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Rain May be Heavy at Times: A collection of personal essays

Natalie Mercer Worrell

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Dedication

To the friends who made these stories laughable

To the family who has made my life livable

To the faculty and students in the Lindenwood MFA program who have made me want to be a better writer . . . .

To my husband, Jimmy, and children,
Tom & Vallie, who have been, and always will be,
my biggest fans.

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INTRODUCTION

(Why I Don't Write)

When I was five and just learning to read, I wrote my first book. Sure, it was just a few pages held together by a couple of staples, containing more pictures than words, but it was the beginning. Throughout my grade school career, I won just about every short story and poetry contest I entered through my schools. I swelled with pride when my classmates referred to me as *the writer*. I liked that title. Whenever I read something I loved, I tried to copy the style in my own writing. Throughout my childhood, I went through life with a book in front of my face. These books hooked me, sending me charging through novels without stopping until they were complete, everything from *Nancy Drew* to Stephan King.

In high school, I took up poetry. My poems were the products of teen angst, outpourings of drama and confusion, with rhyme schemes and clichés. But every now and then, I'd write something I knew was good.

I grew up being told I should be a doctor or lawyer. I had the intelligence, but I already knew what I wanted to be. Or what I *had* to be: a writer.

And then came the drought. I found myself facing health issues, illnesses with scary names, such as mononucleosis and cervical cancer and endometriosis. Just when I'd started college, I learned I was pregnant. I went years without writing a single thing. Life was happening all around me, going by in flashes and streams of successes. But they were the successes of others; of my friends graduating college and landing "real" jobs, while I was stuck working at my dad's office as a receptionist, longing to finish school but not having the time, the money, or the energy.

I didn't feel sorry for myself – I felt pissed off at myself. Angry for letting all of my ambitions fall by the wayside. I didn't realize then that things were unfolding exactly how they were meant to.

I was twenty-four years old, driving around alone on a December evening. My car was warm, but I could tell how cold the night was, just by the way it looked. I sat at a red light, tracing a gloved finger along the steering wheel, considering taking the long way home, when something happened. I realized that the only person stopping me from finishing school and finding a career was *me*.

I went the next day to sign up for classes to finish my Bachelor's degree, and the first class I signed up for was a writing class. This was the first writing I'd done in years, and I was rusty. Yet, at the same time I felt at home again. I felt like the old Natalie I'd left behind, just a few steps out of the starting gate.

Within three years, I had my degree, and I there was no stopping me. I landed a freelance writing gig for a national magazine, and decided to go on and finish my MFA, despite trying to work and raise two young kids, and, of course, enjoy the newly discovered love of my life, Jimmy.

I dove into my schoolwork, polishing my craft. The poetry grew stronger, but I couldn't grapple with fiction; and even my non-fiction was only so-so. My instructors and classmates encouraged me, offered suggestions . . . but I couldn't find a niche to settle into.

That is until Maud Kelly, my non-fiction instructor, handed me a book by Sloane Crossly, *I was Told There'd be Cake*. The essays were written by a sarcastic, witty young woman about her daily life and other experiences that shaped her. She dares to say express her true opinions and feelings, all with a tone that made me feel as though we were lifelong friends, sitting across from one another over a cup of coffee.

This is how I talk, I thought. *I can do this*. Putting my own spin on the essays to include lyrical form and poetic qualities, I quickly found my voice, cranking out a solid essay in just minutes. This was unlike the fiction pieces I'd toiled with for weeks that ended up amounting to scarcely anything.

I had my voice, but once again, life got in my way of writing.

Why I don't write: There are piles of laundry pushing me out of the house. I stripped the sheets from Tom and Val's beds this morning. They are still rumpled on the floor, and it's almost bedtime. Dishes are rising out of the sink.

They aren't in the dishwasher yet because the dishwasher needs to be unloaded. Sometimes I time myself to see how fast I can unload the dishwasher, to make it like a game. Speaking of games, Valerie's been following me around holding the CandyLand box sideways (I already heard the cards and pieces go scattering around the box). I'd love to play with her, but first, these dishes are not just any dishes. They are covered with the remains of old Hamburger Helper, and require special attention.

Tom: get your homework finished, please. Empty the playground rocks from your shoes; they're dropping all over the floor! Valerie, please don't do that with your chocolate milk. Would someone make sure Murphy has food and water? And hang your coats up this time, please.

Giving the kids baths is an ordeal. Not too many bubbles, not too little bubbles. Val wants to play with toys, but not *those* toys – *these* toys. Tom needs to wash his hair; Val's can wait until tomorrow. Valerie won't get out until I find her monkey towel. Tom can't find comfortable pajama pants that aren't too short around the ankles. They both need to brush their teeth – twice, actually, because the first time wasn't good enough. Seriously, half the toothpaste ended up in the sink.

Story time! First a story about alligators. Next a story about princesses and kitty-cats. Finally, a story about alligators, princesses, *and* kitty-cats. Then a drink of water. An extra blanket. The stuffed chickie. Where was it? Left downstairs? I'll go get it.

Kids are asleep. I think. I need to do some work, but I am so damn tired. Bath first. Contacts out, glasses on. Ibuprofen X 3. My neck is stiff. I wish I had more time to spend with Jimmy. Yawn. Bed, insomnia, weird dreams involving my 3rd grade teacher, morning again. Shampoo, rinse, repeat.

If I can't find time to shave my legs, how can I find time to write? Truth is, I'm writing all the time. Every minute of the day. I may not write it down, or type it out, but it's coming to me. My life, my thoughts, my passion and irritation – oh, yeah, poems and essays are getting backed up in my mind just like the toilet did a few months ago. It may be awhile before I can get the plunger and suck these ideas from my brain, but they'll wait for me, with far more patience than I or my children have ever exhibited.

I tried fiction, but why bother when I can't make up anything half as entertaining as the crazy shit that goes on in my everyday life? These are the stories that real people, real moms and women and friends and wives want to hear, and want to read – to know they are not alone in what they go through, in relationships, friendships, families . . . in that long journey between pigtails and income tax returns. And I can write them like I'm sitting face to face with my own friends. There is no way to make it through womanhood without a dose of sarcasm and the ability to laugh a little at what makes us women in the first place.

I've always thought of myself as a poet, but I just recently realized that first and foremost I am Natalie, a twenty-nine year old mother, wife, student, and woman. So that is what these essays are about.

RAIN MAY BE HEAVY AT TIMES

A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

NATALIE M. WORRELL

Crawling out of the Dump

I once told my friends that dating is like wading through garbage. Maybe that's a little harsh, but after contemplating a jump out the window of the women's restroom to escape a date, it was pretty much the sum of my feelings.

You see, dating after a divorce is a whole other beast. We're not in Kansas anymore. Dating no longer revolves around which color of lip gloss to wear and finding ways to bend the curfew rule. Instead, it entails the painful determinations as to which pants hold in the most belly flab, who will babysit the kids, and whether or not there is enough gas in the car to make it to the bar in the first place. I was twenty-five, divorced, and the mother of two small kids – a son (5) and a daughter (<1 year). Oh, and I was also officially bankrupt and still in college.

It had been several months since my divorce was finalized, and the idea of a companion had been climbing back into my mind. Or maybe it was there all along, hiding inside of my desire to hold hands in public, change the battery in the out-of-reach attic smoke detector, find a father figure for my son, and sit with someone on the couch watching reruns of Seinfeld over bowls of ice cream. Perhaps it was simply born out of my fear of being alone.

But this wasn't high school. Back then, a guy not having a job was no biggie. So what if his parents shelled out money for our Taco Bell dinner dates and his car was missing a back seat? Just as long as he looked cute in a baseball

cap and had fresh breath. At seventeen, I couldn't see past my senior prom. That's how I ended up with the ex in the first place. I won't linger in the details of the five year marriage – but mostly because the entire span of time blurs into a mess of arguments, bouncing checks, and my trying to sculpt a monument out of shit – stuck on automatic replay. You get the idea.

Although being thrown back into the dating game scared the crap out of me, I also saw it as a second chance. I now had the option of setting this little thing called a *standard*. Education topped my list. I didn't care in what or how much – I just wanted someone who valued himself enough to be educated in something. A sense of humor and other cliché traits followed, such as being romantic and a child at heart and tolerant of my parents. Something involving one of the arts scored bonus points. And to further complicate things, this Mr. Right would also have to love my babies in addition to myself.

Steve holds the title as First Official Post-Divorce Date. He had a shaved head, goatee, and looked like he'd ridden in on a Harley. But I found it endearing that he spit rainbows as he talked, doused himself in cologne, and carried a photo of a little girl from Guatemala that he sponsored through a charity. After running into each other a couple of times at a bar down the street from me, he asked me out.

I found myself sucked back into high school when he arrived to pick me up. My dad was at my house to watch the kids, so he rose and introduced himself and they shook hands while I stood there, holding my jacket and purse like a

embarrassed sixteen-year-old waiting to go to the prom. In casual conversation during our drive over, he commented that my dad's New York accent reminded him of an old boss of his, except that his boss hailed from Queens and my dad from the Bronx. I nodded, adding that I barely noticed the accent any more.

Later, over appetizers (appetizers that finally arrived after a two-hour attempt at changing a flat tire in bitter St. Louis February weather and, smart me, freezing because I only wore a denim jacket) he noted (again) how my dad reminded him of his former boss, what with the New York accent and all, although his boss had come from Queens, and not the Bronx like my dad. "*What a coincidence*," I'd said in that tone reserved for information to which there is no meaningful response.

Four bites into dinner, he brought up my dad *again*. He pointed out the New York accent adding that, although from Queens and not the Bronx, his boss had a very similar accent. I raised an eyebrow and smiled, afflicted with a nagging case of déjà vu. After checking the napkin holder for a hidden camera, I ordered another gin and tonic. I changed the subject to his job, and he proceeded to tell me that his government position was considered high-stress, and that they actually had a padded, soundproof room in which one could take a break in and scream. Things were starting to make sense to me.

When he reverted back to the east coast accent thing a fourth and final time, I butted in and finished the sentence for him. "Yes, yes, *I know*." I waved my empty glass in the air, rattling the ice. "He reminds you of my dad, but he is

from Queens and not the Bronx," I said at 100 mph through a clenched-teeth smile. Now I was certain that someone would emerge from behind the bar with a video camera and microphone to tell me that the joke's on me and I'd been set up by my friends.

But Steve just stared at me, wide-eyed. "How did you know that?" he asked in astonishment. At this point, I excused myself and checked the women's restroom for a window large enough to crawl through, thinking of those movie scenes in which a dumpster sits conveniently placed beneath the window to break the fall.

"Oh, that's not so bad," my mom replied when I'd filled in the details of the date. I just stared at her. "He seems nice. Don't you think you're being too picky?"

"Picky? Since when is it too much to ask to go out with guy whose memory span lasts longer than five minutes?" I liked to think of myself as tolerant. Being a mother requires patience, so something had to be said for a grown man who could shatter mine within the course of one evening. But I guess I should give Steve a little credit for not being as creepy as Sunny.

Yep. Once again, everything seemed to look good on paper. A detective in St. Louis, Sunny got his name because his hippie-lovin' mom nicknamed him Sunshine when he was small and it stuck. He played the guitar, sang to his orange cat, Louie, and refused to drink socially.

