotel in Blue Ash, Ohio to relax and enjoy the pool. In our room while changing into our bathing suits, I gazed upon Linda, my girlfriend, and asked if there was something she wanted to tell me. She said "What?" then turned to the mirror and said. "My God, I look like I'm pregnant."

About a week and a half later, it was confirmed by her doctor and a few self-administered pregnancy tests that she was, indeed, pregnant. The estimate was made that the gestation period was about 28 weeks or so. Yep, she had been pregnant for a while. Though she had been to her doctor for a wellness visit (and diagnosed as diabetic), and she had also been to her OB-GYN for a routine check-up, neither doctor had mentioned anything about her being pregnant. Linda had been feeling funny, so she went for another wellness visit to her doctor and was told that what she was feeling were the side effects of the diabetic medications that she was taking. So we thought, "OK." She had been losing weight since being on this prescription, so we never gave it another thought, until that moment in the hotel room. At that moment I was thinking, "Wow, Ted, our son, is almost 21 years old, we would have the house to ourselves, all the free time for us just on the horizon, and now Linda is pregnant." We are going to be starting all over, again.

On July 7th, 2003, my girlfriend, Linda, Ted, our son and I went out for dinner just up the street from our condo. We were at O'Charlies on Cleveland Avenue south of I-270. Linda hadn't been feeling well that day, so when I got home from work, we decided to not cook but go out. We had just ordered our beverages and an appetizer when Linda grimaced, and I looked at her questionably. She informed me that she had been having these cramps for a little while and attributed them to being hunger pains. I guess she hadn't felt like eating most of the day, but absentmindedly I glanced at my watch. Each time Linda jerked with a spasm or took in a sharp breath, I would look at my watch. Not once did I say anything until I told her we had to leave and get to the hospital. I told her that she wasn't experiencing hunger pain but was having contractions, and the baby was coming. We left, and our son stayed behind with my credit card to pay for our meal and get it to go. Linda was worried that we hadn't eaten dinner and that it would be cold by the time we got home from the hospital.

We arrived at Riverside Hospital on Olentangy River Road around 6:30 in the evening. While Linda was being admitted she was continually telling everyone that she wasn't in labor because the baby wasn't due for another 3 weeks. Needless to say, she was examined and then taken straight to a birthing suite. I had been giving the times between her contractions to the nurse. I was told to leave the room because they were going to give Linda an epidural. When I got to the lobby our son was already there and told me he had been calling everyone and letting them know that his mom was in the hospital having the baby. It was not long before the head nurse came to me and gave me instructions of what I needed to do before I would be allowed back into the room Linda was in. I had to scrub my hands, put covers over my shoes, and wear a gown, the sort of gown you see in movies where the back is never closed, a surgical hat to cover my balding head, and latex gloves. The nurse stood there watching as I completed each of these

tasks, as though it would spell disaster should I not follow her directions to the letter. By the time I finished, I felt as though I was going to be the person delivering this baby.

I walked into the birthing suite, and there was medical staff everywhere I looked. It was nothing like what is portrayed in the movies or on television where you see only a doctor and a nurse or the midwife and a young girl boiling towels. I mean there was the gynecologist, the head nurse, anesthesiologist, and several nurse's aides. All of these people were busy. They resembled busy little bees in a hive. Each with their own task, preparing for any and all circumstances that may appear at any given moment. The doctor came to me and gave me my duty list: to hold Linda's hand and distract her from the task at hand with words of comfort. I began with asking her how she felt, and her reply was "I don't feel anything after that shot." A moment later it started; our baby had turned that quickly and was crowning. Linda had not dilated enough, and the baby wasn't waiting. Instantaneously it was decided that the baby would be delivered caesarian. To my surprise one of the aides who was too short to assist from standing on the floor climbed atop Linda's chest, dug her hands inside her and turned the baby back around, then with a strong heave, pulled the baby out into the cold world. The baby made not a sound, not a whimper, but looked all over with eyes wide and full of wonderment. Right away I noticed her cheeks, and she had the chubbiest cheeks of any baby I had ever seen. Linda did not say anything. She was just staring at me. Since we had already decided on names, I only said to Linda, "Let me introduce to you, Miss Sara Elaine Nibert, born July 7th, 2003, at 11:15 pm."

Now it has been just over ten years since this Princess came into this world, and it hasn't been easy for Linda and I. We found out soon after Sara was born that she had Down Syndrome. On top of that she was afflicted with a heart disease called Atrioventricular canal defect and needed surgery in order to survive. At 4 months of age Sara had her heart cut open by one of the foremost infant heart surgeons. To our joy and the surgeon's skill we have a very happy Princess. Sara is in the 4th grade, loves school and just this summer played softball on the Miracle Leagues team The Dodgers. She hit 2 grand slams and has been invited to play in the All Star game. She is very proud of her trophy as we all are, and having a pacemaker has not slowed her down one bit. I think to myself that I'm not starting over again with a baby at 42, not really. I started a whole new life that late night in July, a wonderful life.

My Expectations
by Carmen Brennan, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Virginia Duym

My grandma, mother and I represent three generations of my family, but we have very different views of the role of women in society. Their expectations and mine are very different when it comes to child rising. Especially when I moved to a bigger city, I could tell the different ways of living. That's when I found out that women could do more than just house work and raising their children.

When I was a kid, I stayed with my grandparents since my mom had to work. They lived in a small city in Mexico and it only had school up to the eighth grades. Most people in this particular city thought that girls didn't have to go to school past the eighth grade because they were going to get married and their husband was going to take care of them anyway. Growing up with my grandparents was great. The only problem was that people their age, especially women, thought that girls didn't have to go to school after finishing middle school. As a result, my grandma didn't let me do homework at home. She always said that school was for learning and home was for learning how to cook and take care of everything else that needed to done. As a result, when I didn't have school, I washed clothes, mopped the floors, dusted and watched my grandma cook. My grandma didn't expect me to get A's or B's. I don't recall her getting mad the first time I got a C and a D. She just signed my report card and that was it.

When I was twelve, my mother decided to move to Mexico City. She worked for a doctor and his wife as their cook. The doctor had a great offer to go work in a big hospital in Mexico City, so they decided to move. They asked my mom if she would move with them, and they would find her an apartment. They would pay her more, plus I could move with her. "This would help your daughter get more of an education," they said. My mom had mentioned to them that she was hoping I would go to school past just middle school.

I didn't like or dislike school; my problem was that since I wasn't able to do homework at home, I knew I was behind in most of my classes. I was afraid of going to school and of the other kids making fun of me if I didn't know the answers. However, living in a big city helped me see that people thought differently. Most of my new friends wanted to go to school and get at least a two year degree, but some couldn't afford it; so after they finished high school, they started working. I always saw that families who lived better were the ones that had both a husband and a wife working. This helped me realized that I needed to go back to a technical school and graduate as a Medical assistant.

Now that I have children, my expectations with them are almost the opposite of my grandma's. I check their report cards every quarter and keep checking on their homework. They normally don't forget homework unless I'm really busy and I forget to check online. Sometimes, kids seem to "forget" they have homework. It helps that teachers put homework online now for parents to see. My children have some chores, but not enough, for sure. I do talk to them and tell them that the reason I don't make them do a lot of things around the house during school months is because I want them to do great in school. So, I expect them to do great; if their grades go

down, they will have consequences. Consequences such as taking away like their games or TV privileges until their grades go up. But during the summer, if they want to go places, they have to help more as well as learn to do things around the house. So, when they move out on their own, they will know how to do things. I talk to them about how their lives can change if they have a career. Also, I tell them the difference between going to college right after high school and waiting until they're older and get married to go back to school. I use my experience as an example. For me, it is harder because I don't remember a lot of things. It's tougher to juggle between college and home life because I have other things to take care of, like paying the house bills on time, making doctor's appointments, and going grocery shopping. All of these things take time, and I need more time to study than a younger person that has just finished high school.

Now that I'm a mother, my expectations with my children are very different from when I was a kid. Now, I think education is important for both men and women. My children know that in order to live better, they need to study a career in college and obtain a good job. Also, they must learn others things that are necessary for everyday life like cooking, cleaning, taking care of their house, and paying their bills. I tell them that their lives will be easier if they can get a good job that pays better than minimum wage.

What Kids Taught Me
by Mackenzie Wilson, Ohio State University – Marion
Instructor: Ellen Seusy



When I was little, everyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, assuming I was thinking about being an astronaut, a lawyer, a doctor, etc. Each of these “typical” answers are one an adult expects a child to say when asked; none of those related to me or spoke to me in any way. I was too claustrophobic to be an astronaut, too gullible to be a lawyer, and too uncomfortable with lots of blood; none of those seemed right, and so when they asked what I wanted to be when I got older, I just said “I’m not sure.”

When I was in sixth grade at Granby Elementary School, we were given the option to experience jobs as if we were adults. Each of us got to pick a job, had an interview for that job and then went to a fake town (held in a warehouse). We basically played adult for a day. The job I chose was a DJ for a radio station. At the time, this seemed perfect because of my obsession with music. Seeing as I was only in the sixth grade that was the best I could come up with. The next three years had given me the chance to grow up and the question of “What do you want to be when you grow up?” was gaining on me for a serious answer. At this time, I still had no idea what I wanted to be and even being a DJ did not seem like an option. I felt that I should have had an idea of where I was going to be in four years, but nothing was coming to me. My older siblings told me that high school would give me some ideas for what I would like to be, which only made me more nervous for high school. My parents told me not to worry because high school was right around the corner, but with high school came a lot of responsibilities and changes, some of which I did not think I was prepared for.

My sophomore year of high school I was asked to take up, with what I thought was a crazy idea at the time, an option to become a sixth grade camp counselor with my former elementary school. My initial reaction to my former sixth grade teacher calling me and asking about my opinion for this opportunity was *who would want to babysit a bunch of kids for three full days?* Don’t get me wrong; I loved kids. I just never wanted to spend three days and two nights being in charge of ten girls or more and their actions being a reflection on me. As a sophomore, this seemed like way too much responsibility, and in all honesty I was lazy as can be at the time. The only reason I agreed to go was because my younger sister was a sixth grader at the time, and she really wanted me to go. After I accepted, I realized that I had more responsibilities than I thought I could handle and that scared me. It was not that I had never babysat; after all, I am one of seven kids with a younger brother and sister, so I knew what to do. It was just scary to be in charge of someone else’s kids, let alone for a few days.

Departure day for camp came quicker than I expected and I was more nervous than ever. Who would have thought that ten little girls could make me nervous, but when the teacher introduced me to the girls I figured it was too late to back out now.

“Girls, this is Mackenzie. She is Jordyn’s older sister and will be one of your camp counselors for the next few days.”

“Hi Kenzie!” said the girls with complete excitement; this made me feel a little bit better. If they were excited about camp, then why shouldn’t I be?

Arriving at Heartland Retreat and Camp shed a new light on beauty. The open land, the prettiest buildings and churches, and the large camp fire site all had me freaking out with

excitement; it was as if I was a sixth grader at camp again. Although this was not a vacation and was probably going to be very stressful, it just looked like pure fun too. The sun was high in the sky and shining down on us as we retrieved our luggage from the bus. All of the kids were screaming with excitement and joy, "We are finally here"! As some of the girls were shouting, this had me gaining more excitement too. The excitement filled the light brisk air and as the excitement filled, so did my anxiety. Of the ten girls, my ten girls for three days as a matter of fact, there was one fifteen year old girl and nine eleven year olds. This was going to be one of the biggest projects I had ever faced in my life time; I was quite overwhelmed.

Just as each girl grabbed their things and raced to the cabin, I could feel the pressure piling on. As we were directed to the cabins to get our beds and selves situated, each counselor was told to have an ice-breaker ready for their kids. I really did not have one because I just didn't know what to do. It helped that I knew a few girls already just from being a high school basketball player and hosting camps and such. Oh and I guess that since my little sister was in their grade that probably helped out quite a bit. Those few minutes we had before we had to be at the meeting hall were actually not as bad as I was expecting.

The girls just sat on the floor or on a bed and stared at me with a wondering gaze. We all just sat and talked and got to know each other a little better before we spent the next few days crammed all together in one room. I even mentioned my days in elementary school, most of it being how rebellious and crazy I was, which seemed to get most of their attentions. I told them about my trip to sixth grade camp where I went about sneaking out of my cabin and sneaking into my friend's; I made sure to ensure them that I got in a lot of trouble and was almost sent home (which was actually a fib because I never got caught). After I told them about me, I asked them to tell me about themselves. I learned that quite a few girls in the cabin played basketball, like my sister, and were even planning on trying out for the middle school team when they got to seventh grade, which reassured me that these girls were really not too different from me. Some of the other girls were talking about how much they loved to draw and how much they disliked their art teacher. I just laughed, knowing how much I did not like that teacher either; although, I was not going to admit that. This was just day one, but it already felt like it was going really well.

When we reached the meeting hall, we were separated from our kids and met up with our boss, who was the head of the camp for the next few days; we were then filled in on what we needed to know about each of the girls. Some girls had problems that were to remain a secret in order to avoid embarrassment among the other kids including having diabetes, wetting the bed, being scared of the dark, etc. Each kid had a different problem that we had to face without other kids knowing, which is actually much harder to deal with than it may seem. For a bed-wetter, there was a specific procedure: the girl would tell you about it the morning of the accident and then we had to fold up the sheet in a triangle and place at the bottom of bed without anyone else seeing and then had to find and report the accident to the nurse, in which they would wash and make the bed while we were out for the day. Most of the girls already knew what to do but they had to learn to trust us first in order for them to be able to speak to us about it.

As the week carried on, challenges faced were overcome, give or take a few casualties. The best example of one of the activities being a complete and utter disaster was during the survival task held on the last day. Each cabin was given a task to make a shelter that fit everyone in their cabin inside and to build a fire all out of the wood found lying around the woods. The

goal of the task was to make the girls work together to solve problems. The counselors were not allowed to participate unless it included helping carry the heavy items or logs, which meant we were also not allowed to give hints on anything; basically, we were just there to supervise.

Just when I thought everything was going well, a young girl named Tanya decided she did not want to be a part of anything that included working with anyone else in our cabin. Tanya had dark brown hair with purple streaks; she wore black pants and a black shirt. I went to grab the matches used to start a fire when I heard her yelling about something; so I immediately ran over and intervened.

“Girls, what is going here?” I asked as calm as possible.

“She refuses to help. She told me I was not worth anything and no help at all,” said young Rachel with a deep sadness.

I could not listen to this bickering that had gone on all week any longer; why would anyone say something like that?

“Tanya, why would you say something like that?” I said quietly.

“I hate all of them! They have done nothing but ruin my year; they’re bitches!” Screamed Tanya.

I was completely taken back by the swearing and ridiculous reaction from this young eleven year old girl. So after she calmed down, I pulled her aside and told her she was not allowed to speak that way and needed to apologize to them, and they would do the same. Each girl came up and apologized one by one; although Tanya did not seem to believe any of them when they were apologizing, it was still worth it. Tanya apologized as well and explained that she was just angry that she was being bossed around and hated this activity. I reassured her that this was not the way to speak to anyone let alone people she was going to be associated with for the next six years. She quickly caught on to the lesson and even smiled a little bit. This felt like a big accomplishment because they listened to me, which outside of this camp I was not really used to.

The last day flew by way faster than I wanted it to. I did not like the idea of not being with these girls anymore. They even told me that they didn’t want to leave quite yet. So, when we were packing up and cleaning the room up, the girls decided it was the perfect time to share what their favorite part of camp was and what I meant to them. It made me really sad to hear what they had to say and how much I actually meant to them.

When the buses were loaded and as we were riding the bus home, the bus was filled with girls singing as loud as possible the crazy, goofy, camp songs that they had learned earlier that week. Counselors and teachers all sang along, and it was probably the best bus ride I had ever had. These girls meant more to me than I could have ever believed.

