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But Never of the Now: Creatively Nonfiction Women

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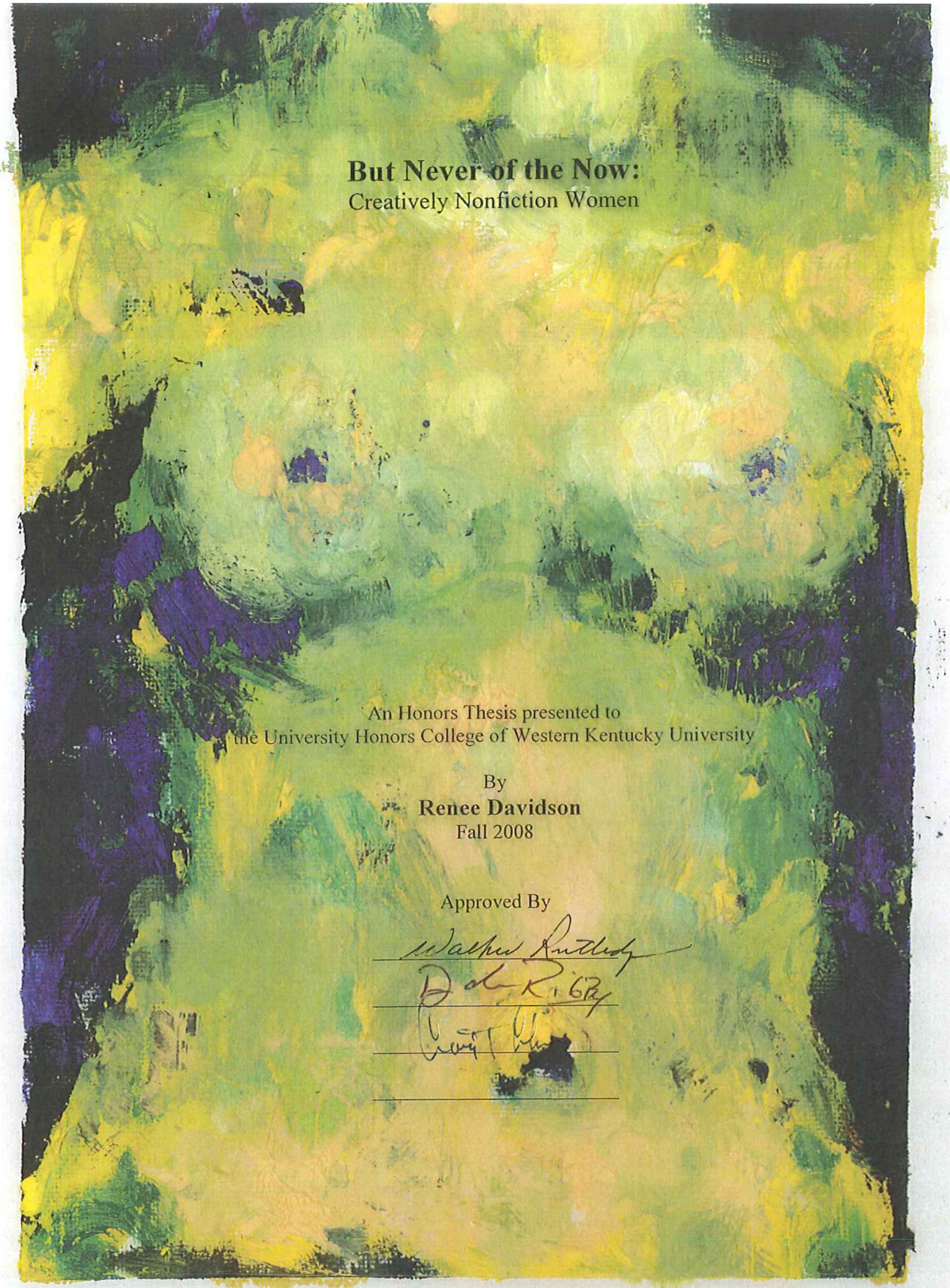

But Never of the Now:

Creatively Nonfiction Women

An Honors Thesis presented to
the University Honors College of Western Kentucky University

By
Renee Davidson
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Approved By

How many loved your moments of glad grace

And loved your beauty with love false or true;

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows in your changing face.

W.B. Yeats

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Preface

I have a thing for women. They fascinate me. I have come to believe that all women are emotional, flighty, indecisive, subordinate, talkative, shoppers. Except for me. And the women I write about. And most of the women I know. This is not to say that we don't at any time make decisions based upon emotion, change our minds once rationalization proves a decision wrong, choose to offer assistance rather than take charge, or even enjoy an afternoon of window-shopping. Generally speaking, without generalizing the general behavior of average women, we are a diverse group of multi-faceted dispositions, abilities, and experiences, yet much of what we encounter is similar due to one primary commonality: being female.

In this collection, I have sought to provide insight into five specific women's lives. Some of their stories come from my own experience and interpretation of their journeys as I have walked along beside them; much of the journeys they have traveled alone. Their brave recollections inform my pieces, their pieces.

Realizing the ripe fields of material at my fingertips by knowing and loving these women, I developed the idea for a collection of creative nonfiction essays, one for each woman. The collection will give nonfiction voice to real-life trials of womanhood. The collection does not create the tangible reality of feminist issues, for this already exists as evidenced by these women. Rather these pieces bring attention to the existing reality of the social concerns taught and debated in college classrooms and political forums. Issues addressed range from teen pregnancy and traditional gender socialization to domestic violence and sexuality. Yet throughout all these pieces, as was pointed out to me by an insightful advisor, there are threads of my own journey to independence, the dirtiest of all dirty feminist issues.

Yeats called it the pilgrim soul. And it irritated and intrigued him in his beloved Maud Gonne, a woman of political verve and vigor. I see such a soul in myself: the desire to speak up, to achieve, to become and continue becoming, to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. This is the soul of all women. At least those of whom I have written. And those I know. We may not wear it on all occasions, but it's there, tucked in shirt pockets or socks. An independent spirit. A pilgrim soul.

Getting By

The military taught him to be mechanical. The stocked pantry was lined with boxed dinners on the right, syrups and jellies on the left, crackers on the top shelf, all at attention. Every time he opened the refrigerator for a glass of tea, he'd give it a quick once over and rearrange as necessary, grumbling as he worked. He believed laundry should be done every time the pink wicker hamper filled, dinner should be on the table between six and six-thirty every night, and there was never an adequate excuse for letting the milk, butter tub, or detergent drop below half mast.