We decided to meet for a date at a concert. He introduced me to the band and offered to buy me a drink. I opted for a Sprite. Naturally, when he returned with a Bud Light in hand, I felt slightly perplexed. I reminded myself how nervous I was, and having a beverage in order to snuff some anxiety seemed logical.

The band sang about black high-heeled shoes and long brown hair and I swayed back and forth on the dance floor, waving occasionally to the band, which I was certain must have written that song about me. I noticed that Sunny kept disappearing in ten minute intervals.

"Are you okay?" I yelled out over the music when he finally returned. He nodded, grabbing onto my shoulder.

"I just had a few too many Tequila shots I think."

I jerked my arm away. "What? I thought you said you weren't a 'social drinker!'" I made the little finger quote gesture around the words *social drinker*.

"I'm not," he called back, clutching at my elbow. "I don't drink socially. I drink to get drunk." Picture the sound of a record stopping, needle coming to a screeching halt on the vinyl: the sound of my brain hitting the brakes. Great. Freaking great. Now how to get out of this one in a hurry? A smoke signal? Too primitive – I had technology. So I set my plan into motion.

"Oh, I see," I said through my best faux smile. "Well, then, on second thought, maybe I will take that drink." I added a wink for good measure.

"Cool! I know the bartender, he'll hook us up. Be right back." With that, he stumbled back into the ring of drinkers surrounding the bar. I hit Shelly's number into my cell phone while pretending to dig through my purse for an Altoid mint. Shelly was my right hand man and she knew what to do. (We were both newly single and therefore cohorts.) If she got a call from me, she was to call back in approximately 15 minutes with a fake emergency to bail me out.

Right on queue, the phone went off as Sunny returned, handing me a drink that spilled out of the glass and ran down his wrist. "Yeah? What?" I hollered into the phone. "Oh, no! Are you sure? You can't get anyone else to help?" I shook my head and flashed Sunny a helpless look. "Oh, okay girlie. I'll be right there." I stomped my foot in pout. "I am so, so sorry, but I've gotta go. My friend is stuck at the airport," I explained, snapping my phone shut.

That night, I added *no alcoholics* to my list of standards -- a list that was quickly turning into a list of *requirements*. *Maybe I am picky,* I thought. *No dementia, no crippling addictions* . . . Going over it in my head, it didn't seem too unreasonable. But I soon found out that I needed to be even more specific, thanks to Kevin.

Kevin intrigued me because he was younger. Not by a lot, really. I was 26 and he 23, but in boy years (especially during my roaring twenties) that can be the equivalent of eons. We went to the same university where he majored in English. His vocabulary put mine to shame, and I finally got into the habit of pulling up a Word document on my laptop and using the Thesaurus while we

talked on the phone so I could appear more intelligent. (Except for the handful of times I used a word in the wrong context, after which I pretended to be joking.)

Things were proceeding slowly with Kevin (three dates and not even a good-night hug), but I chalked it up to chivalry. I invited him to meet up with some of my friends during a belated birthday celebration, and they seemed to get a kick out of it when he handed me a CD he'd burned with Happy Birth Day Nat Alie written on it in Sharpie marker.

Until he excused himself to go to the restroom. "That's really weird," Carrie admitted as soon as he was out of earshot.

"Yeah, that is like the junior high equivalent of a mix tape," Shelly guffawed. "How much younger did you say he is?"

I yanked the CD away from Carrie and Shelly and crammed it into my purse. "What's so weird about that? I think it's sweet. Isn't that what I *need*? *Sweetness?*" Who could expect them to understand the complexity of a mix tape – or rather, compilation CD. He must have personally selected songs that made him think of me. Or so I thought, until I popped it in on the way home and heard "Oh, Cecilia! I'm down on my knees! I'm begging you please to come home. . ."

But I wasn't giving up. Here was a guy I knew was intelligent (Webster's walking dictionary) and thoughtful (let's move the CD away from romantic and into the thoughtful category). Plus, he didn't go screaming into the night when I told him I had two small children.

Based on these qualifications, I had him over for an impromptu movie night and we somehow ended up under two separate quilts watching *Three Amigos*. He moved in to kiss me (I thought), but when I reciprocated, he suddenly snapped back like a spring and pulled the blanket up to his chin.

Then came the single weirdest moment of my life. "This is moving too fast for me," he began. I opened my mouth, but couldn't make words. "I'm a virgin," he confessed. I suddenly felt like an overbearing college guy preying on a teenaged girl.

Sifting through possible responses, I came up with: "Well, that's something to admire." And then we stared at each other for a solid minute. I was still in the process of deciding what to say when he continued to bomb the shit out of me.

"And I'm not completely certain that I won't enter the priesthood."

Excuse me? "*Excuse me*?" I asked him. We'd met on effing match.com (see: DATING IN THE NEW MILLENIUM) for crying out loud! I scooted back into the cushions and pulled my quilt up even higher than his.

"Just wait. Let me explain," he began, going into some weird blend of apology and Catholicism and his use of match.com to meet various types of people. Without my dictionary, I only understood half of what he was rambling. He proceeded to try desperately and unsuccessfully to douse my flame with lame compliments, such as "you seemed intriguing" and "I noticed you have an interest in hockey."

"Then what is *this*?" I demanded, waving my arm in a giant circle that encompassed the quilts, the candles, and the *Three Amigos* DVD case. "Some kind of social experiment? You sign up for online dating *to date*. You want a variety of people? You go to Starbuck's in U-city." I was furious by now, thinking of the kiss on my right hand, the mix tape (er . . . CD), the nearly obsessive use of my laptop's Thesaurus. "And why the hell didn't you tell me that, oh, I don't know, like *three* weeks ago or something?!" Then, thinking of my own Catholic upbringing, I tried to calm myself. "Look, I think you need to go. This is just too weird."

"Can't we remain friends?" he asked, lowering his blanket.

"No, I don't think so." I pointed to the door.

He locked his fingers and twisted them, his eyes shifting to the floor. "I can't just *leave*," he mumbled. And for a moment, I thin light shone down from Heaven. Maybe he needed me in order to determine his destiny. Maybe I was a part of something bigger than even I knew; some life-altering decision. I softened my eyes a little and gazed up at him.

"Kevin? What is it?" I coaxed.

"You picked me up, remember? I need a ride back home."

The next morning, I couldn't decide who to call first. My sister would probably die from hysteria. Carrie would rub it in that she called him strange

first. I settled on Shelly. I made myself comfy on the front porch and lit up a cigarette as I dialed her number.

"He's gay," she said simply after I finished the rigorous rendering of details.

"Gay? Are you sure? I mean, I don't know, he seemed . . ."

"Gay," she interrupted. Thinking back to his dislike of my Burt's Bees chapstick, I guess it was possible.

My list was getting oddly specific as I added *must be straight* and *no priests* to it. I also did some more priority rearranging thanks to guys like Ryan, who deserves no further explanation other than the fact that he referred to the girls he dated as horses in his corral, and admitted (after a solid month of dating) that guys referred to my situation as having a "ready-made-family" and that is not desirable to a young man in the prime of his child-bearing years.

Finally, in an act of desperation I allowed myself to be "set up." A close friend of mine introduced me, virtually speaking, to an old college friend of hers. "He's in law school and knows karate," she said, pumping him. It's a known fact among us who grew up in the eighties that anyone who knows karate scores instant cool points. She thought Aaron and I might enjoy chatting, especially since we'd be seated at the same table for her up-coming wedding. We seemed to hit it off initially, but mostly because we talked online (he was from Des Moines) and I mistook his flat conversation for witty sarcasm due to the lack of tone that can be derived from reading straight text.

Our online chats turned to occasional phone conversations, and I found myself using an invisible scale to balance out his lack of personality and absent sense of humor with the fact that he watched *Scrubs*, knew karate, and was intelligent. I also moved his obsession with video games from the con to the pro column figuring it would give him something to do with my son.

When held in a stringent comparison to the others, sure, he didn't seem so bad. But, mind you, the others had already begun my erosion process, so it wasn't going to take much to crumble me. Obviously, it was just a matter of time – prolonged only by the distance factor, which provided some cushion since we were able to tolerate each other in the smaller doses allowed by phone conversations and periodic weekend visits. Little by little, I found myself becoming fascinating by his apparent lack of any emotion whatsoever and thus began to deliberately provoke him by picking strange and random arguments with him (such as, "You don't like the fact that I wear large earrings, do you? Admit it!)

Next came the complaints from his parents wishing I was Jewish (enter: religious conflict #2) and things began to fall apart fast when, at our mutual friend's wedding, I got drunk and he became extremely irritated by my overuse of bad puns (such as crying out "Are you just stringing me along?" to a strand of Christmas lights).

The topper had to be when he criticized my parenting skills during one of our final phone calls. "I can't believe how late you let them stay up," he'd

scoffed. "And they *stand* on the coffee table? My parents would never . . ." he began.

"Excuse me? It's summer and I enjoy spending time with them. Besides, it's not like we just *stand* on the table. We put cushions on the floor and jump off." Silence. "My kids are awesome, and they've – *we've* – been through a lot this past year, and . . ." Suddenly I realized I shouldn't have to defend myself. Who the hell was he and what did he know about being a single mom – or a parent at all, for that matter?

At that moment, I'd become aware that my standards were not only *perpetually* out of order (like, let's move sense of humor up there with holding a steady job), but ridiculously impossible. And then I started to think maybe the problem wasn't all of them, but maybe it was *me.*

"Don't worry about it so much," a friend said over a late night pizza after class. "You're not being picky, you're just waiting for the right guy. Believe me, you'll know it's him. And it will happen when you least expect it. As soon as you aren't looking."

Aren't looking? Is a single girl – or guy for that matter - ever *not* looking? At the grocery store, pumping gas, in line at McDonald's – isn't one eye always scanning for Mr. Right? Maybe it really was time to stop looking. I kept trying to make frogs fit my prince mold. It was time to retire my jersey number to the dating hall of fame.

Mission #1 in the boy-boycott: change the battery in the attic smoke detector by myself. True, the attic "floor" consisted only of a series of narrow rafters and insulation, and the slanted ceiling was well out of my reach. And although I narrowly escaped with my life, I managed to teeter a step-stool across the joists and replace the 9-volt battery.

I bought *Sonic the Hedgehog* , a video game I'd played as a kid, and showed my son how to beat it. I also invested in a wiffle ball and bat and practiced throwing to him. I traded my Friday night dates for evenings at home with the kids. We took the cushions off the couch and ate ice cream on the living room floor together. When the kids were gone, I walked the streets of my neighborhood or grabbed coffee, sometimes with a friend and sometimes with my text books. I ended up a lot closer to graduating, to my children, and to sanity.

When a girls' night out with Shelly and Carrie fell through, I decided to go to a Humane Society benefit at a winery with my parents instead, as a true testament to my devotion to the mission. The kids were gone for the evening, so I kicked back for a stress-free evening of wine drinking and cheese eating with Mom and Dad.

A June storm was brewing in the distance, its dark clouds pushing in behind the trees that lined the winery. Our table sat beneath a wispy pine tree along the gravel road that led to the turn-of-the-century estate turned winery. Twinkling lights wrapped the trunks of several trees, and a band served up the perfect background music. My mom and I swayed back and forth in our plastic

chairs as my dad lovingly rolled his eyes. The wind started to pick up, and I watched the storm close in, just beyond a table of three – a couple, I presumed, and their third-wheel friend.