It was not until about two weeks later that I received the thank you letters from girls. The letters had me crying as the girls poured out their hearts. One girl wrote that I meant more to her than she could imagine, and I was like the big sister she had never had. Even though I come from a large family of seven kids as it is, it felt as though these girls were family to me. So after that incredible trip my sophomore year, I decided to continue to be a counselor for the following two years of high school and created many more sisters to add to my family. These girls are now

fifteen or sixteen years old, but to this day, I receive messages via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. telling me how much they miss me and how they cannot wait until they see me next. I even still run into some of them from time to time, whether it is going to a high school girls' basketball game, or just out on the street; every time I see them, it feels like I am running into some distant relatives and a sense of happiness and joy comes over me.

In just those three years of counseling, these different groups of girls helped me decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life: I wanted to teach...sixth, seventh, or eight grade as a matter of fact; all because of that first camping trip. Each girl gave me a new reason to want to be involved and help change kids' lives. Whether it was showing them new things, playing or hanging out with them, or even just talking to them, changed my life. I loved to watch them grow and learn new things, and while I was doing that, they were unknowingly teaching me how to be the best person or teacher I could be. Those girls changed my life, and they still have no idea what they have done. I would not have changed a second of that first sixth grade camp trip; the ups and downs helped make me a better person. Now, I know what I want from the rest of my life; just after a few days with some crazy 11 year olds and the challenges they gave me to attempt to overcome, I became a new person, an overall better person. Teaching is my passion and the challenges they gave me are what got me there.

Rain or Shine
by Lalese Stamps, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Mary Bailor

She asked me afterwards why I was jumping up and down and smacking my thighs at the start. I wasn't sure, except that my coach had told me to. Besides, after peeling away layer-after-layer of gold and royal blue warm-ups, all of the jumping jacks and squats I did earlier would be irrelevant if I just stood there and let the bitter chill of the rain defeat me. It was the middle of March 2004 in Milwaukee and I was standing outside with a tiny spandex suit on, convincing myself that at least I wasn't the only one. We were all this cold. I was new to this turf and so was my mom, up there in the stands, shivering alongside the rest of the supportive parents on metal benches. I looked around at all the other runners, coaches, and onlookers and I wondered to myself, why was I doing this? Why was my mom doing this? I wasn't sure at that very moment, but I would soon find out.

Our team left Rufus King early to come to this school to perform on a track with faded paint and a cracked surface in twenty degree weather. I was never one to complain about missing my last two classes of the day, but today I would have much preferred staying inside and practicing my Spanish vocabulary in a classroom that was warm and cozy. Tall and stellar on his box, the referee yelled through his loudspeaker, "Ladies, on your mark." Finally, I thought to myself. Kern was a ref who moved very slowly, taking his time to do everything and there was no exception for this race. My heart racing, I stepped into the blocks that I had positioned earlier in order to accelerate at the start. I placed my hands delicately on the polyurethane track over a faded letter 'P,' for Pulaski High School.

The referee was still fiddling with his yellow flag when he called out, "Get set.... Go!" I was off. I was no longer shivering from the frigid rain. I couldn't focus on that anymore. I ran past the 100 meter mark, a few runners still ahead of me off the curve. The cheers from the crowd resonated with me the most. All I could hear was screaming, hooting, hollering, and horns blaring. There wasn't a silent person in the stands. The 200 meter mark was behind me. Every step I took, I was blinded by the floodlights positioned at every ten degree angle of the stadium. I couldn't help but question whether or not the school was using these lights as a means of distraction for their competition. At the 300 meter mark I could see the finish line straight away. A sharp pain in my side originated, but I knew it was only a cramp and I couldn't let that stop me. I kicked it into high gear, sprinting through the finish line without slowing down, digging every spike on the bottom of my shoe into the track. I had completed my first ever race!

I wanted to pass out in lane three, on my back with my limbs spread out in every direction. I didn't care if the next group of runners ran their race over my exhausted body. Thinking rationally though, I opted for a squat on the sidelines with my hands over my head, offering temporary relief. Attempting to catch my breath, I heard a boisterous screech from the speakers above. The results were in. Second place! I could have known where I placed in the race much sooner had I not crossed the finish line with a combination of tears and rain welling in my eyes. My enthusiasm wasn't evident through my roaring gasps for air, but I was thrilled to have placed where I did. I didn't win the race, but I knew I could one day.

I decided from then on that I would practice harder to improve my skills. Considering I didn't always enjoy running, that was an enormous commitment for me. I had a herd of coaches who could help me become the best runner I could be and the thought of that alone was thrilling. I would be more conscious of what I ate, guaranteeing that it was only beneficial to my progress

as a runner. I would welcome the challenges of competition and enjoy them as well. Something came over me on that cold rainy day on the track at Pulaski High School and I liked my new frame of thought.

I went back to the stands and cheered for the rest of my teammates. I even met other runners representing other schools. We talked about running and different ways we train and prepare for meets. It was encouraging to see how enthusiastic they were about running and amazing to see how dedicated they were. The meet was over and we ended with a team huddle. Our entire team swayed back and forth in a large circle, chanting and laughing. I walked with my mom back to the car. “You know, slapping my thighs whilst jumping up and down doesn’t sound like such a bad idea, now that I think about it,” she smirked at me. I smiled back at her, thinking how proud I was going to make her at future track meets. I stared out of the car window as we drove home, pondering how much I would enjoy running after all, rain or shine.

The Safe House from Danger
by Gigi Anderson, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Kathryn Denton

It's three p.m. The dull yellow school bus drops off the little girl and drives off. She was the last one. She walks quickly and carefully down the corner to the tall red and brown apartment complex. *Five minutes.* Once inside, she stops; the old man with no arms or legs is also heading to the elevator with his creepy son. They enter. She hesitates but enters the elevator. *Three minutes.* She presses the broken seven. The lights flicker on and off, as the elevator slowly leads them up. She looks down and fumbles with her thumbs. The creepy man whispers to her, "*I love that outfit on you*" with sly drunken grin. "*That's your school clothes, aren't they?*" She doesn't respond. "*I wish I had a sweet girl like you to hold at night.*" Her small hands start to shake and she bites her lip. Five... Ding... Six... Ding... Seven... The door slides open and she runs to her neighbor's door and takes her key out. She peeks back at the elevator door. As they close, she sees an evil smile creep onto the face of the companion of the man in the wheelchair as he tends to the deformed and foul smelling man. She could sense he was wishing and wanting that he could have her, just like she knows it was him who had taken the other girls who lived in the apartment complex and had mysteriously disappeared. *Five minutes.* She arrives at her apartment door and enters. The apartment smells like mothballs and Chanel No. 5. Next to the door is a black table lined in gold. On the wall above it is a calendar of herself with her father. She smiles. Then she thinks, *how could you?* The smile slips away from her lips. *Three minutes.* The young girl sits down on the brown sofa with books piled around her like a wall, or maybe a fortress, and the T.V. is on to hide the blaring of police sirens and gunshots. She mostly tries to hide the fear that she holds inside and the fact that she is so often left alone. *Three hours and twenty minutes.* This place has seen some happier times but those seem so long ago. Now she sits and reads her books and tries to imagine a happier future.

*When I was seven, I loved time. I actually counted to sixty and remembered the sequence and used it see how long it took me to get to my apartment. I used to call the apartment **the Safe House from Danger.** It was my thing I liked to use to occupy my time. **I was alone three hours and thirty-six minutes every day.** That seems like nothing now, but back then... it felt like an eternity. Ha ha. I never thought about it before but that apartment has seemed to brand me. Even if I wanted to burn the memory of it from my brain, I know I cannot.*

The Safe House from Danger is her official name but I nicknamed her Molly. I lived there for seven and half years. It was a simple place. It had a small kitchen, a living room and two bedrooms. The living room turned into an arena when things turned south. Infidelity liked our home, and it hated the sun. The windows were draped in Arabic pink and white silk sheets to shield the outside world from the showdowns between my mother and father. *I remember her saying, why are you looking at her? Do you know her? What were you doing with her? My father then in return would try to justify his case. I never looked at her. I don't know who she is. I was getting a drink and...* Usually this goes on throughout the night. The shouting was unbearable. I would cover my ears and cry as Mother turned her shouts and blames into uncontrollable weeping. I always looked for alternatives to drown the pain but they were never found. A quiet hush eventually fell over our home. I drifted to sleep. *Twenty-five minutes.* The shouts heightened and the sound of slaps came rumbling again from my mother. She would become so enraged by his deceit that she would hit and push and throw him down. Never once did I see him strike her back. But I always knew that if he was pushed to his limit, he would explode. I guess

that's why I always sat behind the big brown lazy boy with my knees to my chest and waited so I could cover Mama from his blows if and when the explosion came. She was a tough woman but I always knew that when the time came, she would need me to protect her. The drapes would *change* to black and red, often depending on who won the match. *My mother loves the color red.* The bedrooms were just those bedrooms, used for sleeping. Nothing ever happened there. I felt safe in my apartment, for the most part. I know it may seem odd to think of an apartment as a 'she.' But I did. And that seemed to help. She was my friend, I could tell her anything and she would listen, even the horrible stories of the people I saw and the things I heard. But mostly she was my friend.

Remember I told you I called her Molly? I would tell Molly stories about my day. She seemed to like certain stories though, when I saw or heard things I wasn't supposed to. It seemed as if we were sharing or keeping secrets from the world. For a while, she liked the stories about my adventures coming home from school bus. The minute I opened the door, I had to tell her the time. Thirteen minutes. She and I both knew that if I did not arrive by the 20 minute mark... I was in trouble.

He liked me. The man in the wheelchair's silent companion liked me... He thought my long dark pigtails were cute. He thought my green and red plaid skirt was too. Just like the others, I could almost hear him think. His target: easy girls, they were sweet and sassy, obnoxious and loud.

Six p.m.** Eyes covered in his favorite tie, then led to a car to be driven around the block and back. Told not to talk, or the surprise would be ruined. They always giggled with excitement. He would carry them back into the apartment like it was their wedding night, whispering sweet things. The darkened apartment was similar to mine, but oddly cold... The old deformed man sits in his wheelchair, patiently waiting their arrival. The girls were always placed on his lap first. Their eyes would widen and they always would start to plead, "No! No... Please. Let me go!" But the men grip her down tight and yell, shut up! The men smile mischievously at them and slowly unbutton their white tops. **Five hours and thirty minutes.

The bodies were ravished, beaten and used. Chopped up and placed in garbage bags, then thrown away. Mother always told me that life is sweet on earth. But heaven is even sweeter. True happiness will fill your heart, and all the pain and suffering will simply leave you. But Molly and I know it's only a matter of time. He will be after me soon. It was only a matter of time. I could sense it.

Every Monday evening, I would ride my bike out toward the big hill and play with the flowers as the sun sets. It made me feel safe and warm inside. Mother sometimes joined me as well; she said it was therapeutic. But this Monday, she argued with father instead. *Five minutes.* The sky was a swell of color that night. Reds, yellows and oranges painted the sky. The dandelions were a pretty white and for the first time, I found a four-leaf clover. Before I knew it, darkness had arrived and found me still in the field. Unfamiliar footsteps filled the silence around me. I thought I was alone. "Mommy, is that you?" I flip on my flashlight and look around with a smile on my face. "Mommy, are you there?"

"Hey, Sweet Pea." That voice, I know that voice. Confused, I turn and to see him smile down at me. My body begins to shake at the sight. It's the man in the wheelchair's silent companion. He crouches down and whispers into my ear, "I brought you something." He wraps

a green and red plaid tie around my neck. “You like?” He places his rough, patchy hand on my inner thigh. “It matches that pretty skirt of yours, doesn’t it?” He smiles. Disgusted, I spit in his face. I quickly tuck the flashlight under my skirt hidden from his view while he groans and wipes away the phlegm.

“No!” I scream.

He grabs me and covers my eyes and mouth with the tie. He ties my hands with a rope. He snarls, “You stupid girl, you’re gonna regret that.” He throws me inside a bag and runs down the hill, back inside where *he’s* safe. All the while, I scream, kick and shake. But no one can hear me.

Twenty-five minutes. But Molly knows. Molly can hear. She knows I’m in trouble. She knows he has me. Somehow, my friend knows.

Blood. All I saw around me was blood. Blood is on the beds. It’s on the walls. It’s on the floor and on me. I, like the others was tied to the bed by ropes. “For easy access,” they chuckled. I could not cry. My skin was raw from protest. I thought I could fight them. But it was futile. I was unable to beat him at his wicked game. All I could do was cry... and hope. Was anyone looking for me? Molly, can you tell them I am in a dark place and frightened and alone? Mommy, where are you?

Three days and twenty-three hours.

*The girls play and sing sweet tunes as they wait for the new arrival. A bright light shines through the clouds as she emerges. She, like the others, had long dark pigtails and a green and red plaid skirt on. The majestic golden gate opens. “Come my sister,” they say. **Here**, no one will harm you. **Here**, you are safe. Tears fill her eyes. She’s home. Mommy was right. Life is sweet on earth, but heaven is even sweeter. All the pain and suffering **have** left me. I love you, Mommy and I love you, Daddy. But most of all, I love you, Molly, because you were **my friend. Do you miss me?***

AMBER ALERT!

DOB: 8/16/2006 Height: 4’9” Weight: 58 lbs. Eyes: Brown Hair: Black Last Seen: 4/5/2008
Police found another victim of the necktie murderer in the Bronx today. Her name has not been released until any family members have been notified. This is the sixth victim to date. If you have any information about the Necktie Murders... Please call 1-800-POL-ICE3

A Big Dog Party
by Whitney Collins, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Nancy Pine

Every Friday was the same. My mom would pick me up from daycare, and I'd ask to go to my grandparents'. Sadly, coming from a broken home, half of the time I got the straight away answer of "No, it's your dad's weekend." Other times I got a no because Mom already had plans with me, or my grandparents were out of town. But sometimes, if I crossed my fingers hard enough and stuck my lower lip out enough to make a shadow, I would get that ever-so-sweet yes.

I loved going to my grandparents' house; it was like going on vacation. I don't know what part I loved the most. Their house had an open floor plan and ceilings that seemed to be five thousand feet tall. It almost felt like I was going into a hotel.

It could have been the basement. My mom and I lived in an apartment, so a basement was like a whole new world to explore. Not to mention it was a finished basement that had the best hiding spots: half a dozen closets, a full wall of shelves, and a hidden room behind the laundry room.

It could have been the smell of cookies and clean laundry that always filled the house, the two smells that are still my favorites today.

I think what really won me over was the bookshelf. I had a bookshelf at my mom's, but the one at my grandparents' had a whole new collection of books for me to pick through. There was a collection of books from my mom and uncle's childhood that my grandparents had held onto, some that had been brought over from my ever growing collection at my mom's, and ones that my grandma had picked up on a recent trip to the mall. Some of my favorite books rested at my grandparents'; they might have just been my favorites because they were at my grandparents' house.

I had such a vast collection, but it was the same five books every time: *The Little Engine That Could*, *Danny the Dinosaur*, *Scruffy the Tug Boat*, *Lyle Lyle Crocodile* and my favorite, *Go Dog Go*. There were dozens of others on the shelf, but those were the ones I always wiggled out.

When bedtime would come around, I'd wrap my little arms around all five of the books and wobble over to what seemed like the biggest bed in the world. Maybe getting to sleep in a queen sized bed, rather than my twin sized bed at home, was another reason I loved my grandparents so much.

As soon as I crawled into bed, my grandma would tuck me in with my raccoon stuffed animal, and my grandpa would sit in the rocking chair next to my bed and read through all my favorites. My grandpa was a tall man, topping out at six foot. I was lucky if I was four feet tall, so my grandpa seemed like the tallest man in the world. He would sit down, clear his throat, and begin taking me to a new world in the best voice that I'd ever heard. Deep and powerful, yet soft and soothing all at the same time.

I would always fight though the first four to make it to my favorite, *Go Dog Go*. I must have made that poor man read me that book four or five times each night, and the dog party part a dozen more. I would always manage to wiggle out of the cocoon my grandmother had tucked me into and make him break down every word, syllable and letter.

Every time I spent the night, it was the same routine. I'm sure it annoyed my grandpa, but he never showed it. Patiently sitting with me every time as I stumbled though the tongue twisters and rhymes that composed the Dr. Seuss masterpiece. He worked me through each word on each

page and could still recite the dog party page. Reading it to me over and over and over again, as I absorbed every word about the dogs, and their hats, and their car racing and their extravagant tree party.