She tried to keep up. She was no military wife. Just a short, sweet, Southern woman with the slowest drawl north of the Tennessee River. She was the kind of woman who bought groceries one item at a time and took to work whichever car was at the end of the driveway. Dinner usually made it to the table around 6:35. Sometimes it was a homemade Southern specialty like fried pork chops, baked macaroni and cheese, green beans, and mashed potatoes; other times, she grabbed a few pieces of fried chicken from Dodge's Convenience Store on her way home. But she never missed a parent-teacher meeting, and there was never a holiday when her children went to school without cupcakes.

Thomas and Carolyn Davidson, better known to the grandkids and neighborhood kids as Papaw and Nana. The mystery of middle Tennessee. How did they get together? Why do they stay together?

The initial fault lies with a mutual barber/hairdresser and a small town. Savannah, Tennessee, like most small towns in the South, is notorious for a population of nosy busy-bodies

who, by some biological or environmental quirk, cannot stay out of others' business. The scene went something like this:

"Now, Tommy, who are you seeing these days?" she asked, looking at him in the mirror, a comb held between her fingers like a cigarette.

"Oh, no one, Barbara. Just trying to get the kids all out of the house right now," he answered with a blush.

"How old are they all now?"

"Tom Jr.'s nineteen, Vince is eighteen, and Lisa's sixteen."

"Well, now, they're nearly all gone."

"I guess."

"You know Louise and Vannie Bridges's daughter has two boys around those ages."

"Is that the Louise down at Sears?"

"Yes, yes, that's her. Carolyn's the daughter. She's raised those boys alone for about thirteen years now. Joe and Johnny. Good boys, those two."

Their first date followed soon after. They got married in Lisa's and Johnny's senior year of high school, and moved closer to Nashville not long after graduation.

It is my fault they stay together. My dad, Vince, followed them to Nashville and met my mom, Lorrie, at Tech school. I was the first grandchild. The first person to whom Nana and Papaw shared claim. Eleven days after I was born, I started the tradition of overnight stays at the grandparents' house, and they've raised me ever since.

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“I don’t know why you don’t have the money to come home...”

It was a phone conversation I overheard many times. Nana would pace back and forth in the corner of the garage as if she were in a boxing ring. I could hear her mother's parrot-like shriek from the opposite side of the garage door.

“I told you, Mother, I had to give Tom my check this week...”

“He doesn’t need your check if he has enough money to take those vacations to Pigeon Forge in July. How much does that timeshare cost you?”

“We have our money worked out, Mother. I’m off Tuesday through Thursday next week. I’ll come home then. Daddy’s doing all right, isn’t he?”

“Well, I’m sure he would like to see his daughter.”

“Mother, I can’t be going places every weekend. You know I had to go see Johnny and the boys last week. I hadn’t seen them in almost two months. Now, I don’t have the money this week, but I’ll be home next Tuesday.”

Silence.

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Louise Bridges was a tyrant. Five-feet tall, barely one-hundred pounds, wiry hair and yellowing porcelain teeth. She would work in the kitchen and bark orders at her daughter in the back bedroom.

“Sweep the porch, Carolyn.”

“The dishes won't do themselves, Carolyn.”

“Nancy Carolyn Bridges, why haven't you dusted the bedrooms yet?”

The young Carolyn, an average student, marching band majorette, and part-time housekeeper for her mother, could do nothing properly. Carolyn conspired with Jody Bonee at

sixteen, faked a shotgun wedding, and escaped from under Louise's tyranny. Fear didn't set in until after a month of being Mrs. Bonee when Carolyn still wasn't pregnant.

Joe was born eleven months after the wedding, and Johnny came a couple years later. But Bonee was no different from her mother, and Carolyn refused to subject her sons to a dictatorship. She raised them alone.

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She raised me. Without hesitation she kept me while my mother dealt with my two unruly older brothers. Without a thought about the expense of raising a second generation of children or the emotional burden of caring for a motherless girl, she signed for full custody the morning after my mom died.

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"I used to be a lot more confident in myself before I married your papaw."

We were sitting at a red-light on our way to Wal-Mart.

"I know, Nana."

"I would have left him years ago if I wouldn't have lost you, but it's okay, isn't it? We get by," she said with a thin smile and a double pat on my hand resting on the console between us.

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Cabinets slammed.

"I guess you think I'm made of money don't you? If you didn't spend your check by Saturday afternoon every week you wouldn't have to get any loans. You borrow...what? Three-hundred? And end up paying back a thousand by the time you can pay it off!"

"I just need to borrow fifty dollars to get a few groceries for the week so you can have sandwiches at work," her statement more of an apology.

"This is ridiculous! I don't know why you can't handle money."

"Well, honey, when my entire check has to go to the car insurance this week, and last week I had to give you most of my check for the utilities..."

"I'm paying the house payment, the phone bill, most of the groceries...," he said with accusing irony.

"I can pay you back on Friday– "

"You're damn right you will."

He was severe. His harsh Northern accent overpowered her soft Southern sound. He seemed to win their arguments even when he conceded, as he almost always did after a few door slams and "Goddammits."

She was a rock. Seemingly unmoved by his words. She had had plenty of practice being patient and calm in other lives. Her shell had grown thick waiting for the right moment to breach the subject and then withstanding the necessary rebuttal to get what she wanted in the end.

She shut him up for awhile one fall. Johnny's wife of fourteen years died suddenly of liver cancer. For four months, Nana spent five days a week in Murfreesboro, TN, at work, leaving immediately on Friday to drive forty-five miles south of home for two days with Johnny and his two young sons. She would spend Friday night through Monday morning helping her son and grandsons adjust to life without wife and mother. One night during the week, Papaw was going through the cabinets and refrigerator yelling to her about what they were out of– bread, cereal, deli meat, cheese slices, Hamburger Helper– but Nana didn't reply with her usual "Why

don't you go out and get it yourself?" Instead, she sat down at the kitchen table and started crying.

Five minutes into the scene she was finally able between gasps to explain: "I can't run two households on my own, Tom."

He didn't mention the lack of groceries for three weeks.

That was two years ago. This past spring she traveled back and forth to Savannah. Her father, age eighty-eight, looked cold and stiff, as if rigor mortis had set in. She explained to anyone who would listen in line at the gas station, in a doctor's waiting room that "he's eat up with cancer." The doctors gave up on surgery as a means of postponement. And so he spent his waking hours, one or two at a time, sitting mummified in a rigid wing-back chair, chewing tobacco toothlessly and spitting into a styrofoam cup.

