

Mysterious Ways

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this chapbook to my mother, who has always pushed me to use my imagination to see the world in a unique light. She has never failed to constantly bring laughter and comedy into my life for the nearly eighteen years that I have been alive. I am incredibly thankful to have had a role model who was so clever about using one's own creativity and idiosyncratic humor to make the world feel less intimidating. She encouraged my love of writing by sharing her own beautiful and funny writing with me, and she taught me that I should not be ashamed of the truths in my life, but that I should embrace them and turn them into my own personal art. It is because of her that I did this. Through music, comedy, writing, speech, activism, and more, I took what pained me and made it manageable using my imaginative intuition, as she has constantly been able to do with the many unfair conflicts she has faced in her own life.

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Critical Preface

This fiction chapbook, *Mysterious Ways*, is primarily inspired by my long-time love of mystery in television, film, and literature. In elementary school, the *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* was my favorite book series. I have also always enjoyed the idea of open-ended stories, both in literature and film; for example, the 1953 film *Roman Holiday* gives viewers a bittersweet sense of realism in the last scene, which portrays Joe Bradley leaving Princess Anne whom he loves but can never be with. Because of the unresolved ending, viewers have the freedom to imagine for themselves what may happen next, and in both literature and film, this allows the reader/viewer to continue to think about the storyline long after it is finished, and to never completely lose interest since a concrete ending was never provided. I believe Russian fiction writer Anton Chekhov achieved this effect perfectly in his piece, “The Lady With the Pet Dog,” which has an ending that some readers may consider unsatisfying; however, Chekhov’s choice to leave the primary conflict of the story keeps the reader wondering whether his two main characters will ever be able to escape their marriages so they may be together openly. Essentially, their storylines are meant to continue long after the story ends, but because this continuation is undefined, intuitive thinkers such as myself may find themselves entangled in thoughts of what comes next. I appreciate the choice to provide background and setting throughout the entirety of the story, rather than provide all details at the very beginning. I believe this technique of gradually revealing characters’ and places’ backgrounds works to keep the reader interested. This method of writing also keeps the reader from having to work to

remember those important background details, and instead makes it easier on the reader by directly relating certain background information to specific points in the plotline. I enjoy using shock value as well, and find writing action scenes such as a homicide or a police chase to be difficult but exciting. I consider my style to be more postmodern than anything else, with a passion for giving a voice to the marginalized, and rejecting conventional plot structures.

I believe that my story-writing has improved significantly this year in that I have better learned how to pace my stories. Before this year in my Modern Literature and Writing class, I struggled with writing fiction stories, because I found I usually either spent too much time describing setting--keeping the plotline from moving along and therefore boring readers--or I was overly hasty forming a plot, did not pay enough attention to setting, and either moved the plotline along too quickly, or failed to form a good storyline altogether due to the lack of background which is essential for adequate character and story development.

I have repeatedly found writing fiction to be an almost magical escape from the real world, which has allowed me to deal with painful emotions and conflicts I have faced throughout most of my life. I began writing for fun from a young age because of my mom, who filled my childhood with creativity and has always encouraged me to use writing as an outlet for my emotions. She is a marvellously talented writer herself, and reading her mostly comical pieces further encouraged me to develop the love of writing that I still have today, and that still works as an antidepressant for me on my worst days. Through fiction, I create a world of my own. Perhaps this is a world with characters that I can relate to, so I

don't feel so alone. Perhaps it is a world with characters who are suffering much more than I am, so I may remind myself that my problems could always be worse than they are. I know I will continue to write creatively for the rest of my life, and I could even see myself trying to publish my work at some point. I still have a long way to go before I achieve the level of writing that is publishable, but I see this chapbook as the first step towards a lifetime of writing with a purpose.

Contour Façade

A young pale blonde woman in a light brown trench coat sat elegantly with her legs crossed on a small blue seat in a noisy Subway car, and applied her dusty rose-colored lipstick as she awaited her stop which was nearly at the very end of the train's route. She sat near the front of the train, but not in the very front. She peacefully and efficiently applied her makeup, before looking to her left and noticing an older, dark-skinned man reading a newspaper, and peeking in her direction. He did not continuously stare at her. He would glance in her direction, then back at the newspaper, then once again at her. She knew why. She considered moving to the back of the train, but the entire back-half of the car was completely full, and she decided that attempting to make room for herself would be discourteous and unnecessary. A middle-aged brunette woman wearing glasses with dark blue frames sat to her right, but exited the train almost immediately after 4th and King, one of the first stops. She scooted further to the right of the bench on which she was sitting once the woman left, only to find that the man who had been staring at her took this gesture as a welcome to sit beside her. He stood up, revealing his tall but weak physique, sat beside her enthusiastically, and smiled with one raised eyebrow at her, as if he were trying to indicate that everything was okay. She gave the man a sarcastic smile in return, her eyes looking away from him and to her right, observing the cold grayness of the subway's walls, and noticing little bits of trash scattered along the tracks.

At first, the man did not say anything. He looked up and occasionally smiled at her when she would attempt to subtly glance in his direction, but the two did not speak for

much of what seemed to the woman like the longest train ride in history. Finally, she could not take the silence. She quietly and breathily asked why the man kept looking at her. She wanted to apply heavier makeup, but decided that doing so would give her away. She did not want to look as though she was covering anything up.

At first the man did not say anything in response. He tilted his head to the left a bit and squinted his eyes, as if he were searching for a single grain of sand on the pale canvas of her feminine face. She became nervous, and found that her breathing had quickened. The man noticed her quickness of breath as well, and scooted a few inches away from her, expressing his concern and disinterest in making her nervous. He gave her a kind smile, and she immediately felt a swift wind of relief. She took a few deep breaths, returned his kind smile, and spoke in a casual manner as she turned to him and said,

“Anything of interest in the paper today?” He looked down and laughed ever so slightly, as she tried look over at what page he was reading. Unfortunately for the girl, the subway did not provide ample lighting for her to read the paper from such a distance and while trying to avoid being noticed. While mentally constructing a response to the young woman’s question, the man noticed her trying to peek at the page which sat open on his lap. He finally responded to her, casually turning to the sports section when she turned her head for a moment.

“Nothing much, just nonsense about the World Series, predictions based on bias and false hope,” he said. Being a Seattle Mariners fan herself, the woman smiled and remarked that baseball was not her favorite sport, joking that her team had never even come close to appearing in the World Series. The man chuckled, noting that he was a

Washington Nationals fan, and had also never gotten the chance to watch his team play in the World Series. The woman became more comfortable as they continued to make small talk.