Eventually, I started to pick up words and phrases. It started as me just reading a few words here and there, then a page or two, followed by alternating pages, until I finally read the book to my grandpa. I don't know how much of it was me really reading it, and how much of it was me memorizing it after hearing it seven dozen times, but I had never felt so much pride in my life. I felt like the adult, and I wanted to read more and more and more.

I must have read *Go Dog Go* to my mom, grandma and grandpa ten times in a row that weekend, but I just couldn't help it. I would have gone out in the street and read it to every person who passed. I could finally read. I wanted the world to know. I, Whitney Collins, was the greatest five year old in the world. I could read, and I was ready to conquer the world.

The Opening
by Tamera Grubbs, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Kathryn Denton

An educator is someone who encourages people to explore things that are unknown to them. An educator plants the seeds that grow into questions, wonder and awe. They offer the keys to unlocking a thousand doors. They supply the tools for expression, freeing the thoughts, feelings, emotions and passions of each student. **Awareness** brings **curiosity**, **curiosity** brings a **life** well lived!

When I was in my mid-twenties and at the local grocery store, I bumped into my fourth grade teacher. I was happy to see her, as she had always been a favorite of mine. We stood in the aisle chatting with small talk, and then she invited me to spend a day with her in her classroom. I welcomed the opportunity to spend the day with her. This would give me a chance to relive a simpler time in my life. I was not prepared for the deep emotional stirring this experience would have.

The public education system had changed significantly in the fourteen years since I had left her classroom. The buildings had changed and so had teaching styles. I arrived at a one story long brick building with lots of windows. The area around the building was well groomed. This building could be used as many things. The signs showing its purpose were the asphalt, the playground equipment, and the surrounding tall chain-linked fence. The outside appearance of this building was bland. It held nothing that made you want to stop or to enter. The double glass doors opened outward as I entered. There before me were halls like tunnels. They were not narrow but restricted. Restricted as the teaching style had become. Teachers were evaluated by the grades their students got on standardized testing. Students' work covered the walls of the halls, showing everyone what they had been busy doing. The length of the halls had a staggered pattern of wooden doors on the left and right. The floor of a pale monotonous linoleum gleamed with the reflection of fluorescent lighting. The smells and noises of school seemed not to have changed at all.

When I first arrived, I stopped into the school office to sign-in and ask where I might find Miss Murray. I just think of her name, and I smile. She was unique, quirky, intelligent, funny, strong-minded, and physically fit (before it was the "in"thing). She was of average height, but that was the only average thing about her! She was middle-aged but wise beyond her years. A child could look into her expressive face and instantly see joy, wonder, or disappointment. She was not into fashion, she was not typically attractive, and her hair was kept short. A thing like taking time to do hair was a waste of time! There was a big wonderful world waiting to be explored! She loved the outdoors and would spend time each summer in a remote area of Canada. I loved her stories about her summer adventures. She knew about art, literature, music, current events, math, geography, other cultures and the sciences as well. This woman loved LEARNING! Her enthusiasm for LEARNING was contagious because it was her PASSION!

I glanced into the classrooms that I passed as I made my way down those now unfamiliar halls. The classrooms all looked the same, neat rows of chairs, teacher's desk in a front corner. The things that I noticed the most were the walls! Every inch was covered with some notation, poster, or banner. There were quotes, vowels, grammar rules, math, science, and

book titles everywhere! The wall space was so busy, so distracting! How could children learn in here? Finally I found her classroom.

Her classroom here looked much like the others. I looked for her special projects. I saw none. She greeted me with a smile and stopped at once what she was doing. "Tami, come in!" she said. "Class, this is one of my former pupils who is going to spend the day with us!" I remembered a time when I was the child in the seat and former students would show up just because. I now knew why they showed up. She had touched us deeply. She had given us a gift. I wondered: was I there to feel that again and to thank her for it?

This day I was back in fourth grade, but fourth grade had changed. She took attendance, and we were off and running. She helped the children to be aware of their surroundings by having them help her with the day, month, and year. There was no time to chat about how she was, how they were, or did anything happen last night that they wanted to share. We rushed into reading. I noticed she was hurried and was telling the children, "Come on now, we have to work! We have so much to cover before lunch!" Soon we were onto another subject, as children squirmed in their seats. I noticed so many children going in and out that morning.

At our lunch break I mentioned to her that she seemed to have changed how she taught. She said, "Yes, now teachers have very strict guidelines to follow. I am only allowed so many minutes for each subject. There are now date deadlines to be met for the material that is taught."

I asked her, "Why were there so many children coming and going while you were teaching?"

She said, "Well, some have to take medications, others go out for tutoring, so many reasons. It is like this all day!"

Concerned, I asked, "Doesn't this coming and going distract you and the children?"

She replied with a sad countenance, "We get used to it, but it is distracting. Things have changed, and soon I will be retiring." The rest of the day came and went. There were more subjects, recesses, and special classes for art. During the times that she was not with the children she was so busy. There were so many things missing that day that were present back when I was the pupil!

Let me take you back to 1974-1975 in the same grade. We are in a different building but with the same teacher. She is still teaching fourth grade. The building is on a very big lot. There is the familiar asphalt, playground equipment, and the tall chain-linked fence. The building is large, stately and old. It was built in the early 1900's. It was state of the art back then. The exterior is made of stone, probably hewn out of local stone quarries. The building is a high two storied building; the windows are many and long. There is a sidewalk going to the multiple cement stairs that lead to the entrance of this building. This building has a presence, it announces that its purpose is important. This building is a place where great expectations are housed.

The interior of this sixty plus year old building is well maintained but showing some age. The metal banisters on the stairs have some chips deep into the paint. The high ceilings show a watermark here or there. The basement is dark and dingy. If one goes up the stairs he/she enters into a large open area with a stage, and the classrooms are on the perimeter of this area. They are spread out, and noises from one classroom do not carry to another. If one goes down the stairs at the entry, he/she will go down to the basement. The basement is where the library is located, as well as some very small classrooms for art, music, and also our cafeteria is down there. The stairs that ascend from the first floor go to the second level, which is laid out the same as the first floor. The large open area on this second floor would be used as a gymnasium. The classrooms

are large, and each one has a wall with windows. There are a few things on the walls, but the walls are not saturated as they were in the newer classroom. The desks are in neat rows and the teacher's desk is in the front. There is a large area of a front wall, perhaps even a side wall covered with a blackboard. Each classroom looks a little different but much the same as the others. The difference in this building is we are not crowded together, and the rooms are calm. I do not find them as distracting as the rooms in the newer building.

Now I want to tell you about Miss Murray back in those years. My earlier description of her still fits, the only difference is that she is not hurrying about. She is not feeling pushed to meet date deadlines, or to teach to a test. She teaches at this time so people will learn to think. We will learn to problem solve, to explore things, to question and to develop interests. We will learn to get along, to have tolerance, learn manners and social customs as well. She greets us each at the front door of her room. She helps us with our coats and things. She notices a new dress or new shirt. She asks how your family is. We spend a few minutes after announcements chatting as a class, and she tells us about her evening and asks about ours. She asks if our homework is done! She takes attendance, and we begin our day. We actually do math at the blackboard, and some people even get problems wrong. That is okay, no one laughs. We have been taught to help and support one another. The same could be said of spelling. There is deskwork and quiet time, but we also do group work. You as the student may or may not be able to pick your group. Desks will slide all over the room. We are children, and she knows we have to move. There are even times when she says, "Stand up children, let's get our wiggles out!" We stand, bend, twist and wiggle for a minute or so and then take our seats. The idea being we must be tolerant of everyone and supportive of our classmates. It is a seldom occasion for her to have a discipline problem or to have to send someone to the office. We have recesses, and when we come in she will tell us a story as we settle down. The story she reads could be from a chapter book that she is currently reading to us such as: Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson or Pippi Longstocking by Astrid Lindgren. She has learned to use her voice as a tool. She reads in different tones for each speaking character, loud in some areas, soft in others. We are captivated by her storytelling, as she takes us with her on a journey. The day would almost be over, but there was a reason to work hard! She loved art and would give us time at the end of the day to work on SPECIAL projects. She would gently remind us that if we would work hard and focus, we could have FUN before going home. I remember that most days we made that GOAL. Yes, she taught us to set GOALS. The special projects were always something that tied to a famous artist. We would work, and she would tell us about the artist and the medium. She would even say, "Someday I might see your work in a museum!"

Well, THANK YOU! Miss Murray, many years have passed, but I am still OPEN to LEARNING! I remember the time you took for each of us. I remember the places you told us about like the Canadian wilderness. I have not seen it yet, but I plan to. I remember that books OPEN another world to me. I remember that music OPENS my soul. I remember to make time to go to art museums and take time to really LOOK! YOU were my first EDUCATOR, and my debt is great!

Not a Care in the World
by Denise Seman, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Kathryn Denton

It was a cold crisp day on Tuesday in the middle of a January winter. I was in my kitchen washing dishes and preparing dinner for that evening; it was baked salmon, kale greens, and white rice to be exact. I normally don't start preparing dinner until late in the evenings on Tuesdays and Thursdays, due to my boys' indoor track practice every Tuesday and Thursday evening. However, my boys did not have track practice this particular evening, so I decided to have dinner early.

DeShaun, who is eleven years old, is very athletic and loves, loves, loves football. His personality is so mellow and witty; if I'm having a bad day I can count on him to get me smiling again. Tracy Ethan, my ten year old, he's such a charm. Intelligent but short for his age at 48 inches, he has big puppy eyes that hide behind his magnified eyeglasses and an enormous smile that will melt your heart.

It was about four thirty that Tuesday evening, and the boys were in the foyer standing between the hall stairs and the front door. I was in the kitchen at the sink washing dishes, looking out at the dull sky; it was as if the sky was howling for some attention from the sun, like a wolf howls at the moon. While I was staring out the window I began to hear a song I hadn't heard in years. Not since I was a little girl, a carefree little girl. This was the first time I had heard this song in at least eleven years.

For the longest time I couldn't think of the name of the song until it hit me, like a breath of fresh air. "***Shame, Shame, Shame***" was the title of the song. This song was being sung by my boys, and at that very moment, my heart skipped a beat. They were singing something I had sung when I was a child. I closed my eyes and listened, and then I started daydreaming. Remembering when my twin sister, Diann, my cousin, Taniqua, and I would be playing in the front yard of our apartment complex, singing this song and clapping our hands to the beat of the words. The apartments sat right on the corner of Joyce and Maynard Avenue. Our address was *2060 Joyce Ave. Apt. B*. Four units of those apartments created our subdivision; we were the only children living there. Behind our apartments stood more apartments that housed more people, and there was a bunch of kids who lived in those apartments. It wasn't a good place to stay, because drug traffic there was high. Just across the road from our apartments stood Duxberry Park ARTS IMPACT, Diann's and my elementary school. Oh! How, I love that school. Diann and I went there from kindergarten to fifth grade. They were rated in the top ten best schools in America in *Redbook Magazine* in 1993. Also, the school had Columbus Public Schools' best playground. I learned a lot from that school because everything was taught to us in the form of art. I would say Duxberry Park ARTS IMPACT was the "*foundation to my house.*"

My six year old nephew now goes to Duxberry Park; I was so pleased to hear he would be starting kindergarten there.

Those days of my youth were flooding back on me with the sound of the song my boys were singing. We would have to take turns since only two could play at a time. Most of the time it would be Taniqua and I, for Diann was extremely uncoordinated. Taniqua lived right up the alley from our apartments, a block over in a three story white house that sat on the corner of the alley. I could never understand why she would want to come to our two bedroom apartment

when she had a really big house and didn't have to share it with anyone. She had two bedrooms and a play room. My sister and I had to share a bedroom, so I would just imagine what I could do with all those rooms Taniqua had. She was an only child (she had two older brothers but they were already out of the house), so I guess she spent most of her childhood with us because she was lonely. Or, it could be we had a balcony connected to our bedroom of our apartment, and therefore we would spend a lot of time on the balcony.

DeShaun and Tracy were singing the song from my youth, and I had shut my eyes to drift away back in time to balmy summer days of my youth. I left them at home but took them with me back to my childhood at the same time. I know that sounds weird, but I did. Their sweet high pitched voices were with me in my memory. We were in the front yard of my apartment standing there in the green grass breathing in that summer air. I was playing with Diann now, and the boys were singing with us; they looked on as we clapped to the beat of the song.

At that very moment I did not have a care in the world. I was not a housewife with two boys; I did not have the responsibilities. I was not washing dishes or cooking dinner for that matter, and I wasn't even a college student. I was a child playing with my sister and cousin on a sunny summer afternoon. The best part, I had my boys with me at that moment singing "*Shame, Shame, Shame*" while clapping our hands to the words:

*Shame, shame, shame,
I don't wanna go to Mexico
No more, more, more.
There's a big fat policemen at my
Door, door, door.
He grabs me by my collar,
Made me pay a dollar.
I don't wanna go to Mexico
No more, more, more.
It's a Shame!*

I didn't hear the boys singing anymore, so I slowly opened my eyes. I was back in my kitchen with a grin on my face. DeShaun came running into the kitchen, Tracy trailing behind him yelling, "We want to show you our handshake!" I turned around away from the kitchen sink toward the counter. They had no idea I knew this song they had been singing and I too! used to sing it when I was a child.

"Mom, we gotta show you our new handshake," DeShaun said.

"It's called *lemonade*," said Tracy. I guess that's their twist to the song, calling it *lemonade*, or this could be Tracy, being Tracy; he likes to feel in charge at times.

"Okay," I replied.

They went on to sing the song while clapping to the words. I joined in toward the end of the song. They both looked at me with these astonished looks on their faces, as if I was not allowed to know this song. I quickly asked them who had taught them that song. They both replied that they had known this song for a long time. So then I asked who had showed them that song a long time ago. DeShaun said, "Airianna did."

“Airianna is my niece,” I said. “Oh, well who taught her?”

DeShaun said, “Her mom.”

“Ummm,” I said.

I finished my evening by teaching Tracy the correct way of clapping his hands to the rhythm of the words, He’s a little uncoordinated, a lot like his aunt, but all the while I had this smile on my face. Someday my boys will have children, and their children will do or say things they used to do or say as children. Who will take them back to that moment when they were children, and they too can have a *not a care in the world moment*.

Literacy Narrative
by Jaynathan Kennedy, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Virginia Duym

As a child, I lived with my family in a larger than average apartment on the third floor of an old worn out complex. Its square structure housed hundreds of families in close-quartered, one bedroom apartments. The sidewalks were riddled with cracks; the rusty color of the bricks seemed to become dimmer and faded at the slightest brush of air or the lightest drizzle of rain. In the back, a green metal stairway laid across the building, combining all three stories. Its cheap paint splintered and cracked, and the old green tint was barely noticeable as rust consumed the structure. I can remember everyone always used the fire escape to enter and exit the building. At the bottom of the stairs a large parking lot filled with vehicles sat just feet in front of it. The building was in the middle of the Greenbrier in Columbus, Ohio. This was, of course, at the time one of the most dangerous places in Columbus. The Columbus airport lay just across the highway. At night the sound of jets taking off would roar through the apartments and echo throughout the hallways, rattling fences and scaring the alley cats. The sounds of gunshots rang out almost every night. The low boom stretched miles in every direction. I would sit in my room that I shared with my two brothers and try to listen for the direction they would come from. We would play a game to see who could point to the direction where the sound first came. All three of us sat on the bed, in front of the open window, while waiting for the next boom to come and for the game to restart.

As three young brothers, we did everything together most of our childhood; we were like The Three Amigos. We attended Broadleigh Elementary school just two blocks from our apartment. Being a public school in the middle of one of the worst neighborhoods in Ohio, the Broadleigh's expectations of its students were minimal. Students weren't always taught correctly. The failing academic system contributed to the gangs and violence, as teachers labored in fear of violence, so the expectation of the students to learn wasn't always the primary goal of the school. Therefore, students would fail to learn even basic academic information needed for a normal life. The proficiency test scores for this school were at an all time low, and one of the worst in the state. Every year, the poorly educated students would struggle to pass the state elected test. It didn't matter though; no one expected much of anyone. We lived with our mother Angela and our soon-to-be stepdad Nate. As young parents, Angela and Nate wanted better for us. They wanted us to grow up in a normal neighborhood and go to normal schools that were not filled with gangs and fights. They made a plan to get out of this place. So that's exactly what they did.