He glanced at me periodically, and I felt relief that I wasn't interested in the opposite sex at this particular time. Who needed the stress? Not I. For myself, being a third wheel had surprising appeal. It certainly was easier to ride a tricycle than a unicycle. I focused instead on the sky, the sound of the piano, the bite-sized cubes of cheese.

Sipping my wine with the freedom held only by a girl who is content with a night out with the parents, I purposely looked past him, into the gray twilight, even as he rose from his seat. There was no online questionnaire for him to fill out. He wasn't a blind date, and I wasn't tipsy at the bar with the girls. Maybe he was educated, and maybe not. Maybe he was a wine connoisseur or maybe his friends drug him here. He could be older than me, younger than me. He could despise dancing and puns and be allergic to ice cream. Perhaps he could change a battery in record time and owned a pogo stick. It didn't matter anymore.

A rumble of thunder sounded as he walked in my direction. Was he walking over to me? I studied my wine glass until I felt him beside me. Turning, I faced him and the outline of thunderheads that swirled behind the canopy of trees, threatening to move us all indoors. I noticed that he had light brown eyes and dimples that framed a child-like smile. He paused, and then asked, "Do you know where the bathroom is?"

I didn't, so I answered, "No. Sorry." I traced the stem of my glass.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" He tapped a finger on the top of the empty chair beside me. To save him from his embarrassment, I told him he could. He extended a hand and introduced himself.

Thanks to the wine, my turn to be embarrassed followed shortly thereafter as my mom blurted out, "She's a *writer*. And an *honor student*. She has two kids, though – but they're *great* kids," she added quickly, leaning out seat. There's a mom for you.

I shot her *the look* and turned back to him apologetically, half expecting him to be excusing himself from our table. But he was smiling. Not an awkward smile or a sympathetic smile, but a *real, actual* smile. Then I realized that I, too, was smiling.

Digging around for appropriate words, I came up with, "I'm going to need a refill."

He gulped down the last of his wine and held the empty glass up. "Me, too. I'll go with you." We both scooted our chairs across the grass and stood up. Side by side, we walked up the gravel path as the rain began to fall.

A Girl's Guide to Friends

Rachel was my first friend. The very day I moved into the house on South Pennsylvania Avenue, I found out a girl my age lived next door. Without even a nanosecond of hesitation (no glance in the mirror, no strength in numbers), I knocked on her door. I told her my name and that I was four years old. After that, all I had to do was wait the 47 seconds it took for her to find sandals and come out, and for the next five years she was my best friend.

Within those years, I learned what it meant to be friends. When we fought, we went for the throat, tossing the other's most beloved doll in the dirt or pushing each other off the swings. But when we loved, we loved like sisters, taking the blame for each other when we got caught sneaking into the neighbor's house or drawing naked pictures. We shared everything from Barbies to chewing gum (A.B.C. gum, even), told secrets, practiced kissing using pillows, confessed what we were most scared of. Every girl needs to have a Rachel: that first glimpse into womanhood, the reason why most guys hang around in groups, but every woman has that one best friend, though that #1 role may change.

One of my closest friends now was also my best friend in high school, Karen. Though we have our obvious differences, I think we became friends and stayed friends because we are so much alike. Together, we agonized over test grades, found ways to bend the dress code rules, tried rock climbing, cut our hair

short then grew it out. When we went to Florida together, we bought coordinating swim suits, and people thought we were twins.

Every girl needs that one friend who *gets* her. Today we still manage to have an overwhelming number of things in common, such as each buying a bottle of wine because the label looked fun and letting it sit in the fridge for months because it tasted horrible, or discovering that there is missing poop somewhere in the house because we both, though at different times, let one of the kids go diaper-free. Our husbands hate it when we sit in the bar and have a conversation without really saying anything at all. Take a look:

Karen: Oh, God – do you know what I thought about last week for the first time in ages?

Me: What? What is it?

Karen: (laughing) That time we went (more laughing) . . . hold on, I can barely say it. Okay, okay. That time we went to the – the (hysterical laughing) . . .

Me: Oh! You mean the – (laughter, banging on the table with open palm) – and that guy said – he said (hysteria) . . .

Karen:Yes! Yes! With – with - he was standing there – (indecipherable words, laughter) help, I can't talk . . .

Karen and Me together: . . . with the weird thing moving in his sweater!

Husbands, Adam and Jimmy: What the hell just happened?

I doubt I need to explain the significance of a friend like this, the ultimate best friend. But just recently, I stopped and thought about the roles of other friends I have (and have had) over the course of my life. I realized that I love each for completely different reasons; like loving Mexican food for the kick versus chocolate birthday cake for the sugar. Each does something for me that the other doesn't, and together it's like we form a mosaic. I can't help but wonder what I am to each of my own friends.

The Coming-of-Age Friend: Somewhere in between that first childhood friend that came so effortlessly and the high school friends that were a little tougher to earn, the Coming-of-Age Friends appeared. In the midst of middle school and junior high, a posse was formed that made coping with life just a little easier.

These friends may have found their way to each other through necessity (for example, the pair were constantly teased by the boys for having unibrows, so they banded together, stole tweezers from one of their mother's, figured out how to tweeze one brow into two, and were thus friends well into high school). These are the girls who, one by one, go through puberty and lean on each other for support. I was the first girl in my group of friends to shave my underarms, which made me an immediate expert. Thus, each came to me for advice and wisdom on how to go about it, what type of lubricant to use (soap v. gel), and if the myth about it growing faster from then on was true (still a topic of debate).

Me and four other girls formed my own junior high support group. We might have been 6th grade misfits in some ways; but on the weekends, away from the taunts of pre-pubescent boys who made fun of our budding breasts and home-perms, we took turns hosting slumber parties where we had to decide who our favorite member of New Kids on the Block was, play Truth or Dare, and practice taking our bras off without removing our shirts. Without knowing it, we were learning how friends could help a girl survive.

If you can manage to keep one of your Coming of Age Friends for life, then you will have some top-notch stories to recount together.

The Shit Disturber: Okay, just short of being completely self-explanatory, there is a little more to this so-dubbed "friend." Is she jealous or just plain mean? The reason the phrase "two-faced" came into existence, this so-called friend always seems to like the same boys you like, wants the same friends you have, and somehow manages to buy the sweater or totally cool beaded necklace you've been lusting after for weeks before you can even say, "Mom, will you take me to the mall?"

Sounds like we should kick this bitch to the curb, right? Wrong! We don't, and it's for the same reasons that we can't seem to get over the senior guy in high school who told us to meet him at the food court, only to show up with his big-boobed cheerleader girlfriend and gang of football players to laugh at us. She's like some sort of crack that we are addicted to.

My Shit Disturber was Jennifer. I met her in 3rd grade and let her ruin things for me off an on for a full SIX years. Stupid right? Well, yes. You see, when I was friends with Jennifer, life was good. She was fucking hilarious, and just a touch of crazy. She got me doing things I wouldn't normally do – nothing illegal (that's another type of friend altogether), but she sort of brought me out of my shell. She seemed confident, out-going, popular. With her, I wasn't afraid to approach people, try inline skating, wear my hair down, play practical jokes.

During grade school, I spent many weekends at Jennifer's. Her parents had a circa 1970s basement and HBO, so we could watch R-rated movies. There was even a Ouija board, which we used to freak ourselves out until we ended up sleeping outside her parents' bedroom.

The downside to being friends with Jennifer was that she intermittently decided to stop being my friend, which she made into a game. On any random day, I'd go to sit with her at lunch, and she'd have me blocked out of the table so I had to sit alone or with the lower grade. In high school, she'd go to my closest friends and make up rumors so that they'd be mad at me all of a sudden. Why oh why did I keep coming back for more? It's like the guy who stood you up at the mall suddenly shows up with flowers and chocolates and asks you to take a ride with him in his dad's Mustang, and you're thinking, Hell yes! I forgive you! It took me awhile to grow some she-balls and get rid of Jennifer, but I finally did after my frosh year of high school when I overheard her lying about me outside the cafeteria. I instantly dropped my yogurt and chewed her out, one of only a

half-dozen or so times I actually lost my temper. After that, she was totally called out and ended up switching schools.

But, oh! Those were the days.

The Brainiac: Yes, I was one of the smarter kids in school, and yes I was a little high-strung at times. But the brainiac is a whole other breed of smart. She is the valedictorian, or president of the National Honor Society, and school is the only thing she thinks about. She doesn't really have time to hang out at the mall after school or crash a Friday night party, but her intellect makes her wise on many levels, so she's a great friend for not only academic advice, but any type of practical help you might need. Later in life you can call on her if you screwed up your check book ledger or don't know where to find a documentary on documentaries. And you'd be surprised at how you may be able to help her out if you are a friend that falls into one of the other categories.

The Bad Influence: Okay, this is no Jennifer. She would never harm you in anyway; in fact, she'd kick someone's ass up their throat for you if asked. If you're a good girl, then she's everything you're not – except for a loyal friend. Everyone needs a bad influence to shake things up a little bit, as well as test their morals and strength of character. Let me tell you about my Bad Influence.

Christie and I became friends at approximately the same time me and Jennifer "broke up." Christie was an average to below-average student. Not because she wasn't smart, but because she didn't really give a crap about being there. She came to school late, cut class to grab a smoke, left early – while I

developed ulcers during finals week and argued with the history teacher over my classroom tardy.

The rebellion of Christie started out with little things, like sneaking cigarettes (which for goody-goody asthmatic me were bad enough to begin with) and piercing her belly button with a safety pin (I was worried about infection, of course). Then she went on to dating older guys, staying out late, smoking weed. She seemed to get wilder by the day.

First, she did the Gothic thing, black eyeliner and nail polish, pale skin, big and baggy clothes, etc. And I admit reluctantly that I latched on a little. There was a bit of a power trip involved when you can walk through the mall, and people actually look afraid of you. I had to laugh on the inside: Here I was, little miss straight-A, straight-laced Natalie who babysat on weekends and worked at a law firm after school, walking through the mall with a spiked bracelet and grannies are actually going to the opposite side of the mall to walk as far away from me as possible.

But Christie always took things a step farther, and I was always along for the ride, trying to keep her (and myself) out of trouble. She managed to find the creepiest guys, like Tim, who only had a first name and swore he was a witch who put some kind of curse on me. And Kevin, who only said about 6 words and never smiled and lived on a street named Jupiter, which I found ironic.

Ever hear of that thing called peer pressure? Yeah, it's real. She used to lovingly tease me about breaking out, trying something "dangerous" as I called it.

So I did cave a few times. Once at the mall, she convinced me to steal a cheap ring from a jewelry store. I finally grabbed it and stuffed it in my purse when the clerk wasn't looking. "Eeeee!" she squealed. "I'm so proud of you!" I felt so terrible about the stupid thing that I never wore it and finally threw it away, thinking after the fact that I should have returned the $3 item.

I also have her to thank for my one and only ride in a police car. She convinced me to sneak out of her bedroom one night when we were both 16 so she could meet Kevin (the guy from Jupiter). We were out walking around the neighborhood when Hooray! The cops show up and haul us away for being out past curfew (note: if you are going to have a police car ride story, at least try to make it something more exciting than a curfew offense, like public nudity or bungee jumping from a bridge). We threw such a little baby crying fit in the back of the car that the poor guy just dropped us off at her house and banged on the door until her dad answered. Yikes.