“This man is so kind,” she thought. “And he clearly knows nothing, or if he does he doesn’t care which is just as good.”

“Where are you headed today? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I’m going to my ballet class,” she quickly blurted as she twirled her hair into a messy bun. “The dance school I attend is at the very end of the subway line, so unfortunately I usually get there late, but it beats getting there an hour early and forcing myself to make small talk with the other students,” she smiled uncomfortably. The man quickly sympathized with her introversion, and proceeded to ask her if there was anyone in the class she *did* get along with.

“Oh it’s not that I don’t get along with my classmates, they’re all very nice people from what I can gather, I’m just not much of a talker.”

“I understand that. I’m sorry if I’m pushing your capacity for social interaction too far this afternoon.” This comment made the woman smile, as she assured him that she did not mind his company.

“No not at all, you’re very pleasant to talk to, I just have a hard time when people ask me too many questions about my personal life or my youth.”

“Rough childhood?”

“My childhood was alright, my young adulthood hasn’t been as smooth as I would’ve liked, though.”

“Your youth isn’t over yet, your joints still work well enough to dance the ballet.”

He smiled sweetly and let out a little chortle before he asked, “how old are you, anyway?”

“I’m twenty-six, I had my birthday a few weeks ago.”

“Still so young!” the man exclaimed, “you still have all the time in the world to figure things out for yourself.”

She smiled exaltedly. “I suppose I know I’m still young, but it is hard to see a future when I feel as though I have already lived through enough excitement for an entire lifetime.” With this comment, the man became puzzled. He wanted to ask questions, as he had become increasingly curious with every mysterious comment from the young lady, but he did not want to pry, especially after she had gone out of her way to mention how much she did not like to talk about her personal life.

“Are you from this area?” he asked, hoping to retrieve some information about the mystifying woman without being overly nosy. To the man’s disappointment, the girl gave him nothing other than a somewhat irritated, “no,” and immediately turned her head. Understanding that he had overstepped, especially after she had specifically stated that she did not like being asked questions surrounding her personal life, the man returned to his newspaper, and gave her the space he had convinced himself she wanted.

She became even more irritated by this, then began to worry that she was letting her paranoia get the best of her. This man was kind, treated her completely normally, and thankfully appeared to be clueless to all that was right before his eyes--both in his hands, and sitting beside him on a hard blue Subway seat.

When he first returned to reading the paper, after the girl's very firm and intimidating "no," he noticed the woman was glancing at him with suspicion. "How the tables have turned," he thought to himself with a smile.

Once she eventually stopped looking over at the man, the exhausted woman pulled out a paperback copy of an old Faulkner novel and began reading, never looking up from her book. At this point, she had decided that ignoring this man altogether would be the safest option for her. She was becoming too comfortable with him, and although she missed his small talk immediately when he stopped speaking with her, she knew that forgetting the whole ordeal and moving forward as though nothing had happened would be the safest thing for her to do. She didn't want to be rude, she wanted to ask him about his life, where he was from, his age, his childhood, but she knew that she couldn't without being pushed into answering questions about her own life. She became angry at the unfairness of her having to hide behind a façade. The longer she sat there, watching people on the same car smile and laugh with each other, the more upset she became. She tried her best to mask these thoughts with a monotone facial expression, but finally couldn't help but to shed a tear. The drop of water fell from her right eye, and drew a line down her cheek, clearing a path through the layer of powder on her face, and revealing her weaknesses buried underneath her mask of contour.

The man quickly noticed the tear fall from her delicate face to the open page of the novel she was reading, creating a dark, wet circle that quickly enlarged as it soaked into page sixty-five of *As I Lay Dying*.

"Do you have children?" The woman asked abruptly.

“Two daughters, and my eldest just gave me my first grandchild back in October, a little boy,” the man said fondly. He smiled at the thought of his family, then noticed the girl look down and begin to cry again. Not knowing what to say, the man simply asked, “what about you? Do you have any children?”

At this, the woman squeezed her eyes shut, suppressing her tears.

“I have a seven-month-old daughter.”

“Congratulations,” the man said warmly, “having children is such a blessing.” He gently smiled and put his hand on hers, trying to reassure her without words.

“Tell me about it,” she said quietly with a melancholy smile, “I would do anything for my daughter.”

“Where is she now? Do you have her in daycare yet? Be sure to pick the right place, I think my daughter is still scarred from some of the children’s shows her preschool teachers used to make her watch,” the two chuckled.

“Actually, if I’m being honest, that’s where I’m going now. I don’t know why I lied, I’m sorry,” she said, shifting in her seat.

“No worries at all, I respect you wanting to keep your privacy, especially when talking to a complete stranger,” they both chuckled again.

“I’ve had her in this daycare on the east side of town, we live and I work on the westside, but she already has to grow up in the worst part of this city, so I wanted her to have a safe place to go during the day, especially considering she hardly gets to see me at all. I work full time.”

At this point, the woman had forgotten to care about the words she let escape her mouth. She pursed her full lips, which were swollen from her nervous bites. She waited for the man to continue the conversation, but he took awhile to think about what she had just told him.

He immediately wanted to ask about the child's father, where he was, why he couldn't pick her up from daycare, but he couldn't risk scaring her off at the height of his curiosity.

"Does anyone help you with your daughter? It sounds like you have a lot on your plate," he smiled in a sad but comforting manner, scrunching his body down to her level and turning his head to look at her. She took a moment to respond and he worried she was upset. She broke eye contact with him as she wrinkled her eyebrows in an impatient manner.

"I'm single. I've never been married, and her father isn't in the picture. I grew up with a single father and no mother, and my father passed when I was nineteen. He left a decent amount of money, but I used it to put myself through school, and definitely don't have enough in the bank at this point in my life to hire a nanny. I'm not in contact with any other relatives, and I only recently moved here, so I hardly know anyone in this area. Besides that, I'd never trust someone with Susanna, she's all I have. It took me long enough to gain trust in a professional daycare facility with security cameras."

"I understand. I was the same way with my girls when they were growing up, and now with my grandson." He had to know more about the child's father. "I'm sorry that the child's father isn't in the picture, for whatever reason he isn't."