Vannie was her refuge. He was quiet and obedient, standing a head above his wife and daughter in the hallway's family photo. He went to the bathroom after meals to chew his tobacco, knowing it wasn't a public habit. The man who let her drive the last thirty miles home from Jackson when Louise wasn't in the car, the man who took her sons hunting and helped them catch their first fish on Pickwick lake. He taught them to ice the fish overnight so there was less blood during the cleaning.

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"I've never told anyone about this. My mother cannot know about this."

"You don't have to tell me, Nana..."

"No, no. I've been waiting to tell someone for almost fifty years, and I want to tell you."

"All right, Nana."

“My daddy had an accident when I was in the seventh grade. He used to work on trucks in a shop, and one day the truck came down on him. The lifts... is that what they’re called?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“The machines that hold the car up in the air so they can work underneath...”

“I know what you’re talking about.”

“The lift gave out on this truck and it came down on him. He was crushed. Spent almost nine weeks in the hospital in Memphis. Mother stayed there with him for awhile, but I had to go back to school. Tom and Doris Johnson– our neighbors next door– I wish you could have met them– I stayed with them, and they would take me to Memphis every Friday when I got out of school and bring me back every Sunday night.”

I gave her an understanding nod from the other end of the couch.

“When he came home, Mother went to work at the Sears in town. Daddy couldn’t work for another six months. I had to take care of him when I got home from school. Fix him dinner, clean the house cause Mother was at work. That’s a lot for a twelve-year-old to handle, taking care of a parent.”

“You're right.”

“He wasn’t supposed to leave the house. But I would catch him walking out into the field in the afternoons. He told me he was just stretching his legs. It was a lie. I noticed once he took the handgun with him. I followed him out there, but he made me go on back to the house. He came in after forty-five minutes or so. That’s when I started unloading and hiding the gun. He found it a few times, but then he knew I knew. I was scared to death.”

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“Mother, just about scared me to death this morning.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She called me to come on home. She can’t take care of Daddy with her leg hurting her like it is. She thinks it’s a blood clot. So she’s down and there isn’t anybody to help her take care of Daddy, and you know how the nurse said he’s not going to have any more good days.”

“Oh. Well, we’ll see you on Wednesday, I guess.”

“I hope so. Daddy’s not looking good. And he knows it. Last week when I was leaving Savannah, he asked me when I was coming back. He’s never asked me that before. I told him just as soon as I got up Monday morning. He knows he doesn’t have much longer.”

“He’s lived a good life, Nana. Eighty-eight years is a long, good life.”

“I know. I know.”

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She claims that I’m still her “little girl” even though I don’t look or act like the bald infant she unofficially adopted 20 years ago. She hates that I’m a senior in college. She hates how she works 10 am to 7 pm Thursday through Sunday. How she only gets to see me for a couple hours on Friday and Saturday when I drive the 100 miles home to visit one or two weekends a month. She wishes she could come spend a day with me in Kentucky, go out to eat or walk around the mall. She tries to give me money when I leave for school, but I know she needs it more than I do. Most of all she hates that I’m growing up. I was her first girl. I was her second chance. Her refuge.

Vannie passed away three days after his eighty-ninth birthday. I sat behind Nana in the chapel, while the Southern Baptist preacher spoke of how one day our judgment would come, too.

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Nana, now alone with tyrants in both homes, “Mother” in Savannah and “Tom” in Murfreesboro, finds no escape in a third person. There is no one too sick or too heartbroken to live without her gracious help. Sitting alone in her brown leather chair watching Home-and-Garden television in the moments she can keep her eyes open after a long day at work she thinks about her father, her sons, her grandchildren, remembering what she has done for those she has loved more than herself, thinking of how she rescued them from the grief that sat on their chests like coffins sinking into the earth.

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“Who will I have to talk to when you're ten hours away at grad school?”

“You can call me any time, Nana.”

“I know, I know. You've spoilt me by coming home on the weekends. I just don't know what I'll do when you move so far away. Your grandfather just sits upstairs in the den watching TV, and I'm down here alone. You know, I don't sleep in the bed anymore. I'm just so tired after work I fall right to sleep on this couch.”

“We'll get by, Nana.”

“I'll be all alone when you're gone. I'll be all alone.”

My Mother's Sex Education

> **<u>sexual intercourse</u>:** ***function: noun*** **heterosexual intercourse involving the penetration of the vagina by the penis. (Merriam-Webster Online)**

Every kid looks it up. Sneaks the dictionary from the oak bookshelf in the living room. Turns to the approximate three-quarters' mark, flips a few pages. And there it is. I would skim the passage quickly with another finger tucked in a non-suspect page closer to the front just in case someone walked into the room, as if looking up a word in the back quarter of the dictionary automatically meant it was dirty.

When I was six years old, my mother taught me about sex. At that time, she, my two older half-brothers, and I lived in her childhood room in the back of my granny's house in Nashville. After divorce number two, this was our interim flat until our names finally topped the government housing list. Mom and two of us children would climb into the squeaky double bed, and each night we'd rotate which kid slept on the army cot in the floor. That night was cot night for me.

We never went right to sleep. It's impossible or at least improbable for three children in the same room to "settle down" at bedtime and drift away peacefully to dreamland. Mom was never one for settling down either. At twenty-eight years of age, she was more like an older, all-knowing teenage sibling than a traditional mother. Mom was the older, wiser head of our kid clique.

The clique met nightly before bed to read the latest Garfield comics or a subsequent chapter in *The Phantom Tollbooth*. And some nights, Mom played the cool kid card. She told us

things, taught us things adults didn't want us to know about. She met privately with each child to advise him or her on the best way to prank a sibling. She bragged about the trouble she got into at our ages. She filled us in on the details of her first date at a race track. And tonight she explained to us the ultimate adult secret.

A foot lower than everyone else, I didn't hear whether one of my brothers asked her the classic "Where do babies come from?" Of my two older brothers, Jason, the middle child, would be the one to ask. He was always toeing the line between good and questionable. Once he snuck into the church library and glued all the pencils together, then left a note saying, "Only me and God will know who did this." His logic was a little off; Jason got a spanking and lost all television privileges for a week.

I remember Mom climbing out of bed to see where Granny was. Asleep on the living room couch. We were safe.

"Okay, okay. I guess you're old enough to hear about sex," she said.

She didn't go through the whole "When a man and a woman love each other" nonsense. She went right for the good stuff. Of course at age six, I thought my vagina was what I peed out of. So for years, I questioned how much fun grazing genitals really was. This, however, was not my primary concern that night.

"Mom, I have a question," I said, my face red hot in the dark.