In 2001, five years later, my family rented a large moving truck, stuffed all of our belongings in it, and headed for Worthington, Ohio. We moved into a duplex right next to what would be my new school for the next three years, Liberty Elementary. It was a highly awarded public school in the Worthington school district that sought to properly educate its students. Students were closely monitored by caring teachers every day. The environment of the school was a complete cultural switch for my brothers and me. We acted differently than other kids in our classes because we had moved from a very low income school district to a higher income school district. We felt the rise in expectations as soon as we walked in the door. Students were expected to behave and become educated, and, unlike our old school, most of the students there did just that. As young kids having to face real expectations for the first time, we began to shape our lives into who we are today.

I was joining the third grade when we moved. My teachers were Mr. Biscoe and Mrs. Dale, who was also my brother's teacher for the third grade. Her class was just across the hall, with the name "Mrs. Dale" in bold letters imprinted on her door. Mr. Biscoe was a forty-one years old sports fanatic who lived in Columbus with his wife and his daughter. His light brown hair piled atop his head was beginning to turn gray. It would flop around as he pranced across the chalkboard, covering it with simple math equations. The white powder of chalk covered his hands daily. He taught math to the third graders, while Mrs. Dale specialized in reading and writing. Mrs. Dale was a short old woman who lived with her husband and golden retriever. She was always very soft spoken to her students. Her amount of patience and endurance was remarkable as she made sure her students would be the best in the district. Every year she would prepare her students months in advance for the state elected test, which they would take every year. The school district used a reading program that implemented a system in which books were rated by reading level and points after an individualized computer test, given upon completion of each book. This point system was displayed by a chart that she kept on her wall; a point scale laddered from bottom to top with magnets containing each student's name on its own was scattered across the board. The harder a book's reading level, the more points a student received for passing the book's test. As a new student, my name was at the bottom of the list and separated far from those of the other students who were able to accumulate points in past years at Liberty.

When it came time for me to begin reading, I was of course stubborn to adapt to the process. I would barely read, and began to fail reading and writing. All it took was for Mrs. Dale to schedule a conference with my mother; I was in trouble and scolded by my parents and by my teachers for my performance. I desired to change.

The first book I read was *The Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborne. From the start of the series, my reading began to improve. Likewise, I began to read more often and for longer periods of time each night while becoming engrossed in the stories. It was shortly after that I realized how much I liked fictional books. After each book I would ace the computer test, adding more and more points to my account. About a week before the state test I reached the top of the points board, and my reading level had risen from a first grade reading level to an eighth grade level. My parents were unable to explain the major leap I had taken from Greenbrier to Worthington. Furthermore, my teachers used me as an example to the rest of the class, saying things like, "Look class. Jay read an entire *Magic Tree House* book in one period." I became delighted by the attention; I liked being the example for other students, so I sought to become first in my reading class in all categories. And that is exactly what I did.

On the day of the state test I woke up early to eat a full breakfast and read more of my books. I passed the test with an excellent rating, which was highest in the class. It was a day of celebration for my parents too; they saw the smart young boy that I was becoming.

I would never have been the person I was today if the expectations of education had not been raised to such a higher standard. If I hadn't moved to Worthington, I probably wouldn't have picked up a book and read it from cover to cover anytime soon. I would have become a product of the environment in Greenbrier, joining gangs and fighting. I would have become the person shooting guns in the middle of the night for some listening children as they fell asleep. I would have become the corrupted version of myself. Expectations are what sets the bar for

everyone. Low expectations will produce poor results, but high expectations will produce amazing results and can even change the life of someone with no expectations.

Pandora's Box
by Kuleni Beyene, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Virginia Duym

Myth can be used to persuade people to establish models for behavior, or to provide a religious experience that brings them closer to the divine. Among the many traditions Ethiopians have, one of them is their strong belief in providing their deity with a sacrifice of some sort, or an elaborate ceremony, when they are requesting God's help for something that's important. But, is it really necessary to slaughter defenseless animals or perform a dramatic act in front of God in hoping to be granted a wish? I believe an extreme belief about these doings could raise disagreements among family, friends, and among community members - or even worse, between two different religions.

In Ethiopian tradition, when women get to 50-60 years of age, all the women in the community gather on New Year's Eve to recognize their end of prime age. In other words, they celebrate when they completely have stopped the ability of reproducing; it's sort of like a rite of passage. It's a three-day ceremony where the women dress in beautiful clothing, and also put on extravagant jewelry. Before they put on the dress and the jewelry, all the women in the community gather up and pray. Then the jewelry gets dipped in olive oil that also has been prayed upon, and gets wrapped up and put away till the day of the ceremony. On New Year's Eve, the women put on the dresses and the jewelry while they sing a song. The song is the calling of God. When they are all done and dressed, all the women leave the room so the individual can pray on her own. "Oh God hear me out, bless my daughters, bless my granddaughters and the generations to come" the woman repeats this prayer several times. When she's done, she takes off the necklace, puts it in a box, and puts it away, not to be touched forever. The jewelry is an offering for God so her wish can be heard and granted.

It has been a whole decade since I have visited my beloved country. Recently I was finally able to return to the country that provided me an unforgettable childhood, and that was full of pure happiness. On the eve of the Ethiopian New Year, my plane landed, after sixteen exhausting hours. Our driver, whom I was actually surprised to see is still working for my grandmother, picked me up. On the way my heart filled with excitement and joy, as if it almost wanted to jump out and get to her house already. We pulled up in front of the residence and all the memories and happiness rushed back like I had never left. There she was, standing at the front door with her arms wide open for me to run in to. The hug felt as if it went on for eternity.

"My sweet Kuleni," said my grandmother.

I opened my eyes, still in her arms hugging her; I snapped back to reality to witness that she was not alone. From behind her shoulders I saw so many women sitting on the couches, some were running around decorating the living room and, and her maids seemed really busy. I am thinking to myself, I am sure these people didn't come for me since I didn't recognize any of them.

"Here, let me get that for you. Come in come in, my child and please excuse the chaos, they had to choose this year for my ceremony," said my grandmother.

"What ceremony, Grandma?" I asked. "Oh sweetie too long of a story! Let's set you up in your room. You look tired," she said, taking my hand and pulling me to the stair case.

Every step I took in the house, I got a glimpse of my past. The staircase was my favorite, where I had climbed at least hundred times a day and slid back down. My grandmother set me in my old room, still untouched as I left it ten years ago. She seemed like she was in a rush, so I told her she could get back to her guests. She apologized that she had to leave me for the night, but she told me that I could take her car out and meet my friends to celebrate New Year's Eve. I wasn't too happy about not being able to spend the night with her, but her idea was not too bad. I quickly sorted through my clothes and decided to throw on my white BCBG jumpsuit. After I got done dressing up, I decided I was going to borrow my grandmother's necklace. I quickly went downstairs to ask her if I could. Because the house was still in chaos, I couldn't even pinpoint where she was anymore.

"Oh what the heck, I will just go in there myself, she wouldn't mind," I thought.

I opened up her door and turned on the light to see a whole new and different bedroom. The room was so clean that anyone that tried to enter would be too scared to walk in. It all looked like the bedroom was getting ready for a picture so it could be debuted in a magazine. On her bed lay a beautiful, lacy white dress. In front of the bed, there was her vanity table, where she kept all her jewelry and cosmetics. I sat by the vanity and tried on a couple of pieces that she had scattered around, but didn't really find any that matched my taste. I went through drawer after drawer full of jewelry, and on the last one I found a red box. I opened up the box, and there it was! Wrapped in silk cloth, the most beautiful necklace I have ever seen. I pulled it out to put it on my neck but discovered that it was actually greasy and slippery. So disgusted, I went in her bathroom and cleaned it up with a washcloth. Puzzled about why her jewelry was dipped in an unknown oily substance, I ignored my thoughts and hurried to the mirror to see it all together with my outfit. Satisfied with my look, I rushed out of her room to downstairs and left to celebrate. Better I had died that day.

Hours later, I pulled in to the driveway and shut off the car engine. I gathered my things from the passenger seat and got out of the car. Walking to the front door, I heard all the ladies. They seemed louder and louder as I get to the front door. I heard someone crying, women's voices shouting at everyone. I got my keys out and opened the door, and everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at me. Fifteen to twenty women all staring at me, they all looked like a deer in headlights. Frozen and confused about why I was getting the stare down. "Hello, everyone!" I said nervously. At 3: 30am January 1, 2000 Ethiopian calendar/Julian Calendar (September 11, 2006 standard calendar), my grandmother disowned me.

All in all, whenever I come across a story about traditions, I always think about my grandmother. I think about how disappointed she was. Yelling back, "It's just a stupid necklace!" probably didn't help the situation. Yes, I was wrong to touch the "special" jewelry that was set out for my grandmother's right of passage, but to think that I have cursed the women in our family and the women that are still to come that are unborn is a little extreme. I don't think God cares about ceremonies or sacrifices and specially an expensive necklace that is soaked in oil. Belief systems can bring a community together, but if taken to an extreme level, they can break up a family.

When It's Not Enough
by Taylor Hatcher, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Tricia Baker

I stare up at the textured ceiling, trying to make shapes out of it all. I wonder if it's rough to touch or chalky since it's drywall. Turning back over onto my side in my new full-size bed, I stare at the blank wall. Several stacked cardboard boxes are at each corner of the room as my decoration for now. I shift my gaze to my open window. It's chilly out tonight, and only a shiny street lamp lights the road. Perfect rows of baby trees line up like soldiers as they follow the unfinished sidewalk to the next lot for sale. A silver car goes by, and the shadows of the boxes dance on the bare walls. I look at my clock on the floor, glowing bright pink, and it's past two a.m. I miss my older sister and my dad. They got away while they could. This place is like a hotel, not a home. My bed and sheets have never been slept in, and the house is too big for just me and my mother. It's absolutely lifeless without the whole family, even though the family might as well have been dead before we ever moved here.

Maybe some fresh water will put my mind at ease. I grab the corner of the pink sheets and flip them over as I lower my legs to the side of my bed. Cheer shorts and a tank top didn't seem like such a good idea anymore. The light hair stands up on my arms, and my legs prickle all the way down instantaneously. Finding a sweatshirt seems impossible. I don't know which box is which; they were only marked with my name in precise handwriting in sharpie. I walk across the soft white carpet to my tall door and proceed to the catwalk. Trailing my hand across the smooth wooden railing, I look down into the living room and front entry way. The walls below are all also naked and pale.

I pass my mother's room, the laundry room, and two guest rooms, all before descending the stairs. Taking the last step from the cool carpeted stairs to the frigid floor catches me a bit off guard and makes me shiver even more. Hugging myself and on tip-toes now, I go to the kitchen and grab a water bottle from the towering stainless steel refrigerator. I take a long drink and then wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. I stand here shivering alone and take in the room. The floors and pillars are all a wooden chestnut color, to tie in with the matching wooden paneled fireplace mantle. It was a touch my mother designed to help make the house look warmer and cozier. But the house still feels like a barren wasteland in the Arctic.

My feet pat across the floor and seem to echo through the tall ceiling as I walk to head back upstairs. When I reach the top, a strand of light catches my eye through my peripheral vision. Under my mother's door, a thin glow creeps out. I stand here contemplating for maybe two minutes. There is a fifty-fifty chance for me. I knock lightly; part of me trying to restrain myself from knocking at all. No answer. I tenderly press my ear up to the chilled door and hold my breath. I listen hard to hear heavy breathing. No, I shouldn't say breathing. Breathing is smooth and effortless; it is life. What I hear is a gasping rattling sound I am becoming all too familiar with. My heart rate accelerates. I turn the bronzed round doorknob tightly and push the door open slowly. The cries and gasps for air heighten, but no one is there.

The room is empty, and the satin comforter is halfway off of the bed. A box of Cheez-It's has been torn open and the crackers are all over the bed and floor, some of them in crushed heaps. The bronze ceiling fan is spinning full speed, and the sheer creamy-colored curtains flow

as the autumn air whispers. To my right, the bathroom door is shut. I stride over and slide it open without thinking. Her dry heaving and crying is completely amplified, despite her face being on the floor. My mother lies in the fetal position in her bra and underwear having a full panic attack. I take a small step forward into something warm and slick. There are crimson handprints and smears on the beautiful alabaster tile and then the stench of iron wafts through my nose.

The lights are dim, and I am not so sure if I want to turn them all the way on. “Mom?” I ask, adrenaline pumping hard through my veins. I move close, much quicker this time, and kneel next to her. I reach for her hand and ask if she’s okay. Her breaths are shallow, but her sobs have subdued. Shakily, she puts her hot hand over mine. It too is soaked in blood. “Where are you bleeding from? What happened?” And then my hand is pierced with pain. Her nails are digging into them; I gasp in pain and pull my arm back. My hand forcefully lands behind me to hold myself up and more pain consumes it. I quickly lift it up and see a couple small shards of glass protruding from it. I turn and look and see small and much larger shards of glass askew all over the tile. The paper label is still on the floor intact to the top of the bottle: Vodka.

I already knew. I leave her be because that is the best thing to do for the time being and stand up and edge towards the two sinks to rinse my hand. She’s in her own little world right now, so it doesn’t even matter. I choose the sink farthest from her and find a brushed nickel switch blade teetering over the sink. I feel like all of my blood leaves my body and is poured into this sink because that’s exactly what’s in it; a puddle of blood. “What the hell did you do to yourself?” I ask demanding. She runs a bloody hand through her short blonde hair and slowly stands up. She’s got at least a foot on me and is intoxicated. There has never been much that I could do in this situation.

She staggers and then speaks low, “You think you’re soooo perfect don’t ya? Coming to rescue everyone all the time.” Then she snarls, “How’s about you rescue your fat whore self instead huh?” I’m twelve years old, and I weigh 97 pounds. She’s only inches from me, and I can smell her breath. It’s putrid and smells of recent vomiting. She starts screaming, nothing in particular, just yelling at me and people who aren’t even there. She orders me, “Get on the fucking scale.” I go on it because I am scared. If I do as she tells me, she won’t hurt me so bad. The scale is against a wall by the door, and I face it. There’s a thick silence for a few moments, the kind where all you can hear is that piercing ringing in your ears. A couple of hot tears escape my eyes and drop down to the scale. At the exact moment it splashed, hard fingers pinch at the back of my neck. My head and neck is pulled back like a snake before it strikes and then slammed into the wall. I can already taste the blood on my smooth lips. I start to cry, and I automatically reach up and hold my nose. “Turn around and face me!”

I turn sobbing and trying to stare at her, but it’s hard because the tears are blurring my vision. I am sweating, and my legs feel like lead. Her hand is on my throat now but not tightly, just tauntingly to keep me in place. The odds are never really fifty-fifty when it came to mom being sober. She continues with a slurred speech that I am not paying much attention to. I interrupt in sobs, trying to sound more confident, “Mom, you’re drunk. Let me help you. You need to go to bed.” But there’s no such thing as reasoning with her when she’s like this and sometimes I forget. She’s already arguing with me about how she’s not drunk and throws some more four letter words at me. Before my dad left, he taught me that the only way to fight crazy is with crazy.

I grab her outstretched arm that's on my throat and kick her hard in the bare leg. She tries to grab at my hair, but I push her arm away and dash back across the catwalk to my room and lock my door. I rip my cell phone up, pulling the charger from the outlet, and hit speed dial number two: Papa. My door is being pounded on and screams and curses are being issued through the crack of my door. I'm sobbing into my phone. My hot face getting it all wet. "Mom's drunk again."

"I'll be there in five minutes," he says, sounding very tired. He was there in seven. The pounding stops for a moment, and then I hear a soft knock.

"Tay, are you in there?"

"Yea, I'm here Papa."

"Pack a bag; you're gonna stay at my house again tonight."

"I know."