“He’s not a bad guy. We aren’t together anymore but he still sends money. We never became very close, we met when I was interning at Providence St. Peter Hospital Olympia up in Washington State. He was working as an orthopedic surgeon at the time. We only saw each other a few times, but sometimes that’s all it takes,” she smiled and they both chuckled. The girl then became aware that she was talking too much, and decided to try and turn the conversation to him. Before he could inquire about her work in medicine, she abruptly asked him if he worked. She did this hoping to stay on topic and to not appear as though she was avoiding the subject, while still drawing attention away from her own career.

“I’ve been working as a lawyer for about thirty-two years now, in the field of criminal justice,” he paused and gave her a funny smile. “I majored in Criminology at George Mason University, and earned my law degree from George Mason Law School.”

“Very impressive,” she smiled. Feeling obligated to continue the conversation out of politeness, she decided sharing her own academic path wouldn’t put her at risk of revealing anything she wanted to keep hidden. Besides, she had done nothing wrong. She did exactly what she had to do. This man is kind. He defends people who have done wrong by the law for a living. She was safe with him.

“I majored in biology at Western Washington University, the best four years of my life. I then earned my medical degree at St. George’s University School of Medicine, the longest four years of my life,” she smirked.

“Then you began your residency at St. Peter’s?”

“Yes, about two and a half years ago. As you can probably tell, it didn’t work out.”

“Did you transfer to a hospital down here?”

“Lie,” she thought to herself. “But I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No, medicine just wasn’t my calling I guess. I moved down here with Susanna about a month ago. We’re still settling in, but I really like the social atmosphere here. Big cities excite me, too,” she told the man, forcing a smile through the dense knots that twisted restlessly in the pit of her empty stomach.

The train was nearing the end of the subway line.

“A few months ago, my daughter became very ill. That’s why I had to leave my job. I needed to take care of her,” the woman admitted, looking down at the floor of the dark, hollow car.

“That sounds noble to me, do you want to return to work at St. Peter’s?”

“I doubt I could even if I wanted to. Besides, we’ve built a nice life for ourselves here. Working as a sales associate isn’t quite as glamorous as telling people you’re a surgical intern,” she looked up and smiled goofily, “but with the money from Susie’s father and my working full-time at Payless, we make it work.”

“You’re quite an impressive woman. I’m sure you could get your job back if you wanted to, though, do they know about your situation? Your daughter being sick? Any decent business would understand--”

“No.” She sharply cut him off, and her breathing became heavy.

“I apologize, this really is none of my business, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No worries, I’m sorry I became defensive. Tell me more about your work, I’ve always been fascinated with law.”

“Nothing too fascinating about my job,” he simpered. “I defend criminals who claim to have been wrongly accused,” he paused. “Sometimes I defend those who commit crimes on the basis of morality, too. Crimes committed on behalf of family, loved ones.”

“He knows,” the woman thought to herself. She looked over at his lap. The newspaper still sat there, open to the sports section. “Are you still reading that paper?” she asked as casually as she could manage.

“Oh no,” he smiled knowingly, “you can have it.” He handed her the paper and she slowly reached her hand out and took it from him. She scanned the front page. News about the election. The second page, the war in Syria. The third page, Hugo Chávez’s victory in Venezuela. She began to feel relieved, until she turned to page four and saw a familiar face staring back at her. She lost her breath. Her face heated and she became dizzy. She looked to her left, into the eyes of a man who was a complete stranger, worrying her with his roguish stare, no less than an hour ago. He looked back at her with an expressionless face. He seemed to be waiting for her to say something. She had not yet recovered from the rush of adrenaline that took her speaking abilities, and looked back down at the monochrome photo on page four, questioning her decision to spend the twenty dollars she had on a dye job instead of a haircut, seeing as color is not quite as relevant when something is printed in black and white.

The car stopped and her heart nearly jumped out of her chest as she heard the sound of the subway doors opening. She couldn’t move. She sat there as people shuffled past her, desperate to escape the unlit metallic paddock in which they had been trapped for over an hour. The man hesitated, but reluctantly exited the car when it became apparent to him that

she did not want to talk any more. She finally stood and turned to her right. She slowly walked to the car's door, taking a deep breath as she neared the exit. The tip of her right foot touched the ground outside of the train as she looked up and found herself stopped in her tracks by a muscular Latina police officer of equal height.

“Esther Rubinoff, you are under arrest for the possession of stolen goods from Providence St. Peter Hospital Olympia. You have the right to remain silent. If you do say anything, what you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to consult with a lawyer and have that lawyer present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you if you so desire.” The officer placed handcuffs around her wrists. The woman looked at the officer and then to her right, where she saw the man, the stranger who was no longer a stranger, walking towards the scene. He lent the girl a reassuring smile and a comforting wink as he uncovered his credentials, and prepared to show them to the policewoman aggressively handcuffing his most recently acquired client.



Source: Furedi, Lily. "Subway." *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, 1934,

<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/subway-8731>.

Death Warrant

“Stop it,” the young child said as her small pale nose wrinkled into a disapproving frown.

“Shut up,” her ten-year-old brother’s high-pitched voice echoed throughout the cold, drab parking garage.

“But Ethan,” the girl began to speak before her slightly elder sibling interrupted her.

“We can’t just leave her here, it’s because of us her mommy will cry when she doesn’t come home tonight.”

The little girl’s face condensed as she began to cry at this very upsetting thought. The little boy developed a fearful look in his small, glassy brown eyes. Suddenly, the boy’s sister kicked him angrily between the legs and waddled away, continuing to scream and cry.

“Tell her I’m sorry,” the boy frantically shouted at his sister before swiftly picking up a tiny bird who had lost its life to the seemingly colossal tire of a silver Toyota just under an hour earlier.

“Vivien!” A young woman’s voice echoed through the dark, seemingly never-ending array of ugly grey walls and abandoned cars.

“Mommy!”

The thin-nosed, dark blonde-haired woman picked up her child for whom she had been searching for twelve minutes and hugged her tightly before putting her down and returning to her initial state of panic. “Where is Ethan?” she asked the child frantically.

Vivien looked down at the ground guiltily and mumbled, “I don’t know.”

“Where the Hell is your brother?”

“I really don’t know Mommy,” Vivien responded, her eyes full of tears and opened widely. She rarely heard her mother swear, and whenever she did, Vivien knew it was serious.

The woman swiftly picked up her daughter and proceeded to run down the rows of strangers’ cars as she screamed her son’s name over and over again. Unfortunately, to her vexation, her calls solicited no response.