It was with her that I got drunk for the first time, too. We didn't know what the hell we were doing: I took an 8 oz cup and filled it with Jack Daniels, Bailey's Cream, and some other third thing I took from my parents' cabinet. We chugged the entire disgusting concoction. Neither of us thought we were even drunk until we both stood up at the same time and ended up face-first on the basement floor. We fell asleep together throwing up – her on the toilet and me in the bathtub beside her.

I remember the first time Christie had sex. Well, I mean, I remember when she told me about it. I felt like we were way too young to be having the conversation. I felt far-away, like I didn't know her at that moment and wanted to be teleported back to the first week we knew each other, where we actually went to the movies when we said we were instead of driving to some weird dude's house. But still . . . I *had* to know. "What is it like?" I asked. I was about to receive real first-hand information, not from HBO or Sex Ed class.

"It was pretty fun," she began. "It hurt a little at first, like a pinch. But after that it was okay."

"Oh my God! I can't believe you really did it! Where were you?"

"In his dad's basement."

"Did you use . . . a condom or something?" I felt like a little kid, even though I was actually older than she was by six months.

"Nah. We started to, but it felt better without it."

"Christie! "

"Now don't start," she scolded, rolling her eyes and throwing a pillow at me. "You're supposed to be my best friend, not my mom or something."

Soon after that, Christie started using drugs, even sneaking them to school. She tried to talk me into putting weed in between the meat and cheese of our Lunchables. Once, I couldn't find her at a pep rally, and she had snuck outside to shoot up with something. Finally, she didn't show up for school one day, and her

parents called me that night frantic. She was gone, and they had the police out looking for her and everything. We called her favorite radio station and had them play the song *Runaway Train* and beg her to come home.

When she finally surfaced at a crappy motel with one of her boyfriends, I was furious with her. I can still hear her sobbing and begging me to forgive her, but I knew our friendship would never be the same.

Fourteen years later I still believe that Christie always had my back no matter what path she was on. And that didn't change when it became evident that I wasn't walking with her. She rants about how lucky I am to have a nice house and husband and children, but the thing is, I know she's happy for me, because that's the kind of friend she is.

The Guy Friend: I couldn't have survived high school without my guy friend. During the all-too-frequent cat fights and bathroom drama associated with female friends, the guy friend was there to listen. Guy friends are *not* boyfriends; in fact, the more your friends comment on how you were *made* for each other, the more you start to view each other as brother and sister.

A girl can turn to her guy friend for a shoulder or practical advice without running the risk of having her sob story turn into tomorrow's hot gossip. And a guy friend won't betray you: after all, you may be his only hope for unlocking any mysteries of the opposite sex, or perhaps assisting him in writing a rhyming love poem to his girlfriend.

The Wholesome Friend: Admit it. You've seen a name on the caller ID and deliberately ignored it. "I'll call her back later. I just don't feel like talking right now." You're not trying to be mean; you're just tired, in the middle of dinner, or watching Overboard for the 264th time. You're even anyway, you figure, because you know for a fact that when you called her last week and she didn't answer that she *was* home, since you drove past on the way back from getting gas and saw her car in her driveway. No feelings were hurt in the process; that's just the way things go. Everyone's busy these days.

But there is that one friend who always answers the phone when you call. She's there for you any time; to bail you out of a bad date, to pick you up at the airport – even to help you move! She's one of those rare genuine people, who almost seems too good to be true.

My friend Lisa fills that role. She's almost 6 feet tall with long blonde hair – like a freaking real-life Barbie doll – but she's always too modest to admit she's gorgeous. Last time we went to the pool, I did try to hide behind lounge chairs and umbrellas and other stationery objects on the way to the snack bar because I'm barely 5'4" and have had two kids (you do the math), but *she* was the one from wrapped in an enormous beach towel from head to toe.

Lisa works as a pediatric nurse for a hospital that caters to mostly abused and terminally ill children, most without insurance. I know, I know – a Hallmark movie in the making. I went to work with her once and watched her with the babies. I cried the entire way home, and she just flat out didn't understand what

the big deal was. "I just have to do this," she explained. "I need these kids as much as they need me."

Speaking of kids, she's also one of the few friends who asks how mine are doing every time we talk to each other. I became pregnant with my son at the age of 19, so back then most of my friends ditched me for frat parties. Even today, I still have that handful of single friends or couples without children who don't understand why we can't just drop everything and come to their house for a poker tournament or football party.

I've waited for Lisa to show her true colors for years; to prove that she couldn't be this genuine. I spent many dinner dates watching for her to grab the waiter's ass or slip silverware into her purse or let out a huge belch to embarrass me like I'd done to her in the past; but being sweet *was* the real Lisa.

This reliable friend makes you want to be a better friend, too, maybe make you answer that call – even if American Idol is on. And I'm talking about the first episode where they show the auditions and make fun of the contestants. Yes, *that* kind of friend.

The Straight-Talker: Everyone needs at least one friend who will tell it like it is. They don't bother sugar-coating *anything*. This may result in some emotional damage, but there will come a time when the honesty is much appreciated. For instance it might end up being a blessing that she told you the zebra-print dress was not only too tight, but also made it look like you broke out of the Bronx zoo, because later you show up at the party and see another girl

wearing an animal print that ends up splitting down the backside when she attempts the limbo. You glance at your friend who nods knowingly, like a wise old owl.

I am fortunate enough to have not one, but *two* straight-talking friends. I can thank Carrie for pointing out the obvious flaws in my life:

1. "Give me that picture! Is that *you?* What the hell are you wearing? A prom dress? I don't think so. No, no, I don't care if it was 1996 or whatever – that's bad, even for the 90s."
2. "If you go out of the house wearing those shoes, I'm not going with you."
3. "I don't like that guy (referring to my date). He's weird. If you want a better date, just let me handle it next time. I'll see if Adrian has any single friends."

And then there's Shelly, whose criticisms are definitely born out of concern but are far less constructive:

1. "I'm glad you're the one with kids; I could never get up that early, especially if I'm hungover."
2. "Jimmy? His name is Jimmy? I hate that name. Tell him he should go by 'Jim' instead."
3. "You're trying too hard. Quit acting like some giggly high school girl. Get rid of that glass of wine and have a beer."

I've heard more rude comments from the two of them than a drunk construction worker in a bar, and the times I went out with both of them together, they immediately formed an alliance and spent the better part of the evening "fixing" me. But the good news is that I know they're looking out for me, and even though they're both a tad harsher than me, there are times that every woman needs to hear the truth about certain things, no matter how painful. It's a necessity to have someone you can count on to give it to you straight.

And like Carrie always says, "Only a true friend will tell you when your shoes don't match your outfit." I believe she's right.

The Family Member Friend: This is the cousin or aunt or sister, etc. who has crossed the family boundaries and become a friend. This requires socializing together outside of family bar-be-ques and national holidays. In fact, having one of these friends can make tolerating family functions easier and more fun. Together, you can whisper about Aunt Grace's collection of geese or cousin Ronnie's flavor of the month – and know it won't make it back to them.

If you've ever watched Judge Judy or the People's Court, you've probably seen how these friendships can end badly and sever family ties. Just follow these simple rules and you won't have to worry:

1. Don't buy a car for your family member friend.
2. Don't cosign on a house for a family member friend.
3. Don't give them any money unless you don't expect it to be paid back.

4. Don't steal your family member friend's boyfriend, husband, lover, etc.

My sister Jackie is one of my best friends. We've seen each other through death, addictions, hideous hair colors, divorce, new life, burned pizza, asshole boyfriends, bankruptcy, dealing with our mom, dead parakeets, and more. We've been best friends since I was 4.5 years old and she was only one day old. I held her at the hospital after she was born, and before I knew it, I was holding *her* baby, and she was holding mine. Of course, we've had our fights – like when she and my then-fiancé got into a heated drunken argument over who was going to help me puke in the women's restroom at the end of my bachelorette party. But I never bought her a car, so we made it through.

The Mosaic of Friends: Not every friend falls right into one category. And a woman might play a different role in every friendship she has. I'm no saint, but I was Christie's Old Reliable – her Wholesome friend by comparison; the do-gooder who was always trying to keep her out of trouble. There were times when I was the Bad Influence. Sure, it was on a smaller scale, but I made good people do bad things all the same. To my most wholesome of friends, using the Men's room at the bar was the most daring feat they'd ever taken on. I couldn't get through a night with my friend Melissa without her going on about how wild and crazy I was because I did something like flirt with the waiter so he'd give us free dessert or bring her the roll of toilet paper out of the restroom to make her laugh.

Some girls out there might be a little bit Prom Queen and a little bit Band Geek. Or maybe she's the Valedictorian with a bold streak and constantly tries to get you to run down the street topless, singing the theme song to Loveboat. Either way, having friends who aren't exactly the same teaches you a little more about yourself, and, just like back in the 7th grade, makes life a little easier to swallow – sugar-coated or not.

Scenes from a Wedding

Spirits: Halfway through the reception, it will be obvious whether or not there was an open bar. For a great majority of the evening, the parquet dance floor might be ruled by a woman in her early fifties wearing a long, black, mummifying dress. Short, yellow hair spiked all over her bobbing head complements the barbed tattoo encircling her bicep. She wiggles and shakes and grabs loose teenagers off the dance floor, rattling them around her like change in a pocket. It turns out she's the groom's cousin, forgiven for her quasi-sensual dancing when it is revealed that she just went through a divorce and 100 pounds. She's having a well-deserved rocking night until she ends up face down on one of the dinner tables.

If you have girlfriends, then you have at least one bridesmaid dress in your closet. Don't hate me, but I dodged a bullet the last time I was in a wedding. Carrie picked an awesomely inexpensive dress and didn't turn into a red-headed monster on the day of her wedding. But from what I've seen and heard, things can be disturbingly different.

The wedding is a very complex event composed of many layers. It's as grueling to unravel as a ball of tangled Christmas lights. There are two parts to a wedding: the view from the audience and the cast and crew. Most people prefer to be among the crowd, witnessing the sacred exchanging of the vows, and then ducking out of the chapel before the pictures begin, heading to the reception to

start on appetizers and/or free booze. These are merely spectators; they've managed to score a front-row seat with no strings attached. They consist of extended family, coworkers, and friends who are close enough to be invited, but not close enough to make the bridal party.

The backstage passes go to those who put on the production: the bridal party, immediate family, and those paid to participate (photographers, coordinators, etc.). Oh, and the stars themselves: bride and groom.

Tips from someone who's perfect: Some dresses aren't for all women. Though you might have seen certain girls working it in the white dress with black polka dots and canary yellow accessories (such as giant plastic hoop earrings, faux leather yellow pumps), it does not mean you, too, should do it. Especially if that dress is strapless and you have oversized boobs and 4 different seared on tan lines.

Wardrobe is another chapter. I don't mean to pick apart a woman's most cherished day, but feel free to correct me if any girl's childhood dream of her wedding included a tattooed bridesmaid in a three-sizes-too-small teal dress trampling over the flower girl during the bouquet toss.