"Go ahead. I'll answer any questions you have."

Still embarrassed, I went to the bed and whispered in her ear: "Do you have to take all your clothes off?"

I couldn't imagine being naked in front of anyone but her.

"Well, no. You could wear a shirt if you wanted. But it's more fun naked."

I shuddered at the thought.

We had seen Mom naked at least twice a day. She would always change in front of us, that was until my brothers could recognize what boobs were. They would cup their hands over their own flat chests and snort inconsiderate prepubescent laughter. She only changed in front of me after that.

Matthew and Jason giggled at my modesty from the other side of the bed. But my blushing quickly subsided when Jason asked the next question.

"Can only men and women do it?"

I rolled my eyes at such a stupid question but was cut off from a premature "Well, duh!" reply by my mother.

"No, no. Sometimes a man and a man will have sex. Or even a woman and a woman."

While she and Jason worked out the logistics of these situations, my attention was drawn to the hall light that suddenly came on under the door.

"Shhh..." Mom had noticed it, too.

Granny had slid off the couch to go to bed. Like those of a somnambulist, Granny's sloth-like movements sounded a slow series of creaks in the hall. Sludge, my granddaddy's dog, clicked her toenails ahead of Granny into the bedroom. Our conversation resumed following the thud of her closing door and a few nervous giggles. We had almost been caught.

> **sexy: *function: adjective*** **1. sexually suggestive or stimulating: erotic 2. generally attractive or interesting: appealing. (Merriam-Webster Online)**

My mom was sexy. I remember her small pear-shaped breasts bouncing slightly under her loose Pink Floyd t-shirt. She rarely wore a bra. Didn't think she needed one. Her jeans were

tight like a fitted sheet, pulled by every angle and bend. The curve of her hips, working against the sharp V between her thighs, narrowing into long, slender legs. She called them her stilts.

The surprise despair of becoming a woman hit me during my senior year of high school. I couldn't fit my new child-bearing hips into my size 1 jeans, and though most girls were glad to upgrade to a B-cup in Victoria's Secret, I despised the need for a camisole. No longer the stick-figure girl who proudly weighed just over 100 pounds, I took months to feel comfortable about the slightest sign of body fat. Over the next two years, my weight settled into a comfortably adult range. Then I started to recognize my body. Every time I got out of the shower and looked in the mirror I saw her. Pear-shaped breasts, curved hips, and a sharp V.

Empirically, my mother was sexy. A woman typically knows something about sex-appeal if she gets pregnant at seventeen. My brother Matthew was born to a Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Watts one year and three months before Mom's high school graduation date. Matthew isn't visible in the one surviving wedding picture, but he's there just beneath the small bouquet of roses Mom holds across her belly.

My own father, Mom's second husband, was sexy in a lead-guitarist kind of way. Mom called him her rockstar.

"That's the one thing about your dad, he always did have great taste in music," she would say as we listened to Bon Jovi with the windows down on the way to school.

During their six years of marriage, Dad and Mom would drink together and smoke together at night. The scent of strawberry incense mingled with marijuana musk and covered the walls in a smoke-film. They would shower together in the mornings. They fought like the screaming metal bands they listened to in the afternoons. Threw things and trashed the living

room like the morning following a hotel after-party. Eventually Mom grew tired of him and his lifestyle, and we left.

> **<u>panty</u>: *function: noun, pl. panties* a woman's or a child's undergarment covering the lower trunk and made with closed crotch-- usually used in plural. (Merriam-Webster Online)**

Mom slept in t-shirts and panties. She had this one black nightshirt that had faded to match her dark hair. One night when my brothers were staying with their dad, Mom let me sleep in her bed. After reading a complete book of Garfield comics, eating two cups of chocolate ice cream with milk poured over it, and talking mischievously about my brothers' supposed girlfriends, we went to sleep. She in her black shirt. I in a white and pink nightgown with ruffles along the bottom hem.

She got up in the middle of the night, probably to go to the bathroom. She always did. When she came back, there was peach skin where white panties should have been. I stayed awake for the next hour listening for a man in the kitchen. I was sure a man broke into our house and held her up at gunpoint when she was leaving the bathroom. Mom had to exchange her panties for her life. I didn't know how I would do it, but I was determined to protect Mom if he came into the bedroom looking for her. Lucky for him, my imaginary intruder never came out of the kitchen.

A year later, a man did steal her heart and her panties. Charles Wayne Wilson interrupted my mom's breakfast one morning in a McDonald's in August 1996. I met him in September. He seemed nice enough. By December Mom had a ring, and by the end of January she had a new last name. By April I had learned to be in my room when he got home from work just in case the dog had an accident or Matthew had made a bad grade. The smallest thing could ignite Charles. His face would grow as red as a stick of dynamite, and I swear smoke blew from his ears and nostrils like Yosemite Sam in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, only Charles didn't know how to cuss in

German, just English. Sometimes I heard things thud against the wall that separated the living room from my room. Sometimes I could hear Matthew crying, hidden in the laundry room. Mom would usually be apologizing. She didn't argue with Charles the way she and my dad argued. Once I crept out of my room and crouched just before the entranceway to the living room. I peeked around the corner. Her long legs were tucked in a squeeze so tight that her arms were as white as her breathless face.

In May, my brothers and I did the unthinkable: we disbanded the clique and left Mom to defend herself. My father's parents took temporary custody of me, and Matthew and Jason went to live with their dad. On June 26, 1997, we attended Mom's funeral. Charles had come home early on June 21. Mom's clothes were still on hangers lying across the couch so that she could run before he arrived. They fought all night. The newspapers said she fought back. Mom wouldn't apologize for leaving to be with her kids, her best friends. She died the next day from internal bleeding in her brain.

In Plato's symposium, Diotima, the only woman whose opinion is heard in the discussion of Eros, defines Love based on the desire for immortality. She says, "Love wants... reproduction and birth in Beauty". A mortal wants to live forever and by "reproduction...leaves behind a new young one in place of the old".

It's strange how true I have found this simple exchange of life. My oldest brother, Matthew, lived with Granny for seven years after Mom died. He slept in that same back bedroom until he left for the Army's Basic Training at twenty-three.

Jason was diagnosed transsexual. His therapist says that in the grieving process he wanted Mom back so badly that he began to identify with her, literally recreating her in himself.

He reads the same Terry Brooks novels she read, listens to MeatLoaf, and dates the unfortunate cheaters, addicts, and beaters that Mom did.

"Doesn't she look just like Lorrie Faye?"