Ethan carried the dead bird to a tree near the ground floor of the parking garage. Snot and tears dribbled down his pale, innocent face. He lay the bird down gently, its limp head contorting against the ground. Ethan sniffled, “I’m sorry little birdie. My mommy didn’t know you were there.” He started sobbing again. “I was never going to leave you there, my sister was mean to think that I should.” Ethan’s downward-drooping tear-filled face suddenly crinkled into an angry frown. “She was wrong to think we shouldn’t make her hurt for what she did to you,” he said with clenched fists as rage-filled teardrops squeezed out of the corners of his almost breakable-looking, glossy, red eyes. He abruptly heard his mom’s voice coming from several feet behind him in the darkness.

“Ethan this isn’t funny, you need to come here right now, I’m so worried I can’t breathe,” the woman panted, failing to hold back her inevitable waterfall of tears. The boy paid no mind. “Here you go birdie, nice little place for you to sleep.” He set the bird down beneath a large oak tree and covered it in a bit of dirt with a twig as a marker. As he began to rise, he thought he heard his sister screaming his name just around the corner behind him. She became so close that the screaming nearly pierced through his eardrum, causing

him to wince and feel immense pain in his head. He began to run, holding his hands tightly over his ears, and in the blink of an eye, the boy was gone.

“Ethan! Baby, where are you?”

“Mommy, he’s gone now.”

“Vivien, why would you say that?”

“Because I can’t see him anymore.” Vivien looked hopelessly in the direction from which the group had originally come.

“Don’t be stupid, he’s here somewhere, we just have to find him, he’s perfectly fine.”

“He says he’s sorry.”

“What?” The woman stopped abruptly and developed a puzzled look on her face.

“He’s sorry, Mommy.”

“Vivien, tell me what is going on, please!” The girl’s mother screamed as she buried her acne-filled face into her small hands and let tears flow out of her pinkish eyes. The woman was about to yell at her youngest child again, but when she looked up, her daughter had gone missing anew. She walked back to her car, trying to calm herself as she prepared to call the police. She made her way through the unlit garage at 10:17 at night, using only the flashlight feature on her nearly-dead iPhone 6 to see. Her heart pounded in fear, as she thought she kept hearing noises coming from just outside the freezing concrete shoebox. She finally saw her silver Toyota, and began to run towards the car with great desperation. She could nearly reach her hand out and touch the vehicle, when suddenly the rear lights brightened, and the car lunged backwards with unbelievable speed.

Ethan leapt out of the vehicle, Vivien suddenly appearing from an alternate corner of the eerily silent garage. Once again, the young girl's eyes filled with tears as she crouched down on the hard ground, reached her hand out, and quietly said, "Mommy?"



Source: Sorensen, Jake. "Woman Walks to Car in Empty Parking Garage." *Storyblocks*, n.d., <https://www.videoblocks.com/video/woman-walks-to-car-in-empty-parking-garage-f94am8o>.

Julie

The tines of the fork penetrated his skin like needles into a pincushion. His vibrant red blood dripped from the four incisions that were left by the glossy grey kitchen appliance. As the wet drops of scarlet gore splattered onto the tiled floor, she never looked away from his dark brown, lustrous eyes which were framed by nearly inch-long jet black eyelashes.

The teenage girl maintained a nefarious smile as she continued to keep her eyes locked on his. The fork dropped from her hand, and almost immediately after, her newest victim dropped to the ground, applying pressure to the pin-sized wounds that now graced his abdomen with his prodigious footballer hands.

“What’s wrong, Andy? Can’t you walk?” said the girl, smiling maliciously with her hands pulling flirtatiously at her foot-long auburn pigtails which fell over her shoulders and curled ever so slightly at the tips.

“You’re a fucking psychopath, Julie,” the boy said, struggling to catch his breath and continuing to clutch the abrasions that persisted to ooze blood just to the left of his navel.

“I guess you won’t be playing football this season,” she said, raising an eyebrow and smiling so only her right dimple appeared. Then, in what seemed like one quick movement, the girl took off her shirt, removed a pistol from her brassiere, and shot the boy dead. She pulled out a compact mirror, touched up her mascara and peach-pink lipstick, and left the scene without her shirt as she tucked the glock .45 back into the left cup of her oversized undergarment. She put on a pink jacket, and headed home.

“Hi, Daddy!” Julie said with an unimpeachable smile as she entered the front door of her modest, blue, suburban home.

“Hi Princess, are you all packed and ready to go?” Julie’s father asked, a subtle grin peeking through his Dallas mustache.

“Of course! I’m so excited for the move, I’m sick of Shelby, and really all of Alabama. It’s too hot here.”

“That it is, you’ll like it much more in Alexandria. Virginia is a beautiful state, and we’ll be living right on the Potomac River.”

“I’m sure I will, West Potomac High School looks incredible. I hope I make the cheer squad, the coach there is supposed to be excellent.”

“That’s my girl, I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks to you, Dad. In a way, I’m glad Mom left. Things are so perfect the way they are, just you and me, best friends before father and daughter.”

“It is good that she left, we’ve built a better life on our own than we ever could’ve had with her. She couldn’t handle life as the wife of a Navy man. You and me, on the other hand, we were born to be nomadic. This is the life we need to be happy.”

“To be safe,” Julie’s lips curled into a devious smile, her father smiling back and winking at her in understanding.

“We should go now, Princess”

“Go to the car, I’ll be right there, Daddy.”

“Don’t be too long, and don’t forget to bring your bags.”

“I won’t,” Julie gave her father a toothy grin and waltzed through the front door, through the foyer, through the dining room, up the stairs, and into her very naked room. She gathered her things, and carried them down the stairs. She placed all of her bags by the front door, except for a dainty pink backpack which she carried onto her back deck. She proceeded to pull out a bloodstained fork, which she then flung over the railing of the balcony.

The fork’s sharp tines sunk into the trunk of a very tall tree that sat in the backyard of her former neighbor’s property. The utensil maintained its position, sticking out of the dark brown bark about halfway up the eleven-foot-tall tree.

Julie giggled irreproachably, her blue eyes widening, before running quickly back into the house. She slammed the white, French deck doors behind her before swiftly carrying her packed bags to her father’s silver 2005 Subaru Outback, where his dimpled, freckled smile awaited her arrival.

The car backed easily out of the driveway, and began heading northeast, towards their next great adventure. Julie's work in Shelby, Alabama, was done.