Wedding attire also has two facets, one applying to the guests (which is consequently far more liberal) and the other to the wedding players themselves (which is usually more formal, but often no less comical). At no other time than a wedding will you see a group of handsome, young bachelors willingly wear hot

pink bowties and cummerbunds. And I don't really need to go into any more detail about bridesmaid dresses than I already have. If you're popular and end up in a lot of weddings, here are some possible uses for your collection of ugly bridesmaid dresses:

1. Next Halloween, dress up as a high school Prom Queen.
2. The Halloween after that, go as the Homecoming Queen.
3. Make a parachute for the kids in your neighborhood to play with by sewing the puffy sleeves from your various dresses together.
4. Have a few glasses of wine, try the oldest on one, and laugh.

As for guests, not much can be done. While most people naturally assume that a wedding is a formal event, you can't help but consider the fact that Uncle Bill's definition of formal is the pair of jeans with one less grass stain, and your cousin's Sunday best happens to include a splash of fluorescent orange in the form of a hunter's cap.

Weddings are never drama-free: Sometimes it's subtle; the bride scolding her best friend for eating too many Twinkies during the past week, taking place the closed doors of a dressing room. Other times, however, it is more outward, such as the bride's mother, graciously stepping from table to table in her sprayed-up hairdo and glimmery Chanel eye shadow to tell each table how much she dislikes her new son-in-law and wishes her daughter hadn't gotten married. Worst case, it's the bride screaming at the groom as she makes her way down the

aisle because she just found out he spent last evening shoving wadded dollar bills in a stripper's g-string.

We've all heard the word Bridezilla (and if anyone hasn't, I'm sure you can break it down and decipher the meaning.) I wasn't going to drag out the ol' soapbox, but what the hell: It's become more about the wedding than the actual marriage these days. It seems like people are rushing down the aisle with the wrong mate for the wrong reasons. They just saw a copy of *Modern Bride* and simply must get married before the Vera Wang on the cover goes out of style. I've watched it among my own friends:

"I'm thirty years old!" Melissa said to me frantically. "I want to be engaged and I'm getting sick of waiting! I gave him the *freaking diamond.* All he has to do is have it set. I couldn't make it easier for him than that! My eggs are *dying as we speak.*"

Hello? You don't see that on the Zale's commercials.

Sure, Melissa and her boyfriend had broken up umpteen times and she'd run his name into the ground, but she felt her time to be a bride was running out. She said it herself: she didn't feel like starting over with someone new. There's a certain pressure among young women to have their day in white (or ivory), and even for those in love, the wedding easily consumes them until it becomes more about the floral arrangements than the vows.

And then comes the drama: from the bride, from the jealous sister who's older but still not married, from the mother who disapproves of her daughter's

choice, from the groomsmen who "forced" the groom to a strip club at the bachelor party, from the drunk relative who knocks over the table holding the wedding cake, etc. The stress to have the perfect day is precisely what stops most weddings from being just that.

Traditions: If there is a single pregnant girl vying for the bride's bouquet at the traditional toss, do the right thing and let her catch it. Then again, if your morals are that intact, then you probably don't approve of her at all in the first place. So maybe you should shove her aside and go for it yourself, cutthroat.

What I love most about traditional weddings are the constants you can expect. Sure, they might not be at every wedding, but when a custom shows up, it's like a familiar face among the friends and relatives that you don't know well enough to carry on a sober conversation with. These things include: garter toss, a drunken toast from the best man, edible party favors, someone falling on the dance floor, etc. Many of these things can even be enjoyed if you are a member of the bridal party. As a matter of face, they may even liven things up a bit (the responsibilities can be very stressful: making sure the veil is smooth at all times, helping the bride maneuver into the bathroom stall in her dress, keeping the groom's annoying brother away – and all this while wearing a corset).

Food: While it might seem like free food, someone is in fact paying for it. So if everyone is supposed to get two fried ravioli appetizers, maybe you shouldn't take 4. As for the buffet, the idea is for everyone to take one plate and one dinner, and while it's apparent that toting Tupperware containers in your purse is not

allowed, neither is a covert mission composed of sneaking back into the buffet line and piling on seconds before all of the guests have even had their first helping.

Oh, the food. It's like the prize at the end of the race. If you can make it through the ceremony, the arguments, the crying bride, dueling in-laws, photo shoot that requires contortion to pose the way the photographer wants, and God knows what else – you can get to the food, which usually has appetizers and a main course AND cake.

Unless you're at Brent and Kara's wedding. My sister's long-time best friend Brent got married last summer in an outdoor wedding that took place in between searing August heat and wild thunderstorms. When they arrived at the bowling alley for the reception, they were able to chow down on cold cuts and a loaf of bread, and there was a bar where you could purchase your own sodas.

Listen, if you aren't rolling in dough, I get it. Weddings are expensive – even *inexpensive* weddings. Problem was, my sister arrived on this scene after not only sweating all day in the heat, but sweating in the heat outside the bride's parent's mansion. Yes, Dad was loaded – in fact, the he *owned* the bowling alley.

No wedding is complete without the following DJ songs: YMCA, We are Family, Electric Slide, anything by Michael Bolton, and at least one of the following ultra-obnoxious selections: The Chicken Dance, Hokey Pokey, or Boot Scootin' Boogey. Be sure to remind the DJ, however, to monitor dedications

before announcing them, just in case the groom really is allergic to Vanilla Ice. And remember: When brothers and sisters start dancing together inappropriately, it's time to shut down the party.

So I've been ranting and raving, but I haven't even told you about my own wedding. Let's just say I've learned a lot from the very things I wrote within this piece:

1. We invited only our closest family and friends. We also had no bridal party because I decided keeping my friends happy was more important.
2. Not wanting to suffer through The Village People, we didn't hire a DJ. Instead, we made our own CDs with all of our favorite songs.
3. Wanting to avoid the stress of decorations being perfect, we opted to do it ourselves with Christmas lights and candles.
4. I wore a black dress so no one could question why I was wearing white with two kids in tow.
5. I broke all of the rules: my husband and I spent the entire day together. I didn't toss the bouquet, wear something old and new and blue and whatever. and
6. I refused to turn into bridezilla. (I gave specific instructions to my sister to slap me in the face if I acted up at all.)

But I couldn't escape everything. There was still drama, a few people

gossiping about me, a few people who drank too much, etc. And if you're going to invest in anything, do make sure you have a photographer. Maybe I got a little *too* caught up in the moment, because it turned out that the only clear picture of the two of us had to have my cousin cropped out of it.

If it's your wedding, try to make it about the marriage. And if it's someone else's, take note:

1. Dress appropriately. You wouldn't want to show up in someone's essay about bad weddings.
2. As you hit the dance floor, remember that there are cameras flashing and camcorders running at all times, meaning you could be viewed over and over again – even in slow motion.
3. Also, you don't want to be remembered as *that girl*, for any reason.
4. If all else fails, just sit back and watch the show.

Cheers!

Birds, Bees, & ABCs

I remember the day my son popped the question like it was yesterday. It's the moment every mother dreads without knowing it, the day you can never fully prepare for. And I thought I'd had more time. At least a couple more years before I had to face the fact that my son, my little baby boy, was growing up.

"Mom, where do babies come from?" I froze, leaning over the toilet bowl, scrub brush in mid-stroke. My first grader stood in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. I brushed the hair out of my eyes with the back of my wrist.

"What, sweetie?"

"Babies, Mom. Where do they come from?" He stepped into the bathroom and leaned against the linen closet door, a couple degrees of determination speckling his greenish eyes.

I swallowed hard, trying to budge the lump gathering in my esophagus. I let the brush fall into the toilet with a soft splash and looked up at him. "Babies," I began, clearing my throat, "come from the mommy's tummy." I followed with a tight-lipped smile. By the look on his face, I knew that wouldn't cut it.

"I already knew that me and Val came out of your stomach, Mom. But how did we get there?"

I smiled, wondering if I could somehow change the subject. I raced through my brain for an answer that was both appropriate and satisfying. "God puts the baby there."

Tom pondered this for a moment. "Oh, okay," he said, still thinking it through. "God puts the baby in the mom, it grows, and then the doctor cuts it out?" I pinched my lips into a grin and nodded.

"Hey, you know what? I think SpongeBob's on!" I said, ushering him out the door. His eyes lit up, and he darted off towards the living room. *Oh, no*, I thought. This kid is only six years old. He goes to a private school. Is this supposed to be happening already? I'd handled myself pretty well on short notice, but where there is one question, there are always more questions. How old was I when I learned about sex? I had to think . . . .

"Mom, do people have to take their clothes off to have sex?" I was in second grade, and I don't remember how I first heard about sex. I'd skipped the whole "where do babies come from?" thing and went straight for the dirt.

Pause. Faucet stops, dish towel comes to a rest. Mom stood motionless for a moment before responding, "Well, no. I guess they don't *have* to take their clothes off."

Relief flooded me like chocolate syrup in my ice cream bowl. "Oh, good," I sighed, "because I don't want my husband to see me naked. I might take

my shirt off, but not my bra or pants." Happily, I strolled out of the kitchen and back to eight-year-old life. And that was it.

I thought I had at least that much time before my son asked me anything pertaining to sex. Guess I was wrong. And it wasn't long after the initial question that others, as I suspected, were sparked.

Tom came up to me a few weeks later and pointed at the center of my stomach. "What?" I asked, eyeing him up and down.

"You said God put babies in the mom's stomach, right?" I nodded, trying to imagine where this was going. "How come one isn't there right now?" he asked.

"Well . . . because God knows when moms are ready and when the time is right," I answered confidently.

"How does he know?" he asked.

I decided to go with the standard script. "When a man and woman fall in love and get married . . ."

Tom put his hand up. "Wait, wait."

"What?" I ventured.

"Then how come Aunt Jackie is having a baby? Her and Kurt aren't married."

My mouth dropped open. "What?" I croaked, throat going dry. "Come here, baby. Let's go sit down." During the thirty second walk to the living room sofa, I tried to figure out how to handle this. I knew by dodging the actual truth I was only prolonging things, but prolonging was better than nothing, right? He was still so young. And I was so unprepared. I pressed my palms into my thighs.

"Well?" he asked, tapping a finger against my elbow.

"Hang on. I'm thinking."

"Thinking?"

"Yes, yes. Okay, here it is. God has a way of knowing when the timing is right. You see, every woman has a little egg inside her stomach."

"An egg?" Tom scrunched up his nose.

"Not the kind of egg you're thinking of. It's so small you can't even see it. But when the time is right – and God knows this – the egg grows into the baby. Understand?"

He sat quietly for a moment, taking in what I'd given him. "Okay."

"Okay," I repeated, thinking that was the end.

"Then what is sex?"

I'd really let my mom off the hook, big time. But now I was wishing I hadn't. Kids don't come with handbooks, unless mine got lost in the mail. Plus, I am the only one among all of my friends with any children over the age of three, so it's hard to find advice. My friends and I all seem to agree that we were in at least the 5th grade before we learned the mechanics of sex. Furthermore, if you think skirting the issue will work, trust me – it doesn't. Bottom line, kids ask questions. And what answers they don't get from parents, they get from someone else. So how do you address these things with a first grader?