It's the inevitable question Granny poses every Christmas. Sitting in her disheveled living room where newspapers and beer cans litter the dusty hardwood floor, on a couch with ripped seams, between two mutts who replaced Sludge seven years ago, my brothers and I shift uncomfortably.

I feel sorry for Matthew and Jason, forced to see Mom in my face, my body. The final step to her immortality. The one step they can't reach.

Really, I love to hear how much I look like my mother. Little girls grow up trying to become their mothers. Sneaking into their rooms to the dressing table, covering their faces with rouge and coloring outside of their lip lines with red lipstick. My mom's size ten heels swallowed my feet. Her silky nightgowns hung sexless on my grade-school frame. But I can fit them now.

"Yeah, Granny. She looks just like Mom."

> **<u>body</u>: *function: noun* 2a. the organized physical substance of an animal or plant either living or dead: as (1): the material part of nature of a human being (2): a dead organism: corpse. (Merriam-Webster Online)**

It took ten years for me to find the newspaper articles on my mom's death. While the news was red hot, Nana told me I could see the articles when I was older. I found them two weeks ago, the second week of 2008, when I was twenty years old. Packing to move back into the dormitories at Western Kentucky University, I searched through my grandmother's drawers for my extra-long twin-sized sheets. The newspaper clippings were in the middle drawer of her

dresser. I sat for two hours leaning against the bed, with my feet propped on the dresser, my toes stretched up to scratch at the open middle drawer. I held my thumb over Charles's face while I read the text. Six out of seven articles described the policemen finding "the" body in the living room. Only one mentioned "her" body.

That night when I was getting ready for bed, I stripped down in front of my bathroom mirror. I studied my reflection. I looked at my hands and reached over to my jewelry stand beside the sink. For my eighteenth birthday, I was given Mom's rings. I slipped the wedding band and small diamond ring on my finger. I looked into her eyes that are my eyes. Her shoulders, her waist and thighs. Her body is sexy on me.

Rearranging Beauty

"The pictures are wrong," Karah said.

"Yeah, I know. They bother me, too."

We were sitting on my couch looking across the room at the 16x20 graduation pictures on the wall. All my life they've been on that wall above the piano. My aunt and uncles in Hardin County High maroon for eternity. The owners of the house, my paternal grandparents, decided that the 25-year-old suburban home was ready for a face lift the fall I left Tennessee for college. In the nesting process, the graduation pictures on the wall were unknowingly rearranged.

"We should fix them."

I hesitated to answer her. I knew she was serious, and she knew that this was the kind of silly act that I only talked about doing. I'm very status quo, the type of person who refuses to strip off the "Do Not Remove Under Penalty of Law" tag from a mattress no matter how annoying I find the crinkly noise it makes when I turn over in the night. I would never actually move around the pictures of my own volition no matter how much it bothered me to see Uncle Johnny in Uncle Tom's rightful place.

Looking at Karah looking back at me, my fight-or-flight reflex kicking in, I quickly weighed the possibility of getting caught against the nirvana of correctly arranged photographs. Nirvana won, and it smelled like teen spirit all over again.

"All right," I said determinedly, "let's do it."

I stood up from the couch and walked across the room to the piano. Karah stopped rocking the Graco Snugride car seat; her daughter, Anna Beth, was safely and snugly asleep still buckled inside from the car ride to my house.

My grandparents were asleep too. I could hear my grandfather snoring in the room above us, a sound like sweaty skin peeling from the leather backseat of an old station wagon. There was no need to worry that he would come down the stairs to discover our mischievous agenda. Nana, on the other hand, might awaken if we got carried away with our giggling. She was a light sleeper, and we had been known to stir her with our late-night conversations and contagious laughter, an inevitable development of adolescent girls staying up past midnight. But, Nana would probably pour herself a glass of milk and go back upstairs without a word.

I had claimed Karah as my bestfriend since the day I sat next to her in 8th grade physical science. For the next five years, we spent every summer, overnight bag in hand, alternating between her house and mine. We even managed to con a school-night sleep-over on occasion.

Even now as supposedly grown-up twenty-year-olds, Karah and I still have sleep-overs, but at this stage in life, we have to ask permission from her husband rather than our parents, and our extra guest, the five month-old Anna Beth, now separates Karah and me in bed.

"You pull them down and I'll stack them on the couch," Karah said, opting out of the manual labor because of her height. "I couldn't reach them even if I stood on the piano stool," she explained.

"All right, who's coming down first?"

"Johnny"

I turned back toward the wall. These pictures were the unattainable– some far-off dream

of adulthood, of perfection. Every curl was in place. Every bow tie straight, and every smile genuine. They were beautiful.

Carefully I lifted the antique frame, loosening the grip of its teeth on the nail as I pulled up and away from the wall.

Laying Uncle Johnny's picture down on a fleece blanket, I imagined it circling around him, comforting him with its fresh warmth and softness. Johnny, Nana's youngest son, had not had an ideal adulthood recently. Last year, he lost my Aunt Sana to liver cancer. The doctors discovered the disease only six weeks before she died, and they couldn't identify it for another two weeks. She was my favorite aunt, always sitting by me at Nana's family gatherings. Neither of us really fit in with the rest of that family. We weren't blood-related after all, just pawns of fate, the result of two people being in the right place at the right time.

Fate aligned Sana and Johnny one night at a country western dance hall where someone introduced them to each other in hopes that they would dance. They were, after all, the best dancers in the club. Fate for me stepped in when my parents met at a Nashville tech school. My dad was studying to be an electrician and my mom, a secretary. Her last name being Watts, my dad's pickup line went something like this: Excuse me, but you're the prettiest watts I think I've seen all day.

Karah met her husband in government class her senior year of high school. It was a month after she lost a friend to a patch of black ice and a yellow school bus. He was there the night she went into the hospital because of depression-induced migraines, and he was there the night she didn't graduate from Blackman high because of truancy. Some mornings you just can't get out of bed. Some mornings the warm covers are the only comfort you have from an ugly, snarling world.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’ve wanted to since last fall, but I just haven’t. I thought I’d get over the whole out-of-order thing, but it drives me crazy every time I come home.”

“You’re so OCD, Renee. Good thing you have me to enable you. Who's next?”

“Hmmm… isn’t Johnny supposed to be in the bottom left corner?”

“Yeah, I think so. So, Joe has to move next.”

Joe came off the wall more easily than Johnny did, but Joe’s nail put up a fight when Johnny tried to reclaim his correct spot on the wall. Every time I tried to hang Johnny's portrait the nail pushed all the way against the wall as if hiding from the frame's teeth. After a short laugh at my ineptitude, Karah held the nail thumb’s width out from the wall while I carefully placed the correct notch on the nail. The frame hung precariously until we straightened it against the wall. Success.