I put my toothbrush and toothpaste in my Vera Bradley pack and grab a blanket. My things aren't all unpacked, so I can only do so much. I creep out of my room and go down towards hers because the house is quiet again. A first aid kit is on the floor and some gauze is out on the side of my mother's bed. The comforter laid smoothly over her, and she was perfectly tucked in. Papa comes out of the bathroom and sees me. "Go outside and wait in the truck," he says.

"Is she gonna be okay?"

"She'll be fine in the morning." And that's all we say about it. He drives me back to Grammy and his house and tells me I should probably get cleaned up. He also offers his help, but I say no, and he understands. I go into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. My bottom lip is swollen and purple from where my front teeth bit down on it. My hair is frizzy, and splotches of scarlet infiltrate the blonde curls. I graze my hands gingerly under my eyes because they are puffy. But it's probably only from crying. I switch on the nozzle of the shower and undress. When I step in, I do my best to relax and just enjoy getting clean. But when I look down and see my mother's blood swirling around my feet and down the drain, a wave of sickness washes over me. I fall to my knees and heave until I purge.

Instead of going to school in the morning, I stay with Gram. I can't stay forever though. I go back to the new house after supper. When I see my mom, I decide she looks like Barbie: bleached hair, tanned skin, and a smile that almost looks like it hurts. She made me my favorite dessert: chocolate covered strawberries and whipped cream. She bought me a new outfit she "just had to get me" when she saw it and hugged me. I look at these things with no expression, to show her it doesn't just fix stuff. I love that she tries and knows that I love these things, but what I really love is her.

She sees my face and hugs and holds me again and says, "I'm so sorry about last night. I had a little too much to drink, and I said some mean things last night."

"You hurt yourself," I say blankly.

"I know, and I didn't mean to. I fell and cut my leg on the corner of the sink."

“There was so much blood though...” I trail off.

“You were just tired; you are remembering it wrong. Let’s just forget about it and have a good night tonight, huh?” she says with another big smile.

“You hurt me,” I speak quietly.

She half rolls her eyes, “I know, and I said I’m sorry. So, let’s just forget about it. I don’t need to have another one of these conversations with anyone again. It won’t happen again.”

I put up with this whole “Sorry” routine for five more years to protect my younger sister who was lucky enough to not have been home that night. After those five years, I move in with my dad in Westerville. I didn’t talk to her for six months after I left. When I come to visit, even after all of that time, she leaves me after an hour or two of visiting and goes partying and drinking like a twenty-one-year-old. I was finally able to gain weight at around fifteen years old because I stopped going on the scale for her and taking the things she said to me to heart. She is always going to say sorry, but I don’t know if she has actually ever meant it. I don’t know if I will ever actually forgive her for what she has done due to alcohol impairment, but I will always love her and care for her because she is still a part of me and she really is only like that when she drinks. It is very much a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde situation. Sometimes saying sorry isn’t enough. It loses its power after it’s been said after so many times for the same thing. It is sad that I really don’t feel like I will ever forgive her unless she gives me the right kind of apology: becoming sober.

The bond within a family sometimes defies logic. But when it all comes down to it, you can’t pick your family. What we have isn’t perfect, but it is there. It is our nature as humans to want to surround ourselves with people who we are comfortable or familiar with. We learn lessons from our parents, and that’s part of the reason we love and appreciate them. I’ve learned plenty from my mother of what not to do. I haven’t had the best experiences with her, but I will always ask first, “Is she okay?” Because when we are young, and even sometimes when we are old, who do we call when our hearts get broken? Who do we look to for a sense of comfort and absoluteness? The unconditional love is still there, no matter what we go through and experience together, even when it’s not enough.

Battle of my Life
by Sara Black, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Tricia Baker

I was diagnosed with Super-Ventricle Tachycardia my sophomore year of high school. That was the start of the battle. I didn't know at the time what that meant, but I quickly found out. The first surgery was September 2010. It went smoothly, but unfortunately failed. December 2010 was when the real battle began; I was scheduled to go into surgery at 8:00 AM. I assumed everything would go exactly as the first surgery went; that was not the case! The last thing I remembered was walking into the cardiology wing of the local hospital; when I was woken from a flash of light, I was in the middle of procedure.

The light above me was so bright, I couldn't see anything going on around me further than ten inches above my face. There were approximately seven doctors in white standing around me with their jaws dropped staring me straight in the eye. I could just barely see the haze of tubes coming from my throat and all the wires protruding from my chest.

There was a loud beeping coming from the heart monitors, which startled me more than anything. The doctors were talking quickly as if they were racing, and I was too unconscious (from the anesthetics) to process what exactly it was they were saying. I knew it was nothing good due to the stunned looks on their faces! There was a glow of a nurse above me. She was stroking my hair repeating, "Everything is all right, you're okay. I promise, everything will be fine, have faith." She helped me to relax a little, but not enough to forget that I shouldn't have been awake at that moment.

Why was I awake while on the operating table with the doctors around? I felt my heart pounding, pounding so hard it hurt. However, my heart was beating slowly, abnormally slowly. It were as if someone were dropping bricks on me every three seconds. I knew that I must stay calm! I knew it would have been bad if my heart would start racing from my fear, but shouldn't it be beating faster than it is right now?

There was a man to my right that I could remember from when I first walked in. He looked pale, and his expression looked as if he had seen a ghost. "You're going to feel a sharp pain -- that's normal," he said. "You should be going back to sleep now. We will see you soon." I gave him a slight nod, and everything became silent. Despite the overwhelming silence, everything was still bright; I felt as if I were in a pure white room lying on a table alone. For the first few seconds it was nice, silent and lonely, time for me to calm down after just waking up in the middle of heart surgery! All of a sudden, I started to feel a pulling sensation coming from my chest, as if someone above me had lassoed me, pulling me up towards the ceiling. I started to see memories I had from when I was younger, like I was being pulled through a timeline of my past.

I felt as if I was going through all the memories again. It was like I was really there! I was hiding in the trees, with bark scratching at my back, playing hide-and-go-seek with my brother. Then, I was in the middle of a game of tag. I was pushed and I heard my cousin squeal, "You're it!" Next, I was in the middle of a fight with my mother about curfew, telling me how I need to be more responsible. I participated in many memories. Then, after what seemed like miles, I was finally reaching the ceiling of the white room. Suddenly, I was falling, falling quickly, going past all my memories again. I could feel tears running down my face. I had so much confusion, and I didn't understand why any of this was happening.

What was going on? Why did I feel this way? Was this going to be the end of my short life? What was going to happen to all of my loved ones? Would my mother be able to cope with my death? Was I really going to be okay?

The nurse promised me! I felt my face turn red and anger draw across my face. I had been told everything would be fine! Why would that nurse lie to me? Why would she tell me everything would be fine if she weren't positive? Had I gotten the chance to do all that I wanted in life? Had I accomplished anything that I wanted to? I hadn't even set goals for myself besides to get an A in class. How do I know what to do from here?

I began to cheer myself on. "Come on Sara, you can do this; have faith, don't give up! This might not have been what you expected, but you can get through this, just like the last time!" The brightness began to fade and the falling sensation slowed to a point of stopping. Things began to feel peaceful. Was this what it was like to be dead? I could hear the clock ticking, *tick, tick, tick, tick*. It was so quiet, and the heart monitors were now gone. I started to hear talking in a distance from the nurse on staff. "Oh my, what is this bruise from? I sure hope one of our doctors didn't do this." I felt myself smiling because I knew exactly what the nurse was talking about. My mouth was so dry from the tubes; it felt as if I just pulled a handful of cotton balls out of my mouth. I couldn't speak up, but I wanted tell her that it was my battle wound from my first intense rugby game. I felt the urge to finally open my eyes again. This time it was harder than before. My eyes had been taped. I was startled when I realized I was in a different place. How did I get here? I didn't really care once I had realized that I wasn't dead. There was a huge relief; I started to cry because I knew that the fight was over and I was safe.

Going into surgery, I thought I knew what to expect. I quickly learned life is all about the unexpected. We should expect the unexpected. Even when I thought I knew what was going to happen, I didn't. Things might go unplanned, but we should never give up! If I wouldn't have kept calm, I could have easily not been here today. We need to have good faith and trust; we never know what comes next.

One Less Nickel
by Ben Archer, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Kathryn Denton

A paper route builds character. A kid tends to learn a thing or two about responsibility and integrity after a lengthy stint as the local news-mule, and I suppose I was no different. My route had a certain character of its own to it though, one that taught me something else. I learned a bit about growing up, sure, but I also learned a bit about growing old.

I remember sitting in an office at the *Marysville Journal Tribune* at ten years of age and looking through the packet of forms and waivers that my mother and I had to sign before I officially became the town's newest paperboy. Two lines in particular caught my eye: my rate, a paltry five cents per paper, and a clause excusing the paper office from responsibility for any event that resulted in my death, dismemberment, or, alarming in its particularity, decapitation. My stomach sank! Death was a very delicate subject for me then and thinking about it at all, let alone *my* death, let alone my *decapitation*, numbed me with fear. While I grew pale imagining terrible accidents involving hedge clippers and clotheslines, my mother was growing impatient. I ended up scrawling my signature across those morbid documents despite my newfound misgivings and stiff neck.

The route assigned to me mainly serviced Windsor Manor Apartments, a quaint little provision from the city that allowed an affordable and independent living solution for our population of elderly, disabled, or otherwise inconvenient citizenry. Windsor Manor was mostly comprised of long, squat, and identically designed single-story buildings, but one structure loomed as large on the property as it would in my memory: the high-rise.

Most of the high-rise's residents were in poor health, either physically or mentally, and I'd always save delivering to it last of all out of sheer dread. Just walking through the front door was a challenge; I'd have to brave the gauntlet of regulars that would perch themselves on benches lining the pavement leading up to the place, beetle-browed old men and women, sitting, as I remember them, in silent judgment of my every approaching step. Once safely inside the first set of doors (and outside the gargoyles' sight), I'd buzz room 3H over the facility's weathered intercom pad for passage into the locked lobby proper. "Paperboy!" I'd peep over the speaker, immediately pulling on the door.

I was impatient for the similarly childlike (but distressingly unsteady) voice of my inside contact to crackle back, feebly lilting with surprise and delight, "Oh! The paper boy? Give me *juuust... a miinuuute... deeaar...*" After several excruciating moments, the puzzle that was the "UNLOCK" button would be solved once again, and I would be let in.

Each of the four floors of the high-rise were more or less identical, with claustrophobic hallways narrow enough that you'd have to turn sideways to share. The wallpaper, chaotically floral, was stained yellow by time as much as it was by the amber glow of buzzing wall lamps. An odor familiar to anyone who has visited a rest home permeated those halls, the smell of a hundred failing bodies that only got stronger the further one got from the central elevator. I'd

hold my breath like a diver waiting for those lift doors to open, and, as such, I'd plunge into each corridor, hoping to run out of deliveries before I ran out of air.

On one occasion, I rounded a corner to find a blockage in the halls, a woman with wild grey hair hunched over a walker. An oxygen tank clanked rhythmically as she waded towards me, and I pressed myself against the wall to squeeze by. I smiled, nodded, and chirped a greeting, but she remained silent and stoic, and her wide eyes bored through mine. I could see then that her whole body trembled just from the effort of walking. Her jaw hung open slightly, and I heard her wheeze shallow breaths. Her gaze followed me without relent as we passed, and it seemed to me like the stare of a war veteran, the stare of someone who had gone through more than I was comfortable imagining.

I would always know when a customer of mine died. I'd receive a cancelation notice, my bundle of papers would decrease in size by one, and whatever little decorations they had in front of their home would disappear. I'd deliver my route like normal, just passing them over, and it felt like the world just passed them over. One less person, one less paper. One less nickel. Few at Windsor Manor had a lot of time left to be alive. What was it like to know that your days were better measured with months or weeks than with years? To look back on an entire life lived? I can't pretend to know, but I'm grateful to my route for planting these questions in the back of my mind and kindling in me an awareness of mortality at a young age so that I might live life with more purpose.

Jane
by Angela Ross, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Deborah Bertsch

“Ange, can you drive over to Grandma’s and... sit with her for a bit?” my mom pleaded with me.

“Umm, yeah, sure,” I responded, realizing immediately that the response was drenched with hesitation. My mother didn’t seem to notice. She was in housework mode and flitted about, opening and closing drawers, pushing chairs in, tidying an already tidy home.

“Thanks, honey, that really helps your dad and I. It’ll be good for you and her to have some time together.”

“I don’t really know what to say to her. I mean, I hardly even know her,” I complained, pushing my pretzels around on a tiny paper plate.

My mother furrowed her brow a bit then quickly resumed with her positive-mom-face.

“Well,” she sighed deeply. “This can be a really good opportunity to get to know your grandma before she’s really, gone, ya know?” She sounded rehearsed and talked more to the dishes she had begun washing than to me.

“Right.” I shifted uncomfortably. “I kind of just wish we would have seen them more when we were little. Why didn’t we just go to San Diego more?” I prodded.

My mother, now overly fixated on what must have been the most interesting dirty pan in the history of mankind, managed to give a halfhearted response, “Oh, it was just so expensive. And flying with you four girls? Forget it.”

I kept on, sounding more like a hurt puppy this time around, “Well they could have visited *us*.”

My mother had stopped scrubbing, but her tired eyes were still locked on the pan. “Ange,” she started, as she turned to face me. “We tried. I tried. A hundred times. We wanted you girls to know at least *one* set of grandparents. Grandma Jane.... just, wasn’t interested. She didn’t want anything to do with you girls.”

....

Spring was just starting to show its face, and you could tell by the way the mornings smelled. They were beginning to show little signs of life, and the Robin Red Breasts began to make their much welcomed appearance, chattering in the morning sun. But as I made my way up the two flights of stairs to my grandparents’ apartment, winter seemed to still hold its tight grip. It was strangely dark, and as I opened their door, a storm of stale Marlboro smoke and burnt Folgers engulfed me.

“Gramma!” I shouted, announcing myself so as not to scare her. “Gramma it’s Angela, your granddaughter,” I continued as I made my way through the dark hall.

The television was set to the news, but muted. As I walked through the doorway, I saw her stark white, age-spotted legs peeking through the bottom of a heavy wool blanket. In between her delicate fingers rested a cigarette that had just been lit. It seemed almost as long,

white, and slender as she had become.

My Sunday morning visits had started to become a regular occurrence, so my grandpa could go to Mass with my father. I dreaded them.

“Where’d Sam go?” she asked, confused. “He left me here. He just left me here.” She began to get angry, but her words begged for sympathy. “Who are you,” she demanded, as though it had just occurred to her that I was standing beside her.

“It’s Angela, Gramma. I’m Sammy’s daughter. I’m your baby’s baby.” I reminded her, gently.

“I know. I’m not stupid.” she hissed, as she crossed her arms.

I settled myself on the couch adjacent to her, taking note NOT to sit on “her couch.” She had laid claim to a spot on the end where she would curl her sticklike legs up to her chest, wrap her arms around them, and sit all day chain smoking and surviving on weak coffee and treats alone. Her little sofa spot had quickly degraded from its original state. It was embedded with crumbs, ash, and coffee spills and had been urinated on on several occasions. Down the road, my father would come to find paper napkins, stuffed with rotten meat or stale bread, stuffed in the couch cushions—little snacks she had saved “for the birds.” The whole apartment was filthy, and the hanging blanket of smoke only thinly veiled the reek of body odor.

“He’s taking my money and hiding it somewhere, the bastard. I had money in this little pouch. It was my money, and he took it,” she spoke, shaking with desperation.

I was used to this specific delusion and quickly reassured her that her money was safe in the town bank. It had only her name on it, and only she could get it. There was little, if any, truth in the reassurance, but it seemed to calm her down. Her attention directed itself to the television, where a replay of presidential nominee Obama was giving a speech was airing.

“Do you know who Obama is, Gramma?” I curiously asked.

“Oh yes, of course,” she replied sounding almost snobbish. “He’s very handsome. You know, he asked me out for a date once,” she declared with a nod of self-satisfaction.

I was taken aback for a quick second, but went with it, “Wow! Gramma that’s amazing! I’m sure you were very flattered. What did you say to him?!”

She had looked away briefly, her gaze set on the pair of robins just outside the window. She turned back toward me. “Do you mind if I smoke?” she asked, as she began to light another cigarette.