Take me, for example. I never asked my mom about sex or baby-making, and she must've felt enough relief not to bother bringing it up with me. It wasn't that I didn't wonder; I just happened to conduct my own research. Around that time, I knew that sex involved a man and woman, at least partial nudity, and kissing. It didn't dawn on me for some time that it had anything to do with making babies. It seems as though I spent my entire teenage years finding out bits and pieces of info and then applying them retrospectively. Little light bulbs clicked on above my head for years, such as the time it finally occurred to me that the dresser pushed in front of my parents' door so that me and my sister wouldn't barge in on their naptime actually meant something else.

During 3rd and 4th grade, I began adding to my database of sex facts through my best friend's subscription to HBO and Showtime. Every time I spent the night at her house, we drug our sleeping bags into her basement and tuned in. Through this research, I learned that sex was something passionate. It involved kisses that started on the lips and worked downward, to the nick, the shoulders,

the chest. The woman wore something silky and flowing, and the man was hairless and muscular. The couple moved as if in a dance, and music and steam appeared from nowhere. And when it was over, they embraced in the candlelight, smoking a cigarette until the man had to leave for work or a serial killer broke into the room and ruined things.

Then in 5th grade we had sex education. But I went to a Catholic school, so it wasn't even sex; it was sexual intercourse. It included textbook definitions of the reproductive parts and strict orders to abstain from all sexual relations. There was no mention of one-night-stands, STDs, condoms, silk negligees. Sexual intercourse was for one thing and one thing only: procreation.

Thankfully, I had friends who had friends who had older siblings and promiscuous babysitters and whatnot, so they had some cold hard facts and terminology to share. If I didn't know what something meant, I usually just nodded and pretended to know (again, many months and years could pass before I'd get additional facts that enlightened me). My friend Lauren explained what a French kiss was: "You just part your lips gently, and let him do the rest with his tongue." She cocked her head to one side and closed her eyes. We all listened intently. "I've heard you can practice with a mirror," she added, "but I don't need to, because I kissed Jason *last* summer at camp." We all gasped as she nodded proudly.

Remembering those elementary school days, I had to stop and ask myself if this was how I wanted my children to learn about the birds and the bees. Did I

want him to figure out what an orgasm was in the midst of parallelograms and verb conjugation? I had to clue him in on some things before he found out from someone else. But how?

Tom poked my arm. "Mom, I said, 'what is sex?'" I grabbed the arm of the sofa so I wouldn't tip over. "Joey was talking about sex at school. He says his mom and dad have it."

I bit my lip and decided to test the waters. "Well . . . what do *you* think it is?"

"When two people get naked and kiss?"

Sometimes they kiss, I thought. "That is true," I began. "What else did Joey say about it?"

"He said that his sister told him babies come from sex. So I thought maybe God saw the mom and dad kissing naked and knew it was time to turn the egg into a baby."

"I . . . well . . . yes. Yes, that's pretty much what happens."

"Okay, so why aren't you and Jimmy having a baby?" Oh, shit. He knew that my husband and I were trying to get pregnant. I twisted my ring around my finger and clenched my teeth. "Remember how I told you that the mom has an

egg in her stomach?" Tom nodded. "Well, the woman needs a special something from the dad to help the egg grow into a baby. If God sees that they are both ready, and the dad gives the special something to the mom, then the egg grows into the baby. Got it?"

My poor child looked more confused than ever. He stared at me blankly. I think it was time to bring Jimmy in on this conversation. Clearly, I wasn't succeeding at this on my own. The kids in Tom's class had started talking and they weren't about to stop. Now he was taking these bits of information and applying them to his own life. I knew how that worked; I was a pro at scouting out the basics, then putting two and two together. And if girl conversations were graphic, I could only imagine what they boys were talking about.

I remember gathering the bulk of my knowledge from the lunch table. This is how I confirmed what "rounding the bases" meant after word got around that Tracy Rowe had gone to second base with some kid named Matt. "What's second base?" I heard someone ask at the cafeteria table.

"*You* don't *know*?" someone else huffed. Everyone giggled at the sheer idea of any girl not knowing what second base was, including myself – although I didn't know either.

"Well, for anyone who *doesn't* know, it's pretty simple." This girl, Nicole, sat down her PBJ and waved everyone in closer. All the girls leaned in to hear what was being said. "First base is kissing – *French kissing*, that is. With tongue. Second base is when a boy feels a girl up." The expert scanned the faces surrounding her and picked up the blank expressions. She rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue. "Don't you know *any*thing? Getting felt up means he goes under your bra." Nicole lowered her face, speaking in a voice so quiet it was hard to hear over the clanking of lunch trays and candy wrappers. "Third base," she continued, "is touching, you know, *down there*." A series of oohs and aahs circulated the space above the table. "And finally," she said, sitting up somewhat, "making it all the way to home is doing *it*. *It*," she said again for emphasis.

"How do you know all this?" Lauren (the French kiss authority) questioned.

Nicole picked up her sandwich and took a bite. "*Seventeen*," she said through a mouthful of bread. "My sister has a stack of *Seventeen* magazines in her room and they talk about *every*thing." The girls nodded in approval of her credentials.

I spent the next few months trying to get my hands on a *Seventeen* magazine. Finally, my chance came when I went to a used book sale with my stepmom. In one of the back rooms, I stumbled on a stack of used magazines. I lifted the top issue and held it as if it were the Bible. A girl was pictured on the front, her blond hair teased into wild curls, her hands gripping the collar of her

teal blazer. Bold headlines were printed all over the front, things like *10 Ways to Jazz up Your Bedroom* and *QUIZ: How Close Are You and Your Friends?*

I ran my fingers along the front, stopping at rectangle where someone's address had once been. *Wow*, I thought. *Someone actually had a subscription to this.* There was a sign taped to the table that said all magazines were a nickel apiece.

"What do you want those for?" my stepmom asked, eyeing the stack in my arms.

Thinking quickly, I replied, "Well, we need old magazines for school. I have to – to cut things out for a project. I'll pay for them," I added as insurance.

When I got the magazines to the safety of my room, I called up my friends and told them of my score. The issues were somewhat backdated, but they were filled with articles and quizzes and stories about friends and shopping and guys – a bonanza for a fourteen-year-old.

I cranked up the volume on my boombox and placed the first issue on my lap. I would learn the facts and terminology and become more of an expert than even Nicole was. I scanned the table of contents looking for specific articles. It wasn't long before I got lucky. It was called something like "Alternatives to Sex" and talked about things that girls could do with their boyfriends, but still abstain from sexual intercourse. This was as far a leap from the sex ed class at Queen of Peace Catholic School as I could possibly take.

I devoured sentence after sentence. The author of the article reaffirmed my original education that sex was best saved for marriage and all that. But she went on to say that young women (was that me? could I be a young *woman*?) have this thing called hormones and, in a roundabout way, said that high school kids get horny. And that makes waiting a difficult task. My eyes were popping out of my head at the things I was reading. I could hardly wait to get to school.

"Guess what I read about," I whispered, leaning against my locker door. "It's called *dry humping.*"

This must be what happens when a kid is left to uncover the mysteries of sexuality all on their own. Certain terms, certain slang terms can haunt a girl for the better part of junior high and high school. I wonder how many of my friends really knew what was what, and how many were just nodding their heads pretending to know like I was.

Is this the sex education I envisioned for my firstborn? No. I couldn't lie to Tom. I couldn't shield him forever. He was figuring out the basics, and fast. I'd managed to stretch our conversations out somewhat, but the *talk* was inevitable.

That evening, when Jimmy got home from work, I took him aside and told him it was time. Time for Tom to learn about the birds and the bees. "I told him

that the egg needs something from the man to make it grow into a baby." Jimmy raised his eyebrows. "He knows it comes from sex, but he doesn't know all the details."

"Let me handle it," he said, walking towards Tom's room.

"Wait. Wait. Make sure you tell him it has to do with God. And love," I pleaded with him through my eyes. I rang my hands like a mother.

"I've got this," he said, laughing. "Tom! Hey, buddy!" Tom peered out from his room. "Hey, come sit outside with me for a few minutes." Jimmy winked at me as they stepped out the back door. "Don't worry," he whispered to me over his shoulder.

I peered at them through the kitchen window. I could see the silhouettes of their backs, facing away from me and into the backyard. Their legs dangled over the side of the deck, and Tom was poking a stick into the grass as my husband spoke to him. I could see Jimmy gesturing, and the shadow of Tom's head nodding. After a few moments, they took off running down the backyard towards the swingset, and I watched as Jimmy lifted Tom off the ground and spun him in the air. I placed my hand over my heart, and watched as my little boy laughed.

"Let's talk about sex, ba*by*! Let's talk about you and *me*--" my bedroom door swung open, startling me. "Mom! What?" I asked, tossing my hairbrush/microphone angrily onto my bed.

"I don't like you listening to that."

"To what? This?" I asked, motioning to my boombox.

"Yes, *that*. I don't like it."

"But it's Salt-n-Peppa! It's on the *radio*." I rolled my eyes.

"I don't care if it's salt, pepper, or oregano. I don't like the words, so please just turn it off."

I grabbed my stereo off the floor and dramatically smacked the dial. "I'm fourteen years old, mom. I'm not a baby anymore."

My mom folded her arms across her chest. "You are still my daughter, no matter how old you *think* you are." She batted her eyes a little. I could tell she wasn't really mad at me. She seemed more uncomfortable than anything else.

"Fine, Mom. I won't listen to it."

"Good," she said awkwardly. She started to pull the door shut, but stopped halfway. "What?" I asked, impatiently.

"You know, you'll always be my little girl," she added. "And I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom" I huffed.

"Just wait 'til you have kids," she said, closing the door behind her.

The Bathroom Essay

1. There is only one door in my house that has a working lock: the bathroom. The fact that I've started to type this sentence four and a half times due to interruption (*yes, Tom, I will be at your T-ball game this week*) is a reminder of the solitude I discovered there not long ago, and has me thinking now that I should relocate my office to the linen closet.

I do not find my solace at a high-end spa (*here are your pretzels, Valerie*) with those little cucumbers over the eyes (*on the* table, *Val, right here!*), warm terrycloth towels, lavender candles, (*you come here and get them. I'm not bringing them to you.*) and Enya playing softly over the speakers. I find mine in the bathtub. Propping my legs on the faucet knobs and submersing my ears just beneath the surface of the water does a pretty good job of drowning out SpongeBob cartoons and arguments over who gets to sit in the comfy chair. It stretches out my arthritic joints; it's my daily peace sign.

It wasn't always this way. I didn't realize I had options. Lying in bed with a pillow over the head doesn't work for two reasons: (1) Being in bed could mean that I am sick, in which case the kids bug me at least twice as often or (2) A pillow anywhere but beneath the head could mean I am playing hide-and-go-seek or, worse, starting some kind of pillow fight. Sneaking off to the basement to do a load of laundry is an *okay* idea but, realize this, once down there, you are forced

to actually *do* laundry and possibly change the litter box, thus canceling out any momentary peace and quiet.

And then it hit me one day as I was digging for jeans on a ninety-five degree day. I couldn't wear a skirt because I hadn't shaven my legs in over a week, and I hadn't shaven because I didn't have time. *Didn't have time?* The best I could figure was doing the right leg Thursday and squeezing the left one in the following Wednesday after lunch. I saw myself on the fast track to becoming one of those moms who doesn't even have time to mess with belt loops. It's ponytails instead of haircuts, SPF instead of makeup and, eventually, sneakers night and day, even to weddings and funerals.