As we stood back to gaze on our accomplishment as one would a work of art in a gallery, Karah asked, “Does that look right to you?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe Joe was supposed to go there, and Uncle Tom goes in Johnny’s old spot.”

After a few minutes of holding Joe’s picture over the other relatives on the wall to get a better sense of his place, we were more confused than ever.

“Do you have any pictures of the old wall?”

“Well, there’s definitely a picture of me practicing at the piano somewhere,” I said.

We went into the hall armoire and dug through my grandfather’s perfectly chronological stacks of family photo albums. As a military retiree, Papaw had a place for everything, and

everything in its place. His work bench in the garage even had Stymo labels indicating what went where. Maybe I inherited my obsessive compulsions from him, or maybe I just learned them from living under his strict watch. But his attention to detail made it rather easy to find the picture we were looking for.

I was in sixth grade with the worst haircut of my life. I remember wearing a headband to hold back the mushroom bangs that started in the exact middle of the top of my head. My hair puffed out past my shoulders, even when restrained. My metallic smile and practically concave chest also testified to my awkward transition into adolescence. Sitting in the floor in front of the armoire, I looked up at my own graduation picture on the adjacent wall. Smooth straight hair, straight white teeth, and bare shoulders. Thank God for braces and straightening irons.

"Okay, so it's Tom up top, Johnny on the bottom; then your dad and Joe on the opposite side."

"And Lisa's already in the middle."

"Right, no need to move her."

Oscar Wilde said: "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these men there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty." I wonder about those who find beautiful meanings in ugly things. Maybe Wilde didn't spend time contemplating the ugly. At this point in life, I wonder if all would be peaceful and beautiful if Karah and I could go back to eighth grade before we contemplated the ugly long enough to discern its enduring effects.

I pulled down Uncle Tom from Johnny's spot, and I slid Tom easily into his rightful place: the top left portrait. He was, after all, the first to graduate and the most successful of my Papaw's three children. Uncle Tom turned out okay. He has a wife, daughter, step-son, five dogs, a trucker's license, and a double-wide trailer on a county road in Iuka, Mississippi.

It was Dad's turn, now. His long, golden seventies-style hair labeled him the black sheep of the family.

"Your dad was handsome," Karah said.

"He looks kind of like Kid Rock. Don't you think?"

My dad was a total 1980s rocker. He certainly had a taste for the drugs and alcohol of the rock-star lifestyle. I can still see him packing the finely chopped marijuana into the thin cigarette paper. I watched admirably as Daddy's little girl. He would roll it and run the loose edge of the paper along the tip of his tongue like a typewriter. He liked for Mom to forget about being a mother and party with him sometimes. I remember his getting her drunk on pure grain alcohol one night. She stood over the sink in his white t-shirt and her cotton panties puking up everything she had eaten that day.

Mom finally left him after threatening for a year to go live with her mother. After the divorce, Dad's temper and intoxication landed him in jail more times than I can remember.

Dad was probably drunk the Sunday afternoon of his accident. His license was revoked, so he rode his bike helmetless wherever he needed to go in town. On that Sunday, he didn't look before he crossed the road. I wonder if he really cared to know if the truck was coming his way. It was the third anniversary of Mom's death. I can't help but think that he blamed himself for letting her go. On June 22, 2000, Dad went comatose after being hit by a truck on his bike. A

month and a half later he awoke with anterograde amnesia– no short-term memory. Uncle Tom's wife set him up in a nice nursing home where she knew they'd take good care of him.

He calls me his "pretty girl," thinks I'm beautiful. I guess in a way, I'm his hope. His success story. High school valedictorian, college student on full scholarship, plans for graduate studies. The perfect future for the perfect daughter. I looked again at the genuine smiles of my aunts and uncles. Did they dream what was in store for their adulthoods? Their bright futures? I turned back to Karah and caught my reflection in the mirror over the couch. My own smile was more of a smirk that night. A contemplative crescent floating above the couch like the grin of the Cheshire cat, like I knew something the other smiles in the room didn't. I had found the way to Wonderland and knew that the croquet mallets were really flamingos and that no matter how many times I corrected my pocket watch I would always be late and the white rabbit would leave without me.

"Lie down, I want to use you as my pillow," Karah said.

I knew exactly what she meant. This is how we always lay on the couch together: my head on the arm rest, my legs bent in a loose fetal position, her head on my hip bone, and our curves fitting perfectly in chain-link fashion.

"They look good," I said.

"Yeah. They're finally right."

"Do you think anyone will notice?"

"Does it matter?"

I could feel a certain peace fill the room as our breathing harmonized with Papaw's snores and the rocking of Anna Beth's car seat. For a moment, it was the summer after eighth

grade, and we could fall asleep without setting an alarm to wake us up for work or school.

"I'll let you know if Nana says anything about the pictures tomorrow," I said, but Karah didn't respond. I lifted my head to look at her. She was asleep on my hip. I looked back at the pictures for a moment, then closed my eyes.

In Another Life

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" -Ode to a Nightingale

My first introduction to Mr. John Keats was in Ms. Hofstetter's Advanced Placement senior English class. I sat in the left corner desk of a square of my closest high-school friends. Burgeoning adolescents that we were, it was a consensus that John Keats was the hottest Romantic poet. Little did we know at the time, we were judging him based on Joseph Severn's sketch of the poet on his death bed.

"Ms. Hofstetter, who do you think is more attractive− Keats or Lord Byron?" my friend Shannon asked from the seat in front of me. Our clique giggled.

Hofstetter sauntered over to her lectern before answering: "Byron seems more exotic. Don't you agree? Of course I could see the appeal of the young starving artist as well."

Hofstetter was brilliant. Practically my idol. The most highly respected and feared English teacher at Blackman High school because she also taught two nights a week at Middle Tennessee State University. She would often reprimand us in German or French, depending upon her mood, and our jaws dropped to our desks when she recited Chaucer's *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* in perfect Middle English. She could intimidate her way out of a speeding ticket by using five and six-syllable words. And she taught Keats as though he were lying asleep in her bed from the night before.

Reading his poetry in my well-loved *Norton Anthology*, where every alliteration is circled and every allusion explained in the margins, I myself glanced over my shoulder at my disheveled

bed, wondering if my stuffed bear had somehow transfigured into the form of my beloved Keats. It had been four years since that initial crush, and I must admit I was still more enamored than any bawdy school girl could have been. And being stationed eighty miles north of London for a semester abroad, I had the perfect opportunity for a pilgrimage in honor of my love.