The two finally arrived in Alexandria, where Julie quickly adjusted to her new school within a couple of weeks. She eventually began dating the quarterback of the school's football team, Brett. Although he mysteriously vanished from the school just under a year later, and Julie moved almost immediately after his disappearance, the two were named 'cutest couple' in the yearbook, and no one ever doubted their wholly devotion to each other. Not even following Julie's arrest two years after graduation for the murder of sixteen-year-old Andy Townshend from Shelby, Alabama, did the legacy of their high school romance die. The love continued to live through stories and photographs from football games in people's yearbooks and on the walls of the Virginia high school's gymnasium; for while Julie would be suspected of the homicides of three other teenage boys, she would only ever be found guilty of one murder, and Brett was never to be found.

The Ill Will of Dahlia Kauffman

“I’m hungry,” I told her, admittedly with a cheeky and ever-so-slightly-irritable tone of voice. Lizzie Kauffman smiled at me and patted my head before returning to the Kingsolver novel on which she had been working for weeks, completely ignoring my desirous intonation. I continued to ask her for food, and she began to talk to me in some sort of high-pitched, baby-like tone. I became incensed, and I had to let her know it. I angrily glared as she continued to rub the back of my neck, then whispered her fingers down the middle of my hunched back.

“Dahlia,” she whispered my name fondly as she gently touched the side of my face. I tried to maintain my annoyance, but couldn’t help but to flash a kind smile back in her direction, as hearing her say my name always reminded me of how lucky I was to be loved and wanted by such a kindhearted person. She had short black hair, bright green eyes, and pale but yellowish skin. She wore a ring with the Star of David engraved in the top to represent her Jewish faith, and a bracelet with a ring of small moonstones around her left wrist which her late father had given her for her sixteenth birthday, seven years ago. She was not married, and in the nine years I have known her, she has never dated as far as I know. Presently, she is twenty-three years old, and more beautiful than ever.

“It’s nine forty-five!” she suddenly exclaimed. Much to my relief, she abruptly rose and ran into the kitchen, where she fixed me a bowl of my favorite meats. Being vegan herself, I knew she never really approved of the way I ate, but despite this, she selflessly never neglected to provide me with all of the food I desired, no matter how slimy and meaty it was. At times I felt bad, but I had told her before that she didn’t have to store meat in her house and she continued to do so anyway, just for me.

“Here you go Dahlia, beautiful girl,” she said kindly as she set my food down in front of me before fetching water. Many have mentioned that I am the spitting image of Lizzie, with short black hair and huge green eyes myself, although she is much taller than I am. Despite our physical similarities, we are polar opposites personality-wise. She is quiet, private, sensitive, reserved, a little mentally slow sometimes, but always kind to others. Alternatively, one would probably describe me as more extroverted, carelessly honest, and

outgoing than she. We met at our local tennis courts when I was quite young. She was fourteen and finishing eighth grade. We fell in love at first sight. Our partnership is and was always, without a doubt, meant to be.

It was a cold February morning. I was eating the breakfast she had made for me as she sat in her blue recliner and continued making her way through Animal Trees while The Smiths played quietly in the background. Morrissey's voice echoed through my big ears as Johnny Marr's smooth guitar nearly put me to sleep. We were halfway through listening to Bigmouth Strikes Again when the doorbell rang.

"Elizabeth!" a scratchy, low-pitched female voice yelled from outside of the front door. My heart sank, I knew exactly who it was. I could smell the vile broad's cigarette from a mile away.

"Mommy!" Lizzie jumped up, throwing her book on the chair as she ran to the door to greet Mrs. Kauffman, the horrid woman we called "mom."

"Hi Mom," Lizzie said warmly as she opened our front door and pulled Mom into a tight embrace.

"Hi Mom," I said significantly less enthusiastically as I reluctantly followed Lizzie to the door. Mom, or Mrs. Kauffman as I felt more comfortable calling her when Lizzie wasn't listening, ignored me as usual and made her way to our love seat as Lizzie made her way back to her dark navy reclining chair.

The next three hours played out similarly to how they usually do; Mrs. Kauffman made her way to the kitchen and began making tea for the two as Lizzie enthusiastically asked her about a trip she was planning in the near future. The conversation continued as the tea heated, and eventually we were all back in the living room. Throughout this entire series of events, I stayed quiet for the most part. I walked around the living room, over to the foyer, into the kitchen, and back into the living room. As usual, after a little over three hours and fifteen minutes, Lizzie finally became tired as a result of the extensive chatting, as well as the large amount of food she and Mom had fixed for themselves during this long period of time. Mom was escorted out of the door, being sure to 'accidentally' step on my small foot on her way out. The pain was unbelievable, but nothing new. For about five

years, Mrs. Kauffman had been growing blinder and blinder. As a result, I have been repeatedly sat on, stepped on, and mostly ignored by the woman for the majority of the time I have known her. She never much liked me. She was kind of like Lizzie in that she was fairly private and would generally choose to be alone rather than in the company of other people, only it sometimes seemed like she avoided my company much more than she avoided the company of most. I tried to tell myself that she was just jealous because I lived with Lizzie and occupied most of her attention; but really, she had nothing to be jealous of. Whenever Mom came over, I became nonexistent. Before Lizzie and I moved out, Lizzie always chose the company of her mother over me, and when I tried to get her attention, she simply smiled at me and returned to whatever conversation she and the salty woman had been in the midst of before I arrived; however, whenever I found myself enjoying a discussion with my best friend, and Mrs. Kauffman butted in, Lizzie's attention was immediately stolen from me.

"It's getting late, Dahlia, I think I'm about ready for bed," Lizzie fondly grabbed me by the chin with her thumb and index finger. She crawled into bed as I sat up and thought about the day I had had.

Mrs. Kauffman had been visiting more and more frequently. She had also taken up knitting, resulting in a number of itchy scarves given to Lizzie, and eventually put on me for these ladies' own, messed up amusement. In addition to the endless bundles of yarn that now occupied what used to be my corner of the living room, Mrs. Kauffman had begun smoking two packs a day, and had convinced Lizzie to allow her to smoke in our apartment as long as the windows were open. Our shoebox of a living space smelled of smoke constantly because of this, and an ashtray was now permanently set next to the loveseat on which she smoked, knit, and occupied the attention of my only confidant and really my only friend day after day. My patience was growing thin for the woman, but I knew there was only so much that I could do. I knew that her disappearance would be not only good for me, but for Lizzie, too. Mrs. Kauffman was bound to drag Lizzie into her pool of bad habits and laziness. She already constantly distracted Lizzie from her schoolwork and kept her up late with unexpected visits and phone calls. If Lizzie began smoking or making her

knuckles pop like that awful woman did whenever she wasn't knitting, I would be heartbroken, and Lizzie's recent bouts of depression have already put her so close to falling off of the clear and productive path that she has been on for quite some time now. Things could not go on like this. For Lizzie.