I began by sitting the two in front of the television and telling them that if they are quiet and don't bug me for ten minutes, we would go to the playground. In the bathtub, I not only shaved my legs and my underarms, but I exfoliated my face *and* left my conditioner in for the full two minutes recommended on the bottle. That was the beginning: Now I incorporate bath bubbles and magazines as dictated by my stress level.

2. Growing up, I shared a bedroom with my little sister, who was perpetually stealing my clothes, listening in on my phone calls, and spying on my friends. The bathroom was the place I'd go to read secret notes and practice smiling in a way that hid my braces. We had a white cube of a bathroom with a small window that overlooked woods. A hideaway. Best of all, I could stand on the edge of the

bathtub and get close to a full-length view of myself in the mirror above the sink without hearing my sister call me a wannabe fashion model or tell my mom I was trying on eyeliner. In that very room, I became a teenager: put contacts in my eyes for the first time, figured out how to use a tampon, and memorized the lyrics to every song by Arrested Development.

My little slice of seclusion came to an end, however, when the door knob loosened up and started randomly falling off on the inside. Various family members began getting stuck in there. (My Aunt Linda was locked in during a birthday party for about forty-five minutes before we noticed she was gone and heard a banging coming from upstairs.) After several failed attempts at replacing the knob, we all came to the realization that Dad could not fix it, and we had no choice but to leave the door slightly open.

Although they couldn't be used on a whim for obvious reasons, friends' bathrooms had equally good perks. At my friend Jennifer's house, her older sister kept a Caboodle of make-up stashed under the sink, so we'd sneak in and do makeovers late at night, with hot pink lip stick and press-on nails. Once, we hid in the shower under a pile of towels because she wanted to sneak a peek at her sister's boyfriend when he came to take a pee.

3. The High School Restroom: The restroom at Althoff Catholic High was more than just a place to change clothes in before heading to track practice; it was a meeting place for friends in crisis. The classrooms were always cold, but the

"senior restroom" as it was called (the small one tucked midway down the main hall of the first floor with the word LAVATORY stamped on the door) had a giant radiator in the corner that we could climb up and sit on to get warm. Different friends brought varying experiences.

Before Christie ran away from home and switched schools, we met there on a progressively increasing basis. She was as rebellious as I wasn't: charcoal eyeliner, pot, older guys, failing grades: but I loved her. When her period was a week late, we huddled in a stall together while she puffed on a Marlboro Light. When the guy who played guitar broke up with her, we excused ourselves from homeroom to cry in the second floor restroom, at the cost of two in-school suspensions for cutting class.

After Christie left, Karen took over the role of best friend. She was more like me: an honor student with an ass-load of stress, high expectations, and a desire to bend the school dress code to its breaking point as an outlet: faux colored hair, vintage collared shirts, and randomly colored fingernails. Our restroom meetings were to panic over tests, devise plans for the weekends, and check our make-up.

My friend Jen used to deliberately check under the stall doors for my shoes so she could throw toilet paper over the top and have it land on me. We both found this to be hilarious. All of a sudden – practically overnight – she heard a rumor about me and stopped being my friend.

The best part was not knowing what I would encounter coming into the restroom:

a.) crying freshmen

b.) a hung-over senior drooling on a toilet seat

c.) some shy girl balancing a lunch tray on her lap in the stall with the broken latch

d.) a frantic teen pounding on the sanitary napkin machine,

e.) catty juniors throwing TP at each other & puling hair

f.) all of the above

They're all there on display, just like I was, helping Christie wave away the rings of smoke or reclining on the radiator some freezing day. Girls are bitches, they say, and this is mostly true. But we do tend to ease up a little when we're in the restroom, passing extra sheets of toilet paper to a desperate neighbor, sparing a quarter, and not staring too hard at accidents. You'll never see a girl do a swirly on a nerdy freshman. At least not at my school.

4. The Bathroom Evolution: After moving out of my parents' house, my various bathrooms went through some changes. In my first apartment, I bought a half-dozen bath mats and put them together like a puzzle to hide the brown and gold linoleum. I filled the cluttered room with glow-in-the-dark star stickers and at least ten half-used bottles of lotion. My friends were still impressed nonetheless. All Karen had to show for her independence was a community bathroom located up two floors and down the hall of her dorm.

When I upgraded to a larger apartment, I painted the new bathroom lavender and opted for stenciled stars instead of stickers. In a twenty-something girl's bathroom, candles are a must, and a bonus would have to include a shower curtain that doesn't fall down each time it's slid across the rod.

Today, I've come a long way. I now boast a sophisticated beige master bath donned in a coordinating floral shower curtain and sage bathmat ensemble with a tailored shade in the window. All necessary items are organized obsessive-compulsive-disorder-style in the linen closet (this means towels are placed in order of beach to child-sized with folded side out, toiletries are in bins according to function, etc.).

5. Maintenance for Said Room:

   Windex (generic OK)

   Lysol Tub & Tile Cleaner

   Bleach tablets for the toilet

   Lysol Toilet Bowl Cleaner

   Roll of paper towels

   Toilet paper – (double rolls)

   New bath mat (old one has hair dye on it)

   Air Freshener (anything but Tropical scent)

Raise your hand if you've scrubbed the toilet in my house more than once. I'm the only one with my hand up. Okay, let's move on. Raise your hand if you've scrubbed the tiles. Just me? Fine. What about the bathtub. Who here has

cleaned my bathtub? No one else? I guess it's a given that none of you sanitized the sink, mopped the floor, or organized the linen closet? That's okay, no worries, no need to thank me.

6. I am starting to hate my bathroom. Tripping in the weak dark just before dawn, my contacts not yet in, my glasses eluding my fumbling fingers: I can't see a damn thing, which makes it that much harder to do this. I don't want to turn the lights on. I've peed on these plastic sticks for 9 months now, and I swear I should have invested in the stock if there is such a thing. I hardly even look for the second line, because I can predict that it won't be there.

After two unplanned, healthy pregnancies, I never would have guessed trying for a third could be so heart-breaking. I know what my friends are saying when they tell me to be thankful for the two I've got: I get that, I do. But I am damn sick of hearing it. My first two pregnancies were spent in the perpetual stress of being with a guy I didn't love, along with other party favors such as bankruptcy, bed rest, and car repos. Now that I'm remarried and wanting that perfect #3, with maternity dresses and health insurance and love and all that – what the hell? I hate the way the bathroom looks at this hour.

7. Now that the kids are getting older, I have had to instill use of the lock which has proven to be a problem only once.

You see, what I have failed to come entirely clean about is that I use the

bathroom not only to escape the stress of motherhood, but to get away from my husband as well. If this sounds childish, that's because it is. I've been accused of pouting because I make a beeline for the bathroom anytime we are in an argument after which I proceed to lock the door and hide, until poor Jimmy's apologies and pleadings enter beneath the bathroom door.

Sometimes, particularly when I am losing an argument, he will tease me by blocking my path to the bathroom door like a football player, taunting me, "Where are you gonna go now? Guess you'll have to sit here and work this out with me like a big girl!"

One time, I had been drinking a few too many drinks, and I decided to soak away the spinning room. I filled the tub and sunk my ears beneath the waterline, as custom dictates. Unbeknownst to me, Jimmy was knocking on the door to check on me, and had become alarmed that I wasn't responding. In an attempt to kick the door open, he actually broke through the fragile 80 year old door and came toppling in amid shards of cracking wood.

"What the hell?" I screamed, emerging from the water. He stood staring at me, mouth agape. It took me a moment to register him standing there with the door still mostly closed, lock secure. "The door! You broke the damn door! Are you crazy?"

He picked up a jagged piece of wood and handed it to me as a peace offering. "I can fix this," he said.

"What?"

"Just glad your okay," he said with a smile. "I thought you were dead."

"What? Dead? I'm taking a bath!" I began to laugh, suddenly aware that he'd broken the door only to save my drunken, drowned body from the tub.

8. Restrooms in Social Settings: When you take the bath out of a bathroom, you get a restroom. It's the thing you use at the doctor's office, at the mall, any public place really, to take care of business. And yet there are moments when it can be so much more. Place it in a bar or restaurant, and it transforms into *the* social gathering place for women.

This is a safe haven where women help women; a live exhibit of human nature at its finest: that desperate call for a spare tampon answered, the courteous "Hey, you have toilet paper stuck to your pants," that saves us from embarrassment, and the stream of compliments that run unfiltered: things we might never take the time to notice were we not caught for 30 seconds beneath the hand dryer: "What cool earrings! I love them!" and "Your highlights are breathtaking!"

This is what guys do not have, and therefore do not understand. Despite my being a woman, I am reasonably confident that guys do not discuss cute shoes through the bathroom stalls, and they sure as hell don't notice each other's wedding rings while standing at the urinal. In fact, guys make avoidance a habit in the restroom. It is for this very reason that they do not travel in pairs and do not understand why women do.

How can they not have figured this out by now? When we excuse ourselves in twos or threes to go to the restroom, it is because this is *our time*. Our *rest* time (hence the name). We can talk freely about the men who accompany us without having to use codes or sign language. We can bitch, complain, laugh, make fun of them – all of the things that we couldn't discuss at the dinner table. It's time people get it straight and realize that we don't just go in there to pee. Duh.

9. A few tips on toilet training for the desperate: Okay, I had the little board books that made flushing sounds and the princess potty seat and the expensive undies that have disappearing pictures on the front when an accident occurs – and those things didn't work. For my little angels, the trick was bribery. Yes, my potty training secret consists of bribery.

For my daughter: little chocoholic that she is, I put a glass jar of M&Ms in the bathroom, just out of her reach. Her reward was 3 candies every time she went on the potty.

For my son: little male that he is, I put a jar of Cheerios in the bathroom, just out of his reach. His reward was dropping 3 Cheerios in the toilet every time he had to go so that he could "shoot" them like targets when he went. Did you say typical male? Well good, I'm glad you thought so, because I sure wasn't about to say it.

10. Update: We still haven't entirely fixed our bathroom door. But the good news is: the lock does still work.

Natalie M. Worrell

MFA Colloquium Submissions

March 23, 2009

Natalie Worrell

MFA Colloquium 1/5

November 20, 2007

Analysis of *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote

Truman Capote skillfully mingles facts with the components of a fiction novel in his book *In Cold Blood*. It was this book that lit up a new genre: creative non-fiction, or the narrative novel. Capote uses the elements of fiction, such as strong characterization, conflict, and poetic descriptions, to depict the true events that unfolded in a small Kansas town in the 1950s.

He takes his time, spending a great deal of words on the characters so we get to know them on all levels. Capote captures every minute detail surrounding the events, from the waitress at the café to the colors of the rural orchard. Readers become intimate with the Clutters, a wholesome All-American family who are the victims of a gruesome murder, as well as with the murderers themselves.

Most striking of all is his ability to evoke sympathy for the killers. Because we come to know them so well through Capote's story crafting, we gain an understanding of their tumultuous pasts and inner conflicts, developing a degree of empathy. Capote leaves his objectivity at the door, using a subjective selection of facts in order to incorporate the greatest amount of raw emotion and real-world characterization as possible. We are forced to adore the Clutter family, and then torn from the inside out as Perry Smith, the enemy, is portrayed as a

helpless child, a victim of circumstance. Never before was I privy to such a close look at *both* sides.