. . . .

The car ride had been a somber one. Rain coated the windshield, as the wipers raced to keep up. There were six of us packed in mom’s car, and, for a moment, it felt almost like the old family vacations we would take when we were little. We’d all play games in the car and listen to Simon and Garfunkel, Samantha and I making hand motions to every word we could, as we giggled. But there wasn’t any cabin, or hotel, or beach at the end of this journey.

“Why wouldn’t she have wanted to be buried in California?” I asked, breaking the

silence.

“She wanted to be by her mother,” my mom responded sweetly.

My father had hardly spoken a word for the whole ride. He always tended to stay silent when he was “processing.” My sisters and I all speculated on what he would say up there at the podium, mourning the loss of his mother. He never spoke much about her. His childhood stories had all revolved around his small-town adventures: playing ball with his dad, throwing stones at the water tower, and that one time his older sisters told him stepping on that bumblebee would tickle.

The service was short, and the chapel was so small I thought the rain might sweep it away. My father spoke of his mother being a woman who loved birds—she filled her home with cages of chirpy little finches, singsongy parakeets, and bright canaries. He spoke of her afternoons painting the birds and singing with them on days when she was happy. He said she’d be happy now, up in the sky, floating with the birds.

It was a sweet remembrance. One we had never heard.

As the chapel emptied, I sat next to my father on one of the front pews. He sat quietly, reflecting. I reached for his hand and held it a few moments. He gave it a couple squeezes and smiled at me.

“My mother was a troubled woman. Even before the Alzheimer’s,” he started. “She was an uncontrollable alcoholic. My dad protected us from her—kept us out of the house when she was drinking.”

“Oh, Dad...I can't imagine growing up in a home like that,” I choked.

“I was mad at her when I was younger. But her life was harder than I could imagine at the time. Her mother died when she was 14, and her father cast her out of her home, remarried her mother’s best friend, and started a new family. She was sent to live with her aunt and uncle, who raised her but never really as their own. They were both reckless alcoholics and never really provided her with the home she needed. The home she *deserved* after all she’d been through. She married my dad young, and because of her addictions, was never really...free. She never drove, and couldn’t be left alone for long because she may have caused herself harm.”

“When I was sitting with her, she told me about a trip she took when she was young, before Grandpa, when she went to Ireland to see where her family came from. She said she went out with friends and explored and had the time of her life,” I said, hoping to provide some sense of encouragement or positivity.

My father sat for a moment, saying nothing.

“Oh. No,” I said quietly. “She never went, did she?” My heart broke right then and there. Tears began to fall down my face.

My father looked at me, but there wasn’t sadness in him. He actually looked hopeful.

“Ange, when your brain is diseased, funny things happen. It can reveal repressed anger, like in my mother’s case. But when I think that even for just that moment, she really believed that she had this real memory. It’s like it really happened for her. She DID go. Just not in any

physical sense. But she was there. And I couldn't be happier for her." Then he smiled.

Drugs (and Other Such Pleasures)
by Michael Ahlbeck, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Deborah Bertsch

[November, 2010]

The Beginning...

I shivered all the way from my toes to my fingers as I jumped off the COTA bus and adjusted the cello on my back. I fumbled my pack of Marlboro No. 27's out of my brown leather coat and then proceeded to have even more trouble removing a cigarette from the pack. Once I had finally conquered all the inanimate parts (which included a drawn-out battle with the flint on my lighter), I finally lit the cigarette and took a deep drag. I leaned my head back and looked up towards the dull autumn sky and exhaled the smoke through my nose and straight into the intersection of Henderson and High. And then I began walking north.

After a few minutes of walking, and two cigarettes later, I arrived at an old Victorian-looking house with a definitively triangular roof. It was made of brick and looked unnecessarily tall, at least as compared to its width. The door was wooden with a partitioned glass pane window, split into nice and neatly rectangular sections. There, just above the porch, hung an old-style shop sign that was slowly and carelessly listing to and fro in the brisk November wind. The sign read "The Loft Violin Shop."

I approached the front stairs and threw my cigarette butt into the adjacent parking lot just as I stepped up. The doorknob was quite stubborn, but it yielded after a bit of effort. When I pushed the heavy wooden door inward, it let out a cacophony of sounds, creaking and squeaking whilst popping loudly as I broke what sounded like the seal on a futuristic space pod. I shut the door behind me, this time with much less noise than was generated when I opened it to come in.

"Why hello! How can I help you?" said the fifty-something-year-old man standing at attention behind the front desk. He was dressed in a flannel and what I presumed was a sort of wood-worker's apron tied around his torso and neck. He had curly silver hair and a miniature beer belly. What caught my eye most were his glasses. The lenses were perfect little circles, and the metal frames were extremely thin, so much so that I had trouble recognizing the glasses as anything other than a pair of circles floating magically in front of his face. When he spoke he used that tone (the overly chipper one that is subtly laced with a dash of disdain) that well-trained musicians use when talking to obvious amateurs.

I cleared my throat heavily, while feeling the temporal regrets of smoking cigarettes, and began to speak. "Well, I rented a cello from you guys with the 'Rent-To-Buy' program and recently paid it off and traded my rental in for a brand new one." He gave a slight nod of acknowledgment, and I continued. "Well, I was wondering whether you guys would buy it back from me."

He gave it a fraction of a second to contemplate and said, "Sure, sure. So how long ago did you trade your rental in?"

"Last August"

"Of last year?"

"No, 2010, this year."

"Okay, well let me have a lookat the cello if you don't mind."

He spent some time looking it over, but he didn't seem that focused, as if he already had an answer in mind.

"Well, the best I can do is \$400 dollars."

"But... I paid \$1,100 for it just three months ago!?"

"I know, but unfortunately we have to sell this as used now, and that greatly depreciates the value. If you want my opinion, for what it's worth, I would suggest you keep the instrument kid."

I spent a moment or two contemplating what I was about to do. Then I realized my mind began to falter and waffle back and forth. I swiftly decided that I did not have the time or the luxury for inaction, and I looked at him, avoiding eye contact, and said, "I guess I'll just have to live with \$400. I need the money, I'm a poor college student."

He laughed, began filling out some paperwork, and asked me where I went to school.

"OSU"

"What's your major?"

"Computer Science and Engineering"

"Ohh, one of those types are ya?"

"By title, I suppose."

He continued to methodically fill out paperwork as I leaned inward and outward, rocking from heels to toes back to heels. I just kept trying to forget what I was doing, or what I had done.

Heels to toes.

Heels to toes.

Heels to toes.

"Okay Mr. Ahlbeck, here is one-hundred, two-hundred, three-hundred, and four-hundred..." he said as he counted out the cash "... is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes... would you mind, if I may ask, letting me play her one last time?"

He let out a deep sigh, and with it went away any disdain that was previously in his tone. He compassionately responded, “Of course. Here, let’s bring it to the room upstairs.”

He grabbed my cello (I suppose it was actually their cello at this point) and led me up the wooden staircase. The boards groaned under our weight, as would be expected in a house of this age, and the wall-mounted railing was missing more than one screw. He hooked a right at the top and brought me into a room whose walls were lined with cellos and double basses, save for the space in front of a small four-pane window on the far side of the room. He unfolded an ancient looking stool from the corner and placed it in the middle of the room for me. He handed me the cello... *my* cello, and the bow (to which he had freshly applied rosin) and said, almost in a whisper, “Take as long as you need. Hell, you can play up here till we close if you’d like.”

[October 1st, 2011]

Amphetamines: Part I

They are outside. I know it. I can see them. I can hear them. They know, don’t they? They know, don’t they!?

Look. There. Across the street.

Ahhh! Snipers!

What the hell! I am in some deep shit. Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

I never ever ever should’ve done this. Fuck me.

Umm, let’s peek out the window again. Hmm. Yup. They are gone.

Nope! No they are not. They are still here!

God I haaaatte all these red and blue lights.

Should I go outside?

No, they will gun me down.

Can I sneak out the back?

Nope, there is certainly a helicopter doing rounds above me. I hear it.

What to do? What should I do?

I grab my phone. Wave it in the window. I am signaling the snipers to call me.

“Call me! Call me,” I say aloud.

No ringing. Why? Why?

Oh. They don’t have my phone number. They don’t have my phone number.

I should call them. I should call them, negotiate my surrender.

I open my phone and dial 9-1- and thennn 1.

Ring.

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

“Uhh... uhh. I would like to speak to the police that are surrounding my house.”

“Why are the police surrounding your house?”

“Because I robbed the Sunoco.”

“What’s your address, sir?”

“6558 East Livingston Avenue”

[December, 2012]

Kicky Longstocking

“Dude, it’s Matt. Matt D! I know you remember him. He was a patient before. You were training while he was in withdrawal,” said Ryan, in the most annoyed tone he could muster while whispering.

“I still don’t remember him, dude,” I said, with my own tonal display of annoyance infused in my response.

“You’re an idiot, man. Think back, he was small and skinny and from Colorado. Sorta hipster-ish, and he always wore that gray beanie with the bill”

“Oh shit, man! You’re right! He had that real caricature of a face, smiled real big all the time...”

“Yup, that’s him”

“..and he left the program early right!?”

“Yup. Also, he had a hell of a kick. I’ve never seen somebody come off dope that hard.”

Ryan gave me a good long stare as if I were supposed to react with great fear and worry. I did, a little bit, but on the inside. I sure as hell wasn’t going to let him think I was at all worried. We had been doing this for three months now; there wasn’t much we couldn’t handle.

“So he’s coming back in tonight?” I took the bait.

“Yup.”

“Do you know when?”

“They said sometime around four, so we got about three hours.”

I hesitated for a moment and then inhaled with the intention of speaking, but he began speaking before I could form my sentence.

“Also, Tim told me that...”

I interrupted and took a purposefully exaggerated whisper to say, “Hey, we just got everybody to sleep. You’re talking too loud, dude. I don’t want to wake Nate up. He’s finally getting some sleep.”

He whispered back, half-angry, half-thankful. “Fuck you, you’re the one being loud.”

“Sorry, I’m not trying to be a dick.”

He took a moment to go through one breath cycle, in and out, and responded, “No, you’re right. I would hate to see Nate wake up right now after the past week we’ve had with him.”

“Agreed. So Tim said what?”

“Oh, yea. Well Tim told me that Matt hasn’t shot up in two days. He is going to be kicking when he gets here...”

I sighed very loudly and said, “Well, it’s not the worst thing we’ve dealt with now, is it, Ryan?”

“No, Nate was the worst thing we’ve dealt with by far.”

“Indeed,” I said, accompanied with an exaggerated nod of my head.

We both allowed for a few seconds of silence, then I decided to poke a little fun at him.

“Sooo, Ryan...” I said, while wearing a very cock-eyed grin.

“What?” he snapped back.

“How’s your bonnie-lass doing?”

“Fuck you.”

“Really though, dude.”

“Again, fuck you.”

“I’m just being the realist man. Now that Kyle knows you guys got a thing for each other, he’ll never let her work in withdrawal with you.”

“Lauren is just starting training. She can train for other posts. She’s fine with not working down here.” He paused for a moment while staring at the ceiling.

“And plus, Kyle can fuck off. She’s a good worker. Jacovsky and Dave won’t let him be that much of a dick. Let’s just not talk about it until something happens.”

“That’s fine with me man, I was just busting your chops” I said, in between small chuckles meant to illuminate his overreaction. He didn’t notice.

We both sat in that awkward silence two people find themselves in when both are checking their Facebook on their smart phones at the same time. Maybe a minute went by, then I put my phone down. He followed suit and surprisingly spoke first.

“Dude, get this. They sent Alex to go pick him up from the airport in Detroit.”

“Alex K?”

“Yup. I can’t stand how they use us like slaves when we are in training.”

“Yeah, I agree. But also, I hate that douche-bag Alex, so I could care less.”

Ryan fought with himself to hold in a laugh. It ended with him converting loud cackles into a series of breathy snickers that emanated from his nasal passages. Then we took to the mutual silence of Facebook surfing once more.

It was about 4:30am when security brought Matt down to the withdrawal unit. He reminded me of those little lifeless gray polyps that Ursula (from Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” of course) collects in her lair. He was certainly pale, certainly weak, and certainly in need of help. I jumped up, and took him to get his vitals. Ryan went and started the whirlpool, taking care to find the perfect water temperature. Ryan had kicked heroin before; he knew what he was doing.

As I strapped the Velcro blood-cuff around Matt’s arm (which was near spastically shaking), I began the usual line of questioning:

“So you’re obviously kicking already, but you’re in good hands now.”

“Yeah, soo.. so long as I’m locked up... in here and the do.. dope is lock.. locked... locked out there, I’m.. I’m good.”

I pressed the start button on the blood pressure pump and the cuff around his arm sputtered to life, slowly but surely, like a hot air balloon warming up sideways in a field. I made a point to make eye contact and responded, “You’ve done this before, Matt. You know you don’t get off that easy. Keep your head up, dude.”

The blood pressure cuff reached its maximum inflation and began spitting out chunks of air, deflating step by step.

“When did you last shoot up?”

You could hear his body shaking in his voice as he said, “Coming... coming up on three days here in a fe.. fe.. few hours.”

The blood pressure machine beeped, and the cuff gave one long final gasp as it flattened out. The screen read 101/53 with a pulse of 111bpm. That’s not the best, but I actually expected much worse by looking at him.

“Well, then you know you’re right in the thick of it. What kind of withdrawal symptoms are you having?”

“Horrible mus... muscle aches... my legs are just...”

Ryan came back around the corner as Matt was talking and said, “The bath is all setup for you, man. It should do wonders for those muscle aches.”

“Than... tha.... thanks man,” mumbled Matt.

I jumped back in as I undid the Velcro cuff around his arm. “Listen, I know you’re feeling like absolute shit... and I bet you haven’t eaten in days. Try to at least get a yogurt down if you can.”

He ever so slowly tilted his head up to make eye-contact with me and said, “Yeah, it would prob...bably help my stoma.. stomach cramps. I haven’t been throw... throwing up yet so I should... I should be... I should be fine to eat some... yogurt. Thanks.”

I went to the kitchen and grabbed him a yogurt. He thanked me and opened up the package and took the plastic spoon and yogurt in his trembling hands. I helped him up and he headed towards the bathroom and the hot tub that awaited him.

“Hey man, I will come check on you in a few minutes. There are fresh towels in there for you. If you need anything, just give us a yell; we’ll be here all night for ya.”

Ryan piped in. “Yeah, man. Start with the bath, and we can get you a massage afterward. It’ll be fine dude, you’ve gone through this before, so you know it can be done.”

As Matt rounded the corner, he turned and said, “Sure... thanks gu... guys” just before he was out of sight.

Ryan and I both sat down to get started on the intake paper work. Before we even got a chance to take out a pen, we were both sharply startled by the piercing sound of projectile vomiting. I looked towards the corner and couldn’t see Matt; he was still around the bend. What I could see was a yellowish white stream of bile and yogurt emanating from around the corner, as if there was a garden hose just out of my line of sight. As the regurgitated mess slapped against the opposite wall, me and Ryan took off around the corner. We saw Matt, breathing heavy, with the plastic spoon in one hand and the half-eaten yogurt in the other. First thing he said was

“I’m so.. sorry.”

“Dude, don’t be sorry, that was fucking awesome!” I said, hoping to elicit a smile. It worked.

“Just put it down, take this towel and wipe your mouth. Me and Ryan will clean this up. It’s what they pay us minimum wage for. You, my friend, you get your ass in that bath.”

Again, his quivering voice sounding ever so fragile, he said, “Tha... thanks... thanks guys.”

After Matt made it to the bathroom and shut the door, Ryan looked at me and giggled.

“I told you he kicks hard dude! That’s why I used to call him...”

I cut him off because he already told me this before “I know Ryan. Kicky Longstocking.” And then we began cleaning up the mess together.

[October 1st, 2011]

Amphetamines: Part II

This 911 lady has so many questions. This is annoying.

Blah blah blah, transfer me to the police surrounding my house pleeeeeeeeeeeasee.

Blah blah blah “What’s your name?”

“Michael”

Blah blah blah “Do you live alone, Michael?”

“No.”