While we got one lovely day free of a visit from Mrs. Kauffman, she made a reappearance at our home the following day, Tuesday, the seventeenth of January. This time, she rudely let herself in without a knock.

"The door was open," Mrs. Kauffman claimed through a malicious smile as she once again worked her manipulative powers on Lizzie until the innocent girl forgave her for entering with no warning and scaring the Hell out of both of us (Lizzie was wearing over-the-ear headphones at the time of the woman's arrival and therefore did not hear her entrance when she first came through the front door). Mrs. Kauffman took her usual seat on the right side of the loveseat, where her knitting needles and yarn were. She picked up a soft, periwinkle ball of yarn and purple knitting needles, and began working on another ugly, itchy scarf for Lizzie and I to share.

"Elizabeth, tell me about your academic studies, how is your chemistry class going? Last time we talked about it, you seemed concerned for your grade." Mrs. Kauffman smiled sweetly, continuing to knit more and more quickly.

"It's going much better! We have a new TA who has helped me immensely with understanding the stoichiometry chapter which was the main concept I was struggling with, so hopefully we'll see an improvement in my grade following our next test in a couple of weeks."

Mrs. Kauffman's needles began to make clicking noises as she wound the fabric around the thin, metallic objects at a remarkably fast rate. With every click, I became more hopeful that she would fortuitously stab herself in the eye. She only took a break from knitting when she decided she was due for a smoke. Mid-conversation with Lizzie, the horrid woman arose from her seat, and opened all of our windows in the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen. She came back to her seat, picking up her needles and still-unfinished scarf, and placing them on her lap as she lowered herself onto the yellowish

cushion. She pulled the ashtray which was sitting on the table adjacent to the loveseat closer to her, took a clipper lighter and a thin, white cigarette out of her purse, and lit her abhorrent-smelling cancer stick as she lifted it to her small, colorless, wrinkled lips. Within seconds, One could smell the smoke from anywhere inside of the apartment as well as right outside on the absurdly miniscule street on which Lizzie and I lived. I watched Mrs. Kauffman slowly annihilate the tiny, now ashy object as I thought about everything I hated about her. I thought about those stupid, God-awful needles clicking together over and over again. I thought about the way she only knocked about half of the time when she came to see us. I thought about her disgusting cigarette addiction, and her inability to keep her smoking habits outside of other people's living spaces. And finally, I thought about the way she manipulated Lizzie, the way she always got what she wanted without showing concern for me, for Lizzie, for anyone.

Mrs. Kauffman took one last inhale of nicotine, cleared her throat, and placed the still-burning cigarette on the ashtray. I leapt out of my seat, ran to the coughing woman, jumped onto the table, and nudged the flaring tab onto Mrs. Kauffman's lap; setting the yarn which sat atop her boney legs ablaze, and ultimately incinerating the foul broad, first destroying her clothes, then her hairspray-drenched curls, then burning her delicate skin until she was completely engulfed in the flames. Mrs. Kauffman died that day. Lizzie returned as swiftly as she could with a fire extinguisher, but when she sprayed the woman with the foamy white substance, and the fire was completely out, it became immediately obvious that Mom Kauffman was not going to wake up. The fire thankfully didn't do much damage to Lizzie's and my place, although half of the love seat was essentially useless after that day.

"Mom..."

I looked over to where Lizzie was from the foyer where I had run to stay safe when the fire began. Her face was expressionless. There were no tears, there were no more words for what seemed like hours. Finally, Lizzie removed the metal ashtray from the ugly scene, threw herself on the couch beside Mom, and began to cry. She cried softly at first, but her wails became louder and louder as the night went on. Eventually, she cried herself to sleep.

I wanted to comfort her, I wanted to apologize for her having to be in the room when I committed homicide upon Mom. I knew it was going to be awhile before Lizzie would understand why I did what I did, but I also knew that when the positive effects of not having Mrs. Kauffman around became apparent, I would be forgiven, and Lizzie would be thankful to me. I retired to Lizzie's recliner, and in the morning, we were awakened by a knock on the door. Lizzie slowly woke up, at first puzzled and forgetful about the situation. She quickly returned to reality, and developed the same emotionless expression that I had seen the night before.

"Elizabeth Kauffman, please open your front door immediately. My name is Officer Westberg and I'm with your local police department. I am here with two other officers. We need to speak with you regarding concerns we have about your mother, Sibylle Kauffman."

"Thank God! I'm coming!" Lizzie hurried to the door, her hair in knots and splotches of mascara stained all over her eyes and cheeks.

Lizzie opened the door frantically, welcoming the three policemen into our home.

The men stopped immediately when they saw the completely toasted, dead woman lying on the loveseat. Lizzie proceeded to explain what had happened, only to result in two of these men handcuffing my Lizzie, telling her not to worry and that after they cleared her as a suspect, she could go home. She reluctantly went with them, verbalizing her anger at their accusations. The third officer stayed behind and made a phone call which soon resulted in a few more men coming into our apartment, putting Mrs. Kauffman's body in a big black bag, and leaving. The officer stayed awhile longer, though. He discovered the metal ashtray on the floor, and called for assistance in "collecting evidence to be tested for fingerprints." I was fairly confused about what was going on at this point, but remained calm, knowing that Lizzie would come home to me soon, and that our lives would go back to normal soon, once they proved that Lizzie had nothing to do with her mother's death. Hours went by, maybe days, before anything else happened. Finally, a man came in through the front door. I was disappointed, seeing as I was hoping for Lizzie, but was happy to not be alone anymore.

The man came over to me, set down a carrier similar to the one Lizzie puts me in when I have to see my doctor, and nudged me inside before taking me to his car. Maybe he would take me to Lizzie. I tried to talk to him, but he ignored everything I said. I asked about Lizzie, about where we were going, but no response. I was finally brought to a familiar house. It was that of Lizzie's very quiet Aunt Violet. I hardly knew her, but whenever Lizzie and I went to visit her, she always gave me incredible food, so I relaxed a bit when she came outside and fetched me from the carrier in which I had been residing. Her house was nice. It was big, and I almost immediately got lost, but she helped me find my way around, and even gave me a bed to sleep on while I waited to hear from Lizzie. I stayed on that bed for what felt like forever. Lizzie never came. Perhaps her anger towards me was too much, she didn't want me anymore. In case this was the situation, I worked to find comfort at Aunt Violet's home. It wasn't hard. She scratched me behind the ears, and fed me home-cooked meals. She even shared her own food with me, like Lizzie used to. Still, years later, I wonder if Lizzie will ever come back to me. I wonder where those men took her, or if they hurt her somehow. I wonder what the officer who stayed behind meant by "testing for fingerprints." I wonder if I will ever see my best friend again.