Capote took me from the calm lives prior to the storm that ravaged Holcomb, Kansas and altered its people all the way through the murders, trial, and executions, detailing the effects the events had on family and friends of victims and perpetrators alike. The dramatic conclusion that should have felt like a victory as Perry Smith and Dick Hickcock hung on their ropes felt like a tragedy ending with tragedy.

What could have come and gone with a few headlines or clips cut from a newspaper now lives on the page as a testament to the weight of the "American Dream" – and how it can become a nightmare for both those who want it and can't grasp it, and for those who have it and then lose it.

Natalie Worrell

MFA Colloquium 2/5

September 10, 2008

I attended the first monthly literary reading at the Chesterfield Center for Arts featuring a fiction reading by Michael Nye and a poetry reading by Richard Newman.

Nye, who is a published author and adjunct writing professor, read his short fiction piece entitled *The Utility Room* which takes place in St. Louis and depicts the struggle of a 25-year-old divorced woman named Ellen who is trying to get over her ex and move on with her life. To make ends meet, she rents out her utility room which she has converted to a small bedroom. The strange part is that she ends up renting to an adulterous couple who use the room only for a few hours per week.

The situation is strange to Ellen, and as she passes by the utility room, she often struggles to come to terms with whose room it actually is. Before the divorce, it was a room that her husband, Nicholas, used for himself. With his possessions gone, the room served as a painful reminder of the end of their life together. Now, with Percy and Brenda using it on an hourly basis, the room feels more like theirs than hers, or even Nicholas's for that matter.

When Ellen meets a young dentist, she begins to come out of the haze she was in, although she constantly returns to memories of Nicholas and compares those flashes with the current moments she is in. Upon returning home one afternoon, she finds Brenda returning her house key along with a final cash payment, delivering the news of her and Percy's break-up. Ellen isn't sure exactly why, but she is saddened by the news of the end of this adulterous

relationship. Her first thoughts turn to the utility room as she asks herself what she will do with the room next.

The story ends with a final scene, Ellen bringing her dentist date home, and in a moment of passion, she pulls him into the utility room – *her* utility room – where she gazes through the windows into the city streets and suddenly sees a future filled with possibilities.

Overall, this story was impressive, however I was a little surprised by some of the overuse of a couple of words, such as "rapping on the door" and "rapping on the window" which oddly made the contemporary piece feel more dated than it was. Then he threw in current items, such as Craig's List, which pulled the story pack into 2008. It was hard to cut the language away from the time, although some of the confusion might have come from the way he read it, as he was incredibly soft-spoken.

I did enjoy the piece, appreciated hearing the author's reading of it, and would read more work by this author. I was also impressed by his ability to pull off a main character of the opposite sex. The language, mannerisms, and inner thoughts felt very believable as a twenty-something woman. There wasn't one instance where he faltered or the male perspective slipped in.

In the second half of the event, Richard Newman read some previously published work as well as some new pieces from a manuscript he is currently working on. The first poems he read were more impressive than the others. They definitely had contemporary language and topics, with a thread of alcoholism running through, yet with a humorous approach. I very much appreciate using humor to write about serious topics, as that is something I do in my own work. The latter of the poems he read were mostly villanelles or rhyming poems which felt too sing-

songy and with forced rhymes (almost like Hallmark cards on Vodka). I wasn't as impressed by his poems as I was by his reading abilities – he was able to engage the audience and keep our attention with his dry humor and sarcasm. Even though I did not like all of his work, I did like many of the poems and so enjoyed his reading that I would attend another reading by this poet.

Overall, I enjoyed the evening. On another note, I am glad to see events like these popping up. The Chesterfield Arts Center is going to be holding this event once a month, and I will likely attend again. (Free wine & cheese, too – not that those indulgences influenced my opinion.)

Natalie Worrell

MFA Colloquium 3/5

March 1, 2009

I attended a reading at Schlafly Brewery honoring the winners of the 2009 *River Styx* Micro-Fiction Micro-Brew contest. The event featured readings by several of the finalists, including the first place winner, Amina Gautier.

The first reader was finalist Lisa Nikolidakis, whose winning piece was entitled *Misplaced.* She appeared nervous in the beginning, but pulled off a decent reading of her story as well as another, *Boy Band.* I found this piece especially interesting because it was written from a male perspective. Although I was listening to it in a female's voice, I found her male character to be very convincing. I know firsthand how difficult it is to slip up when writing from an opposite-sex perspective, and I really think she accomplished her purpose.

Although finalist Gary Leising was unable to attend due to being out of state, his piece *Enter Fortinbras* was read aloud by someone else. Acting as a dark comedy and playing off Shakespeare's betrayal in *Hamlet,* Leising takes us to the scene of a college production of *Hamlet*, where his story's main character is playing the role of Hamlet and has a crush on the woman who is playing the part of Ophelia. While onstage, the racy story flashes between scenes of the performance and of Ophelia's player giving a blow job to the character of Fortinbras. Throughout the narration, the phrase *Enter: Fortinbras* is used repeatedly, in both a literal sense (within the play) and in a mocking sense (as in, enter Fortinbras to steal the object of his affection, and can even be taken a step further with sexual undertones).

The writer's use of sarcastic tone, repetition, and drawing on the analogy of *Hamlet* to a real-life love triangle was engaging and clever. In my opinion, this story could have easily taken 1st or 2nd place.

Among the other readers was fellow Lindenwood classmate Fred Venturini. He read his winning work, *Punches* and a morbidly playful piece called *Horoscope*, throughout which he addressed a fictional horoscope reader delivering foreboding predictions with oddly specific events, involving everything from daily events to details in the intended reader's personal life. His was a laugh-out-loud read that was not only well-executed, but also strongly written with witty detail.

Finally, the grand prize winner, Amina Gautier read *Minnow*, a tale of a pregnant woman who has not yet told her boyfriend that she is carrying their child. She compares the life within her to a minnow, and she is the lake the baby is swimming within. Her analogy is poetic, but she takes it to another level when she incorporates real emotions of fear, and even resentment towards her boyfriend as she distances herself from him, preferring to visit the cats who live in a nearby bookstore. In the end, she throws up while watching tv, and it is then that her boyfriend realizes she is pregnant. Not wanting his help, she gets a bucket and water and begins to clean up her own mess.

What I enjoyed most about the pieces is that the writers were able to pack so much into a short space. All of the pieces were contemporary, and the readings were entertaining and well-executed.

Natalie Worrell

MFA Colloquium 4/5

March 19, 2009

I attended a reading by Lydia Davis at Washington University. Davis is a contemporary writer, French translator, and creative writing instructor at University at Albany, SUNY. She is known for writing humorous and often "strange" short stories, some of which are even one or two sentences. Her work sometimes walks the lines of poetry, philosophy, and short story – or somewhere among all three.

Her most recent work is a collection of stories called *Varieties of Disturbance*, published in 2007. Her stories challenge the reader through both the depth of meaning and the length, which is often short enough to require a sort of leap from the reader to reach Davis.

Davis's lecture at Washington University included a vast sampling of a technique she uses which involved the recording of dreams. These are short pieces of fiction evolved from her own dreams. They are often senseless and poetic, requiring insight from the reader to connect them to real-life experiences.

Among the pieces shared in the reading were *Swimming in Egypt*, during which the narrator recalls a deep-sea dive, where she swims through a tunnel surrounded by blue lights, which turn out to be possibly fish or coral reef. She recalls a sense of flying, and nearly allows herself to get lost in the beauty surrounding her.

The Moon draws a parallel to the sea, as Davis describes the dark room she is sleeping in. She focuses on minute details, such as the moonlight falling across the toilet seat, and the sudden vastness in the space. Another common dream quality is repeated in *The School Children in the Large Building*, during which the narrator speaks of being in a school house with two male, homosexual teachers and a classroom consisting of all boys. In this story, the narrator is trying to find the bathroom, and is unable to locate a toilet to use. The elements of the "dream stories" are true to sleeping consciousness and relatable to dreamers alike.

Davis goes on to share many more of these dream-like short fiction pieces, including *The Woman in Red, The Husband Seekers, The Party, The Dog,* and *In the Train Station*. Each of these stories consist of the same whimsical world that lies between wakefulness and sleeping, with elements of both a real world and a dream world. Interestingly enough, both aspects can be appreciated by readers, courtesy of the attention to the most minute of details, the repetition of dominant colors and images, and the poetic, open-ended structure that allows for individual interpretation.

Natalie Worrell

MFA Colloquium 5/5

March 21, 2009

Analysis and comparison of Raymond Carver's *The Bath* and *A Small, Good Thing*. Raymond Carver (1938-1988) was the author of several short story collections. His worked evolved through three, distinct periods marked by drastic changes in style, starting with a hard-edged and detached minimalist style, during which he wrote *The Bath*. Over time, his style moved into a more expansive style, and among the pieces written during this period is *A Small, Good Thing*, a rewrite of *The Bath*.

The Bath is a rigid piece that presents a succession of facts and events in order to tell the story. In summary, a mother orders a cake for her son, Scotty, who is to turn 8 on Monday. Early that day, the child is walking with a friend and is struck by a car. Though dazed, the boy was able to get up and walk home, although after he sat down and told his mother what happened, he fell back, unconscious.

The child was taken to the hospital, and his mother and father continuously reassured themselves and each other that the child would wake up. The two debate whether or not to leave the hospital to go home and bathe. Although they both feel guilty, they are urged by the doctors and nurses the boy is stable. First, the father goes home. When he enters the house, the phone rings, and an unfamiliar voice asks him about the cake that was never picked up. Confused, the father hangs up the phone. During his bath, the phone rings. He frantically rushes to answer the phone, and hears an unfamiliar voice who says, "It's ready."

The father returns, and there is a series of doctors and nurses entering and exiting the room, each time assuring the mother, who we learned is named Ann, and the father that the boy will be fine, and is just sleeping. After much urging, the Ann decided to go home also and have a bath and change her clothes. On the way out of the hospital, she encounters a family who is waiting on news about their son and mistakes Ann as a hospital employee, and tries to get information from her. She rambles an explanation that she is there about her son, and goes on to say that her son will be just fine. The family calms down and utters, "Our Nelson."

At home, the phone rings and Ann answers. Again, it is the baker, and he tells Ann that the call is about Scotty. Not even thinking of the cake, she does not realize who is on the phone.

With that, the story ends. In this piece, only the essential facts are relayed, without any additional details. The reader does not learn all of the character names, and doesn't learn the mother's name until close to the end. There are no physical descriptions of the people or the surroundings. In fact, the only specific details Carver provides are about the cake, within the first paragraph. The significance of the bath within the piece is unclear, especially since it is important enough to be the title. Throughout the story, the reader does get a strong sense of tension and denial from the parents, and this brings the process of having a critically injured child into focus. However, the ending is inconclusive. Carver does not give enough cues for the reader to determine the outcome of Scotty's condition, nor does he provide enough information about the baker's role. Further, there is no growth in any of the characters, and no conclusion whatsoever.

Carver takes the same story and rewrites it in *A Small, Good Thing*. Right off that bat, the reader is provided with ample details, including character names and a detailed description of

the baker, in both physical appearance and