My reunion with Keats began indirectly a year ago in October 2006. I was engaged then. A date was set. June 22, 2007. A Friday. A year before I would graduate from college. But my fiancé, Andrew, didn't go to my college, and I had left my home of Murfreesboro, TN, behind in the fourth grade when I decided to attend Harvard Medical School. With the progression of time, I realized firstly my distaste for hard science and secondly the lack of resources to fund my grand transplantation to New England. Following my senior year in high school, I moved one state north, despite my year-long relationship with Andrew. The winter after my first semester, Andrew proposed. A logical man, he saw the promise of marriage as a way to ensure my eventual return home. In the meantime, he planned to move to Bowling Green to be with me so that we could marry sooner.

But Andrew never did establish a permanent address in Kentucky. Eight months after we had set the date, he suggested we postpone the wedding until I could graduate and move home. As soon as the wedding was postponed, I signed my name in permanent ink on a list to travel back to Teresina, Brazil, where I had escaped under the guise of a student missionary the summer after my first year at WKU. I spent what was supposed to be my wedding day debating apartheid and George W. Bush's foreign policy with Brazilian university students.

We used to kiss each other's eyelids. Andrew tried to shut my wild wild eyes with kisses four, but four were not enough. Twenty kisses or twenty-thousand, for I never kept count,

could not permanently shut my wild wild eyes. And wanting to absorb as much of the world as possible before being chained to middle Tennessee in marriage, I also decided to exile myself at Harlaxton College in Grantham, England, for the fall of 2007. This was the death certificate of my engagement.

In March of that year, five months after the postponement and five months before I would leave for the UK, Andrew ended our relationship. I could see it in his eyes when he came to visit me at school that day. I could feel it in his clammy hands.

I felt freedom sans merci after a few days of watching and re-watching *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to rid myself of both the blues and the mean reds. It was a freedom reminiscent of the first time I got drunk. It was my oldest friend's twenty-first birthday. I lost my bathing suit to her family pool. It was a young death, but it was not premature.

In October, halfway through my semester abroad, I read the *Norton's* short biography of John Keats while in my bed. It only seemed appropriate. In the fuzzy state between awake and asleep, I had an epiphany. I must have been Keats's fiancée in another life. Fanny Brawne. Seemed reasonable.

After wandering around Keats's Hampstead home, I found myself standing above a case of artifacts from Keats's life. His fiancée's portrait was a little left of the case's center. Her miniature looked like someone took my high school graduation photo and stretched it length-wise. Her brown hair, long nose, and clear blue eyes, like a faded image of myself.

Then I saw it. Her engagement ring. The note beside the ring box said Fanny never took the ring off. Even after Keats died and there was no hope for a wedding band to couple with it. That display case was the ring's only home other than Fanny's finger.

I studied the deep red garnet in its orange-yellow setting. The golden prongs clinging to the gemstone like a lover begging it to stay in bed. Like Keats himself sprawled across her. Across me.

It would fit me. The band looked like a perfect size six.

My own innocent engagement ring was a solitary white diamond set in white gold. The prongs so delicate: it was a wonder I didn't lose the jewel. The band, size seven: it was a wonder I didn't lose the entire ring.

Before I left for England, I asked my nana to put away my ring. I don't know where it is now. I haven't seen the ring since that night in March. I took it off when he left my dorm room.

I felt dried up, used and thrown away. I was half in love with easeful Death, not knowing whether I wake or sleep.

Over time, I found myself not mourning the death of the relationship, but rather, I mourned the death of who I was in that relationship. She was a girl I liked. Clever and giving. A girl who smiled and believed in naive love's "us against the world" philosophy. But I did not know her really until I looked into her wild eyes.

I met John Keats at sixteen. My eyes counted the wooden floorboards as he kissed my right hand. I didn't want him to see my cheeks flush.

He was different from the soldiers I had met. It was easy to enthrall military men with a coy glance across a ballroom, and so it was that I never lacked dance partners at social gatherings. But I knew from the stories our friends the Dilkes told of Mr. Keats that he would not be so easily impressed. I teased and flirted with him the way I would with any other young man. I told him about the dances I attended, the men I met, and the fun I had out in society. My stories incited jealousy and sorrow in amounts equal to love and desire. John praised me and despised me, often within the same hour. I was enamored by his obvious affection, the way he bit his lip in frustration, how his eyes creased and his ears grew hot.

John and I decided to marry. It only seemed right considering our overwhelming infatuation. John swore I was a hindrance to his work, a hindrance that could only be removed by my staid presence. I did not understand his reasoning, but no young woman would argue with a proposal from the man she loves. I began dreaming about married life, and John began writing ferociously. His financial situation allowed no room for a wife and family, but his heart required them. He knew multiple publications were the only means to ensure our marriage.

The blood came only six months later. The first spot was the size of the ruby in my ring, he said. I decided I should not worry about so small a spot. But I did worry. The second spot was much larger in size. John called it his death certificate, written in red blood on white sheets.

John wrote me a letter when he knew his death was imminent. At first it looked like every other doting sheet of paper sent to my side of Wentworth. I read his fluid script, and my heart

turned to lead. I ran to him, his letter in my fist. I absolutely could not agree to end our engagement, to extinguish hope in his life, in our life together. When the fire receded from my passionate face, I realized how cold it was in the room. He strained a smile of relief when I sat beside his bed. He closed his eyes as I ran my fingers through his hair.

I became Mrs. Louis Lindon at thirty years of age. Frances Lindon. My husband will never know about John Keats. He will never read the letters written to me, the sonnets written about me. And he will never write his own. I am no longer a woman warranting passionate verse. I am not a woman in love out of choice. I love out of necessity now. I was thirty and a burden worse than any vow whispered to a young lover.

I stand in his study with my back to the fireplace. His cold, white lips are sealed in plaster. If I carried his bust to the fire, would his cheeks' fading rose warm to pink again? Would his lips soften into speech. His memory sits in the chair near the window. Resting his chin in one hand, he scripts a letter with the other:

To Fanny Brawne

Janice

It is Tennyson's birthday, today. The sixth of August. At this time last year, I was packing for a visit to Tennyson's home shire. A semester at Harlaxton College.

Nothing can compare to a drafty, nineteenth-century drawing room circumscribed by seven students and one teacher. Our little white desks had tiny fold-over writing-tops, so that at least one book would fall with a distracting slap to the floor every class period. We couldn't survive a class without referencing a poet past, so we needed sundry books, notebooks, and even audio aids. Our poor little desks couldn't accommodate our literary appetites.