Source: Sandfort, Melissa. "Black Kitty." *AgWired*, 31 July 2011,
<http://agwired.com/2011/07/31/black-kitty/>.

Bubbles

“Isn’t it funny how you’re never quite sure where they go?”

“I know exactly where they go.”

“Where?”

“They go to space.”

“How do you know?”

“Because space is way up high, above the sky, where we can’t see. It’s like balloons, when you let go and it floats higher and higher until you can’t see it anymore.”

“Balloons go to space, too?”

“Of course they do, where did you think balloons went?”

“I don’t know, I never really thought about it before. Do they have families?”

“I don’t think they have families, but they definitely have friends.”

“What are they made out of?”

“Just soapy water, I think. Air too, of course. That’s what inflates them and helps them float.”

“Why are they round?”

“Balloons?”

“No.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Can they be other shapes?”

“Maybe, they might be round because the open part of the wand is round.”

“So if we got a wand with a giraffe-shaped opening--”

“I don’t think anyone makes those.”

“I think we should make one.”

“Out of what?”

“I don’t know, will the soapy stuff cling onto anything?”

“I don’t know, but if it clings onto plastic, it will probably cling onto other things.”

“How do you figure?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s start gathering materials.”

“A giraffe might be too difficult, or any animal for that matter.”

“But I want to start a zoo in space.”

“In space?”

“Where the bubbles go.”

Jess's Crush

Jess contemplated her love for the girl, wondering what it was that had made her fall so deeply in love with an individual she barely knew. Was it her dimpled smile? her enormous brown eyes? Her long, thick black hair? Her smooth, tan Latina skin? Or perhaps it was something beneath the surface. She thought back to the first time she had seen Liliana. She was walking a grey and white pitbull around the local bus station, near their high school. Liliana repeatedly left Jess curious as to why she was at a bus station and not a trail or an open field of some sort where the dog would likely be happier. Jess found that Liliana often walked her dog around the local bus station at the same time every day around 4:00 p.m. Jess had never questioned her sexuality before, she had always simply assumed she was straight, but somehow, she found herself wanting to be around Liliana, craving her touch, growing curious about the taste of her devil-red lips. Every day after school, Jess got lunch and coffee, then headed over to the bus station around 3:45 in hopes of catching a glimpse of the woman she craved to know better. Every day, Jess swore she would speak to Liliana, and every day, she became too afraid once she saw the girl's overwhelming beauty, so she stayed hidden. From afar, Jess watched Liliana's perfect, confident strut, watching every movement her hips made as they swayed from side to side beneath her small waist. She had the perfect hourglass figure. While Liliana walked, she listened to music through earbuds, lip-synced, and danced, not caring who was watching her. This was an aspect of her behavior that Jess found especially charming. Jess was fascinated and infatuated with Liliana's adventurous and playful nature. Jess had come from a strict Catholic family who had very high expectations of her in most every aspect of

her life. Growing up under such uptight circumstances, Jess craved adventure, she craved to disobey rules and taste the freedom in which this girl seemed to bathe. Every time she watched Liliana, she pictured herself walking right beside her, wrapping her arm firmly around the girl's waist, as they walked her pitbull together and talked until the sun set. Although she was too shy to talk to Liliana, she never stopped dreaming about what she would say to her if she had the courage. Until her departure from secondary school, Jess spend every late afternoon gazing at her love and marveling at her sexy walk and her feminine clothing. What she never knew, was that Liliana was watching her, too. Jess tried to hide herself, hoping that her crush would never catch sight of her. Similarly, Liliana glanced back strategically at every chance she was given to catch sight of Jess's aqua-blue eyes and short blonde hair. Liliana loved Jess, too, but could never quite find a way to tell her so.

A Very Short Flight

The 3:15 Southwest flight from Boston to Seattle began boarding at 2:35. Charlotte boarded the very crowded plane nearly last, and found herself sitting beside a man reading her all-time favorite novel: *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell.

“You have good taste in books,” she gave him a lopsided smile and awaited his response.

“You like Orwell?”

“The only people who don’t like Orwell are those who do not understand Orwell.”

“Absolutely true, I fell in love with his work after reading *Animal Farm* when I was in the tenth grade. I read *1984* in college and was impressed once again, so I started collecting his novels and short story collections in hopes of reading everything he’s ever written.”

“Ambitious! But definitely worth the time.”

“Definitely! For a long time *Burmese Days* was my favorite of his novels, but I think *Down and Out in Paris and London* is about to steal the first place spot.”

“It really excellently portrays his ability to tell a good story. While *Animal Farm*, *1984*, and *Burmese Days* are all great stories, they were written mostly for those with an interest in history and politics, not for those who want a heartwarming or exciting piece of fiction. I love *Down and Out in Paris and London* because while he manages to stay true to his style by emphasizing the economic and political issues of the time, these issues are downplayed slightly in the novel so the reader is better-positioned to enjoy a sweeter, more

lighthearted story rather than prepare for an in-depth political analysis which nerds like you and I may enjoy, but definitely not everyone.”

“Exactly, it’s a better book for a wider audience.”

“Precisely.” Charlotte blushed and noticed the man doing the same.

“What’s your name?” He asked her in a deep but gentle voice.

“I’m Charlotte, what’s *your* name?”

“I’m Daniel, it’s very nice to meet you, Charlotte.”

“Likewise, Daniel.”

Charlotte couldn’t believe it. He was perfect, or as close to perfect as one can really get. They continued to speak about literature, then about music, then film, agreeing on everything.

“This is too good to be true,” Daniel thought to himself. He felt an urge to continue talking to her, he wanted to know her better, he wanted to ask her out, the flight was almost over and he couldn’t think of anything to say that was good enough, when suddenly the plane began to experience mild turbulence. The large object wavered in the sky, as the flight attendants tried to calm the passengers, and the pilot warned everyone to prepare for the worst. Through all the chaos, Charlotte and Daniel maintained their conversation, only stopping when the plane began to fall downwards at an alarmingly fast rate. Air masks dropped, so did life vests, but nothing could save Charlotte and Daniel from their inevitable fate. On their way down, Charlotte turned to Daniel and quickly thanked him for making the last moments of her life some of the best. He grabbed her hand and leaned in to kiss her, when suddenly the plane crashed to the ground, killing them both instantly. Their

bodies were discovered next to each other, hands still intertwined, before they were taken away to the same morgue a few hours later.