Blah blah blah “How many people live there?”

“Seven.”

Blah blah blah “Are there any guns or weapons in the house?”

“No, you idiot.”

Blah blah blah “What’s your....”

Wait. Shut up. One of the cops has pulled his car right up front. Those are bright lights.

Oh shit. He is pounding on the door.

Oh shit.

Oh shit.

I go to open the door but then I realize:

“This man is going to take you to jail for the rest of your life if you let him in.”

NO. I do not want to go to jail.

I wave at him through the window. I put my pointer finger up indicating “one second officer of the law, I will cordially answer the door momentarily.”

Then I march into the kitchen.

Then I open the kitchen drawer next to the sink.

Then I grab the knives.

Then I put them on the counter.

Then I pick up the duller one I can find. (An excessively large butter knife in fact.)

Then I march back to the door.

I've seen this work in movies before.

I've seen this work on T.V. before, and not just "T.V." T.V. but also "Reality" T.V.

That means "real life put on T.V."

Don't believe me?

Google it.

I take the butter knife and put it to my throat.

What a joke.

I step to the door, upon which the cop keeps pounding.

I unlock the latch, tilt my neck back to make the knife easily visible.

Then I open the door.

[June, 2013]

Poker Face

"Lauren... I just..." I was having trouble getting the words out. The drive up from Columbus combined with finding Ryan like this was sapping my brain of processing power.

"What, Michael?" Lauren said softly.

"I just don't know... I just don't know what to think."

"Welcome to my world."

"I mean... you're pregnant with his child! What is he thinking!?" I sat for a moment or two with my head in my hands. Lauren said nothing. She looked like she was holding back tears.

"Can I have a cigarette?"

"For sure," and she handed me a Virginia Slim, and we went out to the back porch. She lit my cigarette and then lit hers. Her hands were shaking.

"I tried, Lauren. I told him, 'I knew you were doing dope again the moment you came into the restaurant last night. I could see it, Ryan. We all have trained eyes for this shit. You know what it looks like, I know what it looks like... we worked at a fucking rehab for Christ sake!' He denied

all of it. He told me he was nodding out because he worked all day and smoked too much weed last night and..."

"Bull-shit!" she blurted out.

"He barely smoked half a bowl last night. He was too busy falling asleep!" she said, gasping with anger.

"I know. I know."

We stood there in silence and smoked. Ryan's parents were doing yard work out back. His mom was cleaning the pool, and his dad was mowing the lawn. I suddenly felt a lot of respect for these people I only just met yesterday.

"He wants to take me to the poker hall tonight. Hopefully, I can get him to come clean about what's been going on."

"Michael..." Lauren said as she looked me right in the eyes "... Michael, whatever you do, you can't abandon him. Please. That's the last thing he needs right now. He needs a friend."

I put my cigarette out on cement at the bottom of the porch stairs and looked up at Lauren. "I wouldn't Lauren. I wouldn't ever just disconnect. That's my brother in there." I took a wide stance and pointed firmly back towards the house. "Me and him have had too many crazy night shifts together for me to not help him."

Just then we heard Ryan yelling from inside, and I heard his footsteps coming down the stairs. Ryan yanked the sliding door open. He didn't look high anymore. I doubted he'd do any more while I was there since he knew I knew. Lauren whispered to me, almost inaudibly, "Thank you." In return I nodded ever so slightly.

"I'm showered and ready, dude. How 'bout you?" Ryan belted out.

"Yeah man, let's do it!" I said with exaggerated enthusiasm.

We headed back inside where we grabbed our wallets, and then we headed out the front door. Lauren followed.

The June sun was just starting to decay into its blushing ruby color. I never thought of Michigan as having any sections of flat, Ohio-like countryside. Yet there it lay before me, sprawled out like a Great Dane taking the deep stretch that almost always concludes a midday nap. The long driveway up to the house was being tickled by mango-colored light rays that seeped from the west. Twilight is the prelude to darkness. This was the prelude to twilight.

"Boys?" Lauren called from the front porch.

"Yeah?" Ryan and I responded simultaneously.

"Be careful, please."

Ryan laughed and got in the driver's seat of his mom's bright yellow Ford Focus, while I nodded at Lauren and said assertively, "We will."

As I got in, Ryan lit up a cigarette and began conversation as if nothing had happened earlier that day.

"You pumped, man!? We haven't played real poker since that time you, me, Lauren, and Donald went to the casino."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't end up like that night."

He cackled and said, "Fuck no, it better not end up like that!"

We sat quietly for a moment or two while he finished his cigarette. He threw his cigarette butt out the window as we merged onto the highway and began talking again. We kept up petty talk about the old days during the drive down the highway, but I was mostly distracted. I did my best to not act upset, and rather to just listen to him. I was trying to figure out the best way to confront him about the heroin again, but it seemed like I'd only be beating a dead horse. I had to address it again though; I couldn't just drop it and act like I believed his denial. I decided I'd ask him after he got a few drinks in him, and honestly after I got a few in me as well.

We pulled up to a long one-story building with a marquee-type sign over the entrance that read, "Ace's Spaces Poker Hall." As Ryan parked the Ford, he grabbed his shades and said, "You got your poker face on, dude?"

"Always. You got yours?"

Smiling, he slipped his Aviator sunglasses over his big dumb ears and gaunt-looking face and said, "Of course."

[October 1st, 2011]

Amphetamines: Part III

I've never had a gun pointed at me, like for real pointed at me, like "I might shoot you with this gun" pointed at me.

"PUT THE WEAPON DOWN NOW!"

Haha.

It's a butter knife you idiot.

"DROP THE KNIFE OR I'LL DROP YOU!"

Hahaha. These fools.

"Where did you get that line? *Law and Order*?" I reply as I shut the storm door and go back to my laptop.

Now they will go away.

Surely.

Surely they will go away now.

Right?

Go away police.

GO AWAY.

I think more police showed up.

Ugh.

“Michael! Come out of the house with your hands up!”

What, a megaphone!?

What are they still doing here!?

THIS IS NONSENSE.

Okay.

Okay.

Sigh.

They are not leaving.

Damn.

Whatever.

Fine.

I'll surrender.

I'll surrender.

Fine.

I open the door and place the knife, the harmless butter knife, at my feet.

There are extremely bright lights everywhere.

There are people with shotguns and pistols and snipers and RPG's and slingshots and spears and axes and trebuchets all over.

“Put your hands up and slowly step out of the house!”

Whatever.

Fine.

I put my hands up and step out, extremely slowly.

“STEP OUTSIDE OF THE HOUSE NOW!”

Jesus Christ man, I am coming out! Don't you see me stepping out!?

BAM!

The sound of a shotgun being fired reaches my ears.

Something hits me in the chest. It hits me very hard.

The shotgun goes off twice more.

BAM! BAM!

Something hits me in the gut.

Something hits me in the thigh.

I can't help but to collapse backward.

[August, 2013]

Leave a Message at The Beep

“Hey Lauren it's Michael. I was just calling to see how you were doing. Ryan is probably still in the withdrawal unit and can't make any calls out, but when he does he will probably call you first. Just wondering if you've heard from him yet. Also, I was curious if you knew of anything he needed. I was going to buy some shit and ship it up to him. Obviously cigarettes are a golden gift, but let me know if he needs any Tide or shampoo or phone cards or anything else really. I know it sucks being stuck in there without the shit you need. Okay... well, I just wanted to check in with you. I'm feeling a lot better now that we got him back into rehab. Hopefully, the baby you two have on the way will motivate him to get it right this time... Just give me a call when you get a chance. Thanks, Lauren... bye now.”

[October 1st, 2011]

Amphetamines: Part IV

Hmmm.

That hurt.

Still hurts.

A lot.

They shot me.

They shot me with little fists of pain.

They shot me!?

“GET YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR BACK!”

What?

Really?

You shoot me with three beanbag bullets and expect me to be able to do anything other than...

“TAZER! TAZER! TAZER!”

Oh, this can't be good.

[February 1st, 2014]

Emma

“Hello?”

“What's up, Ryan!?”

“Nothing.”

“I saw Lauren's post on Facebook dude, that baby pop out yet?”

“Not yet. She needs to dilate more, apparently.”

I went silent for a moment. I was so happy for them.

“Wow, man. I can't believe you're about to have a kid.”

“Neither can I, man.”

Now he went silent for a moment. I chimed back in.

“How is Lauren doing?”

Even over the phone I heard him take a small sigh before he said, “She's hanging in there man. Hey listen, dude, let me call you back, the doctors just came in.”

“Nah, don't worry about it, I just wanted to wish you both the best of luck. I'm happy for you guys.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll send you pictures. The baby is supposed to show up tonight or early tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll be looking for those pictures. For sure.”

“Alright man, I’ll call you tomorrow”

“Okay... oh, hey, Ryan?”

“What?”

“Try not to pass out.”

He laughed and said, “I won’t man, I won’t.”

“Alright, talk to you later.”

Just before midnight my phone went off. I grabbed it up and checked who had messaged me. It was Ryan. When I opened the message I saw a picture of mom and dad next to a little fat-faced baby and the message, “Welcome to the world, Emma.” I pulled my hand over my mouth and sat there, entirely speechless. I felt the urge to cry.

And so I did.

[October 1st, 2011]

Amphetamines: Epilogue

The neighbors gather outside after hearing gunshots and seeing the emergency vehicles. They watch as a young man, looking as unkempt as a bum, is escorted out of the house in handcuffs by police and paramedics. One of them says to the other, “What the hell is going on out here!?”

The other neighbor responds, “That kid was acting nuts, and the police had to take him down.”

“What??”

“Yup. He was on some sort of drugs.”

“What a shame.”

They stay gathered until, slowly, vehicle by vehicle, the ambulance and police cars siphon away, like water rolling down the drain. And then, with nothing interesting going on to keep them, the neighbors siphon away as well. And the street falls silent once more.

[January, 2013]

...Of The End

The Loft Violin Shop looked exactly as I remembered it. Stoically standing guard over North High Street was, I presume, this building's ethereally eternal destiny. The sign above the porch still swung back and forth in its aimless fashion, and the door still required considerable effort to open. The door let out its usual dissonance as I opened and shut it, and I felt comfort in recognizing the sounds.

Behind the counter stood a man, in his mid fifties I'd say, with silver hair and a miniature beer belly. He wore a woodworking apron around his torso and neck and had a very distinct pair of glasses. They consisted of circular lenses with very thin frames. It looked almost as if they were floating in front of his face.

"Hello there, young man! How can I help you!?" He belted out. His tone was upbeat and chipper, almost too much so. I suppose I couldn't have expected him to remember me.

"I would like to set up a cello rental, please."

He cocked his mouth at an angle, grabbed his chin, and averted his eyes upward and to the left.

"Hmmmmm. Let me check and make sure we still have one to rent. I believe we just got one back."

"Not a problem."

He disappeared into a back room. As I was waiting. I took the time to visually consume as much of the room as I could. There were at least a hundred violins and violas hung up on the back wall behind the counter. My desires for geometrical regularity were tantalized by the way they arranged the violins by size from smallest to largest. It reminded me of one of those AT&T commercials where they mimic the increasing bars used to delineate the strength of your phone service with other objects such as skyscrapers or Popsicle sticks. I was just beginning to realize that the same geometrical regularity was present on the adjacent wall where they hung the bows when the man reappeared from the back. He was carrying a cello with him.

"Okay, here we are."

"Awesome" I said, grinning from ear to ear as he set the instrument down on the counter.

He sat down at the computer behind the desk and said, "Have you rented from us before?"

"Yes."

"What's the name?"

“Michael Ahlbeck,”

He punched away at the keys and took a moment scrolling down the screen.

“Okay, here you are. If you could just look at this screen and confirm all the information we have on file for you...”

“Yup, that all looks correct.”

“And we can just bill this account you have on file?”

“Yeah, that’s still my checking account.”

“Ok, well, you’re almost set, let me just grab the serial number off of this cello and give you a receipt and you’ll be out the door, my friend.” He grabbed up a flashlight and shined it between the “S” holes on the cello. He squinted as he looked inside the hollow body of the instrument, then he went back over to the computer and punched in the numbers. His face scrunched up real quick, and he pulled his head back from the computer screen while pulling his glasses off.

I was unnecessarily worried by his reaction. “Is there something wrong?” I said.

“No,” he responded, yet he continued to appear very perplexed. He let out a long contemplative “Hmmm” before talking again. “Did you sell a cello back to us right after you finished paying it off? About three years ago?”

I laughed. Had it really been that long?

“Yes. Indeed I did.”

He continued to look absolutely enthralled by whatever was displayed on the screen. He stood up real quick and went back to the cello with his glasses and his flashlight.

“Not only did I sell it back to you guys...” I said, taking a moment to pause for dramatic effect, “... but it was you who was working that day.”

He tilted his head downward so that he could look at me over the top of his glasses. He squinted at me for a good three or four seconds, and then it hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Oh! I remember you! You’re the kid who played upstairs for like six hours until we closed!”

“Yup. That was me. I was a different person back then, that’s for sure.”

He nodded and said, “Yeah, well, wait till you get to my age and look back, kid. Huge difference.” We laughed together for a moment, and then he clicked his flashlight back on and took another look inside the cello. This time he wrote the serial number down on a piece of paper, number by number. He took the piece of paper over to the computer and compared it to the one he typed in. He took a huge breath in and exhaled loudly through his mouth while he removed his circular lenses once more.

“Well kid,” he began, “believe it or not, this cello here, the one I am about to rent to you...”

Now he took his turn to pause for dramatic effect. I'll note that his pause was much more effective than mine.

"Yes!?" I almost yelled at him.

"Well, this is the same cello that you sold back to us 3 years ago. It's the same exact serial number. It's the same exact cello. We've just been renting it out ever since it came back in."

"You're kidding me."

"Honest to God kid, look here..."

He showed me the numbers on the screen from my sale and then shined the light into the cello and let me compare.

They were the same.

"Well I'll be a horse's uncle."

I couldn't believe it. So much so that I just looked at him and smiled as he put the cello in its case and handed me the paperwork to sign.

I scribbled my signature incredibly fast and then he slowly handed the cello over the counter to me.

"Well, my friend," he said with a tickled grin, "here's your cello back. Thanks for letting us borrow it for the past three years." I grabbed the cello from him as we shared a laugh over his joke. I thanked him and headed for the door. Before I made it out he yelled after me.

"Hey... umm, Michael, right?"

"Yes?"

We made eye contact, and he beamed an embarrassingly genuine smile right at me and said, "If you pay that cello off again, do me a favor, would you?"

"Shoot."

"Please don't ever sell it. Music obviously means the world to you, kid."

I scoffed defensively and said, "And how exactly would you know that?"

He gave me that look people give. You know, the one where they know they have a better hand than yours, and they know that you know as well?

"Because what else could possibly be the case? You spent six hours playing it, on a Saturday afternoon, entirely alone."

I took a moment to think about it, and then, as I walked out the door I said one word.

"Touché."



A Day at the Circus
by Lashana Alford, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Rhunette Diggs

In the early spring of 2013, near Columbus, Ohio, I got out of bed and looked out of the window to see what the weather was like. The brightness of the sun was very deceiving, giving off the appearance that it would be a warm and sunny day. The window even felt slightly warmed from the sun's powerful rays, but the weather report predicted temperatures in the high 40's with possible rain showers. Despite the forecast, we weren't going to let the weather spoil our big day that has been a tradition that my family and I have kept for years. When I went to wake up my daughter Kyla (8) and my son Kaden (3), they jumped out of bed full of life, and energized. Smiling, Kyla asked me, "Is today circus day?" Smiling back, I gladly answered her with a yes.

As we got dressed, I reminded Kyla to dress warm, knowing how cold it was outside. After we ate the warm oatmeal that I had prepared for breakfast, we put on our coats and headed to the car. We were on our way to the fairgrounds to see the Shriner's Circus, just like we had done every year around this time. Even though we had been to this circus time and time again, there always seemed to be a new act to see, and that made it all the more exciting.