I've never had students like that. An entire class of them. Not one of them ever skipped unless they were exploring this new continent. Oh how I miss them!

I knew from the first week at Harlaxton College that I would miss them. And when the last week came around, I couldn't handle losing them to our Motherland.

Our last night together was to be unusually special. I asked around, called around. I even hired a cab to take me looking for the perfect pub. I needed history etched in stone walls, a fireplace that breathed poetry into the fabric of wing-backed chairs. I needed a deep, woody red wine from Xanadu's sacred river and an Irish whiskey with the bite of Yeats.

That night, our last night together, we were at the Angel and Royal hotel, we drank Chilean merlot, and remembered the four months we had in England.

We had studied London first. I wanted to approach our syllabus geographically rather than chronologically, and since Harlaxton College arranged for its students to travel to London

on their first weekend abroad, literary London is where we began. The London of Swift, Blake, and Wordsworth. I knew there was something special about this group when they arrived five minutes early on the second Monday of classes to show me photos of them reciting Wordsworthian verse on Westminster Bridge at sunrise. The anxious pink early morning clouds matched the excitement in my cheeks. I was overwhelmed, even unduly flattered by such enthusiasm.

I was such a student as this in college. Memorizing lines that stole my breath in attempts to retrieve it and give it away again to my next beloved poet.

I met a medical student named John Fuller while in college. We were married before graduate school. I never imagined I would be that girl. I was planning to leave my North Carolina home before I met John. But the cloudless facets of a small diamond ring do much to fog the vision of a young woman.

At our last dinner, we discussed favorite memories.

"Remember when Preston slid into class late? You could hear his combat boots pounding up the stairs and across the hallway. Then as soon as he hit the door, he tripped on something."

"Tripped, yeah," answered Preston embarrassed.

"You slid right through the middle of our circle. And then you just got up and walked to your seat like nothing happened!"

"I've never had an entrance like that in all my years of teaching," I said, laughing as hard as I had that day.

Once the laughing died down, another student recalled the costume ball.

"I think Dr. Fuller had the most creative costume, or at least the most

passive-aggressive."

"Dorothy Wordsworth needs to be given formal voice for her resentment. After all, William was a blatant plagiarist. I don't care how talented he was," I retorted.

It was true. I wore my charcoal skirt, black turtle-neck and beret to the costume ball. Seemingly uncreative, but to distinguish the inconspicuous garb, I carried a construction-paper book entitled *Grasmere Journals* as proof of my literary merit and a daffodil as a reminder of the injustice done to me by my brother who grew famous from my detailed notes. Dorothy may have loved her brother, but surely, she did not have to sacrifice her talent for his.

I am a staunch feminist. I tried to deny it for awhile. Over and over, I tried to deny it. I had experimented with subjecting my plans to John's. My trials failed, over and over; after all, John was the true scientist. No matter my affection for a man, I could never disown my independence, my pilgrim soul. I was a writer. I was a teacher. My work was my own, and my life was my own.

I smiled remembering where I was at that moment. Who I was at that moment. Janice Moore Fuller. Professor of British poetry. In England. With the most gifted and passionate group of students ever imagined.

"My favorite memory, of course, was our literary pilgrimage to Keats' house," one young woman interjected.

She was truly inspirational. I knew there was something special about her all semester. Something beyond her dedication and intelligence, and our mutual romance with John Keats. It wasn't until we met one-on-one to discuss her writing project that I realized our spiritual connection.

She was in England as an exile after having been engaged to a man back home. She had planned to get married the previous summer but didn't. She couldn't vow to deny her independence. She wouldn't. England was her declaration of freedom. Tears filled my eyes as she read her paper. I look back thirty years, past my twin daughters growing up, past smiles and frowns, ghosts of men and soft touches that were never really there. History was now and England.

It's strange how words can entice you to love someone. Her words reserved a chamber in my heart where we could talk of poetry and England. I would never meet John Keats. But his words were more real to me than the “I do” of the young John Fuller. Keats and his colleagues had refused to make room for my husband in their chambers. John said I put poetry before him. I said I couldn't reconcile my passions.

At Keats' house in Hampstead, I found myself stricken silent, as I was many times before, at the sight of the poet's death mask. He would be twenty-five for eternity in this solemn bust. His eyes pupil-less white, never to look through me as only a poet can. His lips were sealed by the plaster mold. He would never tell me he loved me. Only his written words could cleave my heart and search around inside me.

My beloved student and I stood beside each other in Keats' study watching our love for a sign of life. Watching for the pink to restore softness to his lips and flood his cheeks with warmth.

“He's so beautiful.” I could barely whisper the words.

“He is. He is.”

After dinner, in the front room beside the fireplace, we sat in the wing-backed chairs and read our favorite poems. One student read “Lonely as a cloud,” recalling to our memories her

unique visualization of the battle between the daffodils and waves. She envisioned them as *West Side Story*'s Jets and Sharks. The class mimicked the rhythmic snap,snap,snap,snap of the musical's dancers. Another student read "Ode to a Nightingale," and Tennyson's "Ulysses" inspired us on to perpetual adventure. There were visions of Innisfree and the "grandeur of God," and with every reading, we seemed to recognize the looming close of something great.

I was the last to read. T.S. Eliot provided my words that night:

> What we call the beginning is often the end
> And to make an end is to make a beginning.
> The end is where we start from...
> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

This was our end. We talked of meeting again. Five years from now. Back at Harlaxton Manor. We had grand plans of traveling about the country to see every poetic landmark, every cottage home, every college classroom, every quiet study.

But this was our end. We all knew this was our end.

I sat there watching the students drinking, trading stories, playing cards. I ran my finger along the thin edge of my wine glass thinking how different life at home would be from this. My daughter Emily would meet me in Italy the next week for a short vacation, but when we returned to the states she would be leaving me in Carolina, going north for medical school. Her twin sister has been married almost a year now; she and her husband live an hour or so away in Raleigh. I dreaded the wreck my house would be in once I moved back after the sitters had made it their home for a few months. The house would be empty. No students about my hallways, knocking upon my door. I would eat my meals alone. I would look mournfully into my coffee wishing it Earl Grey.

How I miss it all. The perfection and artifice of it. We were expatriate tourists, living a literary fairytale alongside dreamers like ourselves. Like the transcendent immortality of Yeats, we were golden birds refined in fire, singing to the Lords and Ladies of Byzantium. We sang of what is past, or passing, or to come, but never of the now, understanding its fragility.

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