Breaking News

Will grasped onto Brian's cold, nearly dead hand. The pair had been inseparable since they began seeing each other secretly in 1966, when Brian was twenty-four and Will was twenty-two. Forty-nine years later, they still found themselves unable to be legally married due to Indiana state laws. Presently, Brian was lying in a hospital bed with lung cancer, his partner of forty-nine years crouched beside him, trying to hold back tears. The pair had expected Brian to pass some time earlier, and had gone through many high points and low points in his extensive treatment; however, the two knew that the end was coming soon, and chose not to waste a moment being upset. Instead, they sat in bed together, watched their favorite movies, and snacked on as much junk food as Brian's very delicate stomach could handle, which really wasn't much, but Will didn't mind feasting on his leftovers.

It was a standard, sunny Friday in June for the loving pair, they enjoyed a showing of the Rocky Horror Picture show, and cracked jokes to help ease the pain of Brian's fatal illness. The film ended too soon, and they switched back to television, deciding to watch reruns of their favorite childhood shows instead of another film. The old television shows made Will feel very nostalgic and emotional, so he turned the volume down a bit and decided to check in with his partner.

"Remember when we used to talk about the day we would someday get married, our fantasies about the legalization of same-sex marriage, you wearing an all-white Elton John-style suit, and me in a classic penguin tuxedo?"

"I do remember, that was a long time ago."

“I’m sorry our dream couldn’t come true.”

“It might still, you never know.”

The two chuckled, as Will leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on Brian’s dry but still soft, sweet lips.

“I love you,” Will said as a single teardrop fell from his eye.

“You will never know how much I love you,” Brian said, fondly smiling at his perfect, handsome partner whose side he never wanted to leave.

The couple fell asleep next to each other in bed with the television still on and playing *The Jetsons*. Will awoke a few hours later, and decided he would leave the television volume low so he could watch without waking his beloved boyfriend.

Then it happened.

Will became puzzled when his program was interrupted, and the words “Breaking News” came from the speakers which sat in the cabinet below the TV itself.

What came next was even more shocking.

“Supreme Court Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage Nationwide.”

Will read the headline on the top of the screen. He heard the reporter say the words, and still, he couldn’t believe it. He took a moment to process the news he had just received, then quickly went to shake his soulmate awake to share the good news, but Brian didn’t wake up. Will proceeded to cry, turn off the television, and swear quietly to himself as he prepared to call a nurse. He went to pick up the telephone, but instead went back to where his deceased partner lay peacefully. Will took a gold ring out of his back pocket, and slipped it onto Brian’s pale ring finger, before calling for help and saying his last goodbye.

Race

It all depended on this. If Stella won this 100 Individual medley race, she was guaranteed a full-ride swimming scholarship to the school of her dreams. As her event approached, she adjusted her goggles and pulled her cap down so it covered her entire forehead.

“Step up.”

She stepped up onto the diving block, doing her best to ignore the swimmers on either side of her, and only focus on herself. She couldn't let herself be distracted now. This was it.

“Take your mark.”

Her hands reached down and grasped onto the tip of the platform on which she was standing. She took a deep breath and awaited the ‘beep’ that told her to jump in and start swimming as fast as she could.

BEEP!

Stella was off. She hated that the individual medley, or IM, began with butterfly. It was by far the most tiring of all of the strokes, and she didn't consider it to be one of her best, either. Nevertheless, she made it through butterfly, even though her arms were hitting the water at different times due to exhaustion by the time she had almost completed her first lap. She was careful to touch the wall with both hands, and energetically pushed herself off of the wall and onto her back. Backstroke was her favorite stroke. She made it from one end of the pool to the other in what seemed like less than a second, and immediately dove into her second favorite stroke, breaststroke. Although her speed slowed

just slightly, breaststroke is generally a slower stroke, and she tried not to worry herself too much. She touched the wall with both hands, and began her final lap, swimming freestyle. She knew that freestyle wasn't her strongest stroke, but put every ounce of energy she had left into kicking as hard as she could, understanding that a stronger kick was the key to sprinting in the pool. She touched the wall with enough time to look back and see her opponents trailing behind her. That scholarship was hers, and she knew it.

Drawings on the Wall

My daughter Stephanie was three years old the day we began our most beloved artistic endeavour of her childhood. Steph is twenty now, and away at college. Every time she comes home, we continue to add to our wall. It all began on a cold November morning. I was watching television and drinking coffee, trying to wake myself up before going to work. I ventured down the hallway of our one-story ranch-style house which my husband and I had been saving for quite some time. We were thrilled to finally move in, and were just settling in at the time of this event. When I reached the end of the hallway, I peeked into my study, where I saw Steph drawing our family on the wall in Crayola markers. I nearly cried out of love for my precious daughter (and thankfulness that she picked the only room in which guests never go). When she finally saw me coming in, she became very panicked, quickly threw the markers into a nearby drawer, and tried to stand in front of her masterpiece. It made me sad to think that she thought I would be so mad. I decided to comfort her by retrieving the markers from the drawer, and adding my own drawing to the previously drab, white wall. Stephanie looked up at me with a smile that could cure cancer. She picked up a purple marker which had fallen on the ground earlier, and drew a flower next to my drawing of a blue kitty-cat. From that day on, we used the wall as an outlet. We drew with washable markers, so when we ran out of room, we could erase old drawings to clear up more space. When Steph was in high school, she even used the wall to map out ideas for essay she was writing. This wall became our safe place. We could leave messages on it for each other. We could illustrate silly murals and draw whatever we wanted together. To this day, she adds to it whenever she comes home, and I

am always sure to leave a message for her both before she comes home for a visit, and before she leaves again. When she is not there, I draw on the wall, and send her photographs of my most recent creations, so she is reassured that the wall is being put to good use while she is away. Earlier this year, my husband and I discovered that we will have to move for a job opportunity that was too good for me to pass up. At first I became sad about leaving the wall I had spent seventeen years beautifying with my daughter, until I realized that it was only a matter of time before she brings a child into this world, and the three of us can start a new wall of drawings together.