When we arrived at the circus, we prepared ourselves for the long, cold walk to the building where the circus was being held. Once inside, we shed our coats, and gave the ticket holder our tickets. We looked around, and there were amusement-park rides of all sizes, along with food

vendors that filled one whole side of this large, 60,000 square-foot building. The whole place smelled of freshly cooked French fries, and funnel cakes. I couldn't resist the temptation, so I bought fries and drinks for the three of us. We took our seats just in time for the show to begin. While circus music played in the background, the ringmaster came out and said, "Welcome to the Aladdin Shriners' circus!" As he announced one thrilling act after another, the kids all watched in awe.

They laughed when the silly clowns came out, and clenched my arm as the lion tamer led the group of lions from their cages for their performance. There was a high wire act, and another act that involved two motorcyclists riding dangerously close inside of a metal grated ball. At one point they even had a woman come stand inside the ball as they rode all around her.

Once intermission started, we rushed into line to get our picture taken with a small monkey and another picture with a snake. There was a long line of people wanting to get snake pictures taken. Once it was our turn to take the picture, the photographer told us to sit down and he approached us and handed us a boa constrictor that had to have been at least five feet long. Although we had done this before on many occasions, Kyla seemed a little frightened as the snake got a little too close to her, while Kaden seemed to be unaffected by the whole experience.

The kids got to ride a camel for the first time, and they thought that was really fun. In the past years at the circus, they offered elephant rides, and one year I actually worked up enough nerve to try riding one. It was an experience that I will never forget. While we stood in line to get on the elephant, I started to get scared. I never realized how enormous elephants were until I found myself standing there, almost underneath one. Once on top I realized that it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Although we were way up high, the elephant walked so slow that we didn't feel like we were at risk of falling off. We looked down on the crowds of people under us as the elephant walked around the ring, then it was time for us to get back off.

After we finished with the camel ride, intermission was about over, and it was time for us to head back to our seats. In the second half of the show we saw a man juggle bowling pins that were lit on fire, and a girl who could hoola hoop, using probably about twenty hoola hoops at one time. We also saw a dog act and another clown act. The final act of the show was a woman shooting out of a cannon. Everyone waited in silence as they counted down, and there she went, flying clear over our heads, across the room, and into a net that was waiting to catch her fall. Everyone clapped as she climbed down off the net, and as all of the other acts came back out into the ring and bowed. As usual, the show was spectacular. After the kids rode all the rides they could get on, we finally left.

On the ride home the kid couldn't stop talking about their favorite parts of the show. About 15 minutes into the ride home, I noticed that all the chattering had stopped and there was total silence. After more than five hours of circus fun and rides, Kyla and Kaden were so tired that they fell asleep. I smiled to myself, because I felt unusually warm now; for a chilly day.

Six Words that Forever Changed My Life
by Afia Chrappah, Columbus State Community College
Instructor: Dylan Canter

What is the most prominent memory from when you were eight years old? Was it catching your first baseball? Was it having your first sleepover? Perhaps it was something more serious like breaking your first bone or attending your first funeral. The most lasting memory for me was something that changed my life forever. When you are eight years old, you are very vulnerable in every sense of the word. The advice people give you, as well as the responses they give you, are very important to you at that delicate time in your life. When you are eight years old, you can no longer get away from punishment with a laugh, you can no longer say outlandish things without consequences. When I was eight years old, I was told something that changed my life forever. When you are eight years old being told something life changing can either put you in a place where you question ideas you once believed in, or it can cause you to stand firm in your beliefs.

I have moved around a lot in my life. I was born in Accra, Ghana. Ghana is located in West Africa, and it is also known as the Gold Coast. I lived there for the first five years of my life. My memory of Ghana is sporadic and bittersweet. My memories of Ghana include being surrounded by people, eating delicious food, and spending an endless amount of time playing in the sun (my other option was playing in the rain). My other memories of Ghana include living in a tiny two-bedroom house with six other people, three of those people kid relatives that I fought with over toys and TV time. What my memory does not include is spending time with my mother and father. The reason for that is that they were not around a lot during the first five years of my life. They both had very separate but valid reasons for that separation. I learned the reasons when I was eight years old.

I moved to America when I was five years old. I had a stepmother whose name was Becca. Becca came to Ghana before we moved to America; the reason she came to Ghana is still a mystery to me. My biological mother's name was Christina, and she was Ghanaian. I had lived with my biological mother Christina for my whole life up to the point we moved when I was five. I had seen my father only one time. That time was when he came with Becca to take me to America. The days leading up to the big move to America were a blur of confusion for my five year old self. I remember faintly: confusing words from my mother like "be a good girl and listen to your daddy." Those words were confusing because I was excited to move to America only because I thought my biological mother was coming with me. She didn't. To this day I cannot think about this life changing move without a mix of complex emotions. It is all because of six words uttered by my stepmother three years later.

My life in America from the point I moved from Ghana to the point my stepmother said six words that forever changed my life was confusing to say the least. The first roadblock for me was language. Ghana's official language is English but if one were to go to Ghana you would most likely hear the language of Twi. Twi is the Ashanti language spoken in Accra. Twi was the only language I spoke fluently. I had to learn English in Kindergarten (going much slower than the others in the class). The moment I stepped off the plane at CMH I knew my life was about to change drastically. I didn't know if it was for the better or for the worst but I was leaning towards the latter because I was still wondering where my mother was (maybe she took a different plane). She wasn't on a different plane and three years later I would once again be on a plane but not for a much anticipated reunion.

“Your mother is an angel now”. The words were said with fiend remorse and sorrow. It was December 2002. I was sitting in a dark room getting ready to go bed. It must have been about 9:05 pm. Flashback to three days before those words were spoken.

Christina (Bio Mother):*on the phone bad connection* “Alea”? (my nickname)

Afia: “Yea”?

Christina: “Afia”?

Afia: “Yes”

Christina: “Do you know who it is”?

Afia: “Yes”

Christina: “Afia, Afia Alea Alea, Can you hear me. It’s your mother Christina. AFIA????!!”

Afia: “I can hear you but you're breaking up...I have to go.”

Christina: “Afia I love you ok?” Can you hear me, I love...”

Afia: “Bye”

I will forever ask myself why the last conversation I would ever have with my mother went the way that it did. I know the answer, though. The answer is that at eight years old you are easily influenced by the people in your life. My stepmother was in the room, watching and listening to the conversation intently. Even at eight years old, I knew that if I had spoken to my biological mother the way that I wanted to then it would be an even longer time before I got to see her.

After being in America a while I had learned that my father didn’t really love Becca. She was a “pawn” in the quest to get my biological mother to America. Even though I was young and still yearning for the woman that gave birth to me and loved me endlessly, I knew enough not to get overly sappy with her on the phone with my stepmother in the room. What I didn’t know was that three days later the woman I left in Ghana, my mother, would die before the citizenship process was complete. When my stepmother came to tell me the news of my biological mother’s death, she simply said it as a fact with feigned sympathy and feigned regret. After all, she loved my father, and she wanted him and I to herself. When my father and I went to Ghana for the funeral he himself still had not spoken to me about my mother’s death. It was in Ghana that we sat down to discuss how to move forward.

Losing my mother taught me to be bitter. Growing up without her taught me to love the people in my life even more. My life has changed drastically since losing my mother, but this time I can say it was for the better. My dad has since remarried a wonderful woman and now has three more beautiful little girls. We are moving forward because it’s hard to walk backwards and still accomplish the goals ahead of us.

A Soldier's Right to Speak
by Joshua W Sexton, Ohio State University – Marion
Instructor: Ellen Seusy

I have never been very athletic. A few months of flag football in second grade was as “sporty” as I got. When I announced to my friends and family that I was joining the Army, it was met with an understandable amount of shock, and more than a little alarm. Nevertheless, not four months after I graduated high school in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I was in Indianapolis, taking the Oath of Enlistment. Getting to this point had already taken a mountain of paperwork and all manner of medical assessments. The oath is what makes it official. Any refusal after you’re sworn in is considered insubordination, and leads to court martial.

The choice to join the military inarguably took courage. I had many reasons for joining, all gilded by the honor and adventure a military career provides. But I also knew of the pain and suffering that Basic Training would put me through. Not to mention the inescapable fact that joining the military puts my very life in danger.

I went through Basic Training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and it was exactly like what I had expected: physically brutal and mentally devastating. Even the weather seemed determined to challenge. I was subjected to prolonged temperatures in excess of 100°, complete with dead grass blowing through the air, into my eyes, and under my clothes. Worse still was the snow and freezing cold which settled in during my last few weeks there. Physical Training is an integral part of military life, and, as designed, pushed me to the point of breaking, every day. Once broken, it took me a whole day to fully recover. Fortunately, this was taken into account, and physical training would alternate between strength training one day and running the next. Furthermore, soldiers are excused from all normal physical training the day before a Physical Fitness Assessment.

Basic training wasn't all obstacle courses and firing ranges. I learned a surprising amount of rules, regulations, and procedures that governed our modern military. For example, I learned how, in an effort to prevent any actual abuse to soldiers, I had the right to bring any concerns I had to my Supervising Officer, in private. If I felt that my concern had merit, but was not being addressed by my Supervising Officer, I was permitted to raise the issue with the next member in my chain-of-command. Additionally, I was forbidden to go anywhere alone while in training. I was required to have a "Battle Buddy" with me at all times. This served many purposes. Not the least of which was to ensure that there was a witness in all situations. In addition, I learned that Integrity is a core principle in the military. I received little formal instruction on the concept, but, along with every lesson on splinting a fracture and proper weapon maintenance, Drill Sergeants were always stressing personal integrity. Honesty was not a choice, it was the only option. As a soldier, I was expected to demonstrate not only physical courage, but moral courage as well.

The distinction between physical courage and moral courage is clearly outlined in the book *Moral Courage*, by Rushworth Kidder. On one hand, physical courage is remaining steadfast, knowing that the consequences are potentially harmful to my body. Moral courage, on the other hand, is remaining steadfast in the face of consequences of a social, emotional, or mental nature. Fortunately for me, personal integrity was a principle of mine even before I joined the military.

I excelled at all aspects of soldiering except one. Running. It took every ounce of my being, but I was eventually able to run two miles in under the sixteen minutes required for male soldiers to graduate. After graduation, I was off to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, for Advanced Individual Training. This is where I learned the skills specific to my job as a Ground Surveillance Systems Operator. It was a little less intense than Basic, but mostly because I knew now what was expected of me, and made fewer mistakes.

Fort Huachuca sits fifteen miles north of Mexico and 4616 feet above sea level. At that altitude, air is thin and my body had to work harder to get the oxygen it needed. Suffice it to say, it made running long distances hard for even the most seasoned runners. The Army allowed four weeks for me to acclimate, and then, once again, expected me to complete the two mile run portion of my Physical Fitness Assessment in less than sixteen minutes. I failed my first attempt.

Failing any Physical Fitness Assessment results in a make-up test, one week later. The day before my scheduled test, I knew that I shouldn't participate in morning physical training. I also knew that the officers leading the morning assembly formation didn't know about my impending fitness test. They would expect me to join a Physical Training group immediately following formation. My Drill Sergeant was a middle aged man with thick-rimmed glasses, named Drill Sergeant Waddell. He was the only one who could excuse me from Physical Training. I needed to remind him of my test, and I needed to do it before formation. The other Drill Sergeants wouldn't take my word for it.

In the morning, while the other soldiers were still gathering on the Drill Pad, I headed over to the Company Office. I was sure to bring along my Battle Buddy, Pvt. Zupco.

Zupco and I were waiting in the hall outside our Drill Sergeant's office when Drill Sergeant Anders stepped out of his own office, down the hall. Drill Sergeant Anders had a thin frame, but was extremely fit, and equally fierce. He was surprised to see us; we should have been forming up with the rest of the company.

"Sexton!" He exclaimed.

Zupco and I snapped into the At-Ease position. With my back straight, feet shoulder-width apart, and my hands together behind my back, I met Drill Sargent Anders's eyes, and asked "Yes, Drill Sergeant?!"

"Why aren't you on the drill pad?"

"I need to speak to my Drill Sergeant, Drill Sergeant."

"You *need* to form up for Assembly, Private. Now move out."

"I need to speak to my Drill Sergeant first, Drill Sergeant."

His eyes went wide as he hurried directly at me, stopping only a foot from my face. "I told you to move out! Now MOVE OUT!"

I fought hard to suppress the impulse to look away. I repeated, "I need to speak to my Drill Sergeant, Drill Sergeant." Not breaking eye contact.

"DROP!"

In one quick motion, Zupco and I dropped to the floor, into the front-leaning rest position.

“Zupco, why are you here?”

“I’m his Battle Buddy, Drill Sergeant.”

Drill Sergeant Anders looked back to me and demanded, “What are you doing, Sexton?”

“I need to speak to my Drill Sergeant, Drill Sergeant.”

He leaned over me a little. “Now you listen to me. You’re going to go out there, and form up with the rest of the company.”

“I have the right to speak to my Drill Sergeant.”

“The RIGHT?!” He exploded with anger, “Push!”

Zupco and I pushed and pushed. All while Drill Sergeant Anders stood over us hurling threats and radiating malice.

Standing up to, and outright defying, a Drill Sergeant took courage. A little bit of physical courage, yes, but I had long accepted physical punishment as matter of course. According to Rushworth Kidder, a morally courageous action consists of three parts: “a commitment to moral *principles*, an awareness of the *danger* involved in supporting those principles, and a willing *endurance* of that danger” (7). I was fully aware of the danger involved with making my stand. Drill Sergeant Anders's opinion of me was not the only thing at risk. I was in the Company Office. Behind every door was an Officer who could make my life miserable, not to mention the threat of Court Martial for insubordination. Confident that I had the right to speak to my Supervising Officer, I was willing to endure whatever consequences transpired. It was my commitment to the principle of integrity, both mine and the Army’s, that gave me my confidence. It was moral courage that empowered me to look Drill Sergeant Anders in the eyes, and repeat my defiance.

Suddenly calm, Drill Sergeant Anders asked me again, “you gon’ a form up?”

“I need to speak –”

“PUSH!”

Another volley of well-practiced hatred was interrupted when Drill Sergeant Waddell entered the Company Office. All I could see was white linoleum tiles with sparse blue and green speckles, but I could hear the thump of his boots as he approached. I imagined him looking at me and Zupco face-down on the floor, then at Drill Sergeant Anders dripping with rage, and then back to me.

Summing up the situation, Drill Sergeant Anders explained, “Sexton says he has the *right* to see you.”

I stopped doing push-ups and looked up at Drill Sergeant Waddell the best I could. He frowned at me. “Get up,” he said simply. “Inside.” Zupco and I jumped up, and hurried into our Drill Sergeant’s office.

Inside, with the door closed behind us, I nervously reminded my Drill Sergeant of the make-up Physical Fitness Test. He maintained a serious glare throughout, but only responded with,

“I know.” I further explained how I shouldn’t participate in this morning’s Physical Training. “I know.” He repeated. “I was planning on pulling you out after formation.”

I was feeling a little embarrassed by the seemingly unnecessary scene I had just caused in the Company Office. But I left it at “Yes, Drill Sergeant. Thank you, Drill Sergeant.”

Zupco and I exited the Company Office without further incident. Drill Sergeant Anders had gone on about his business. When we got back to the Drill Pad, our whole platoon was there, but most Drill Sergeants, and other Officers, weren’t. Zupco, loud and crude, boasted about our ordeal. He proclaimed me the bravest person he had ever met. Zupco even went as far as to call out Christian, the most physically superior soldier in our platoon, and told him he had nothing on me. I welcomed the praise, and my esteem amongst my fellow soldiers was raised substantially.

That afternoon, my platoon had finished another formation, and was heading out for training elsewhere. Drill Sergeant Waddell called to me, “Hold up, Sexton. Drill Sergeant Anders wants to speak with you.” A moment later, my platoon was gone. Only Zupco and I were left on the Drill Pad when Drill Sergeant Anders exited the Company Office, and started toward us. My dread only grew as he approached. I knew he was coming to finish his retribution. Zupco and I snapped At-Ease as Drill Sergeant Anders neared, but, to our surprise, he didn't stop, didn't even look at us. He just stated clearly, "Sorry about before," and kept walking.

It’s true, I did struggle athletically. But after that display of moral courage, nobody questioned why I was there. I had what it took to be a soldier.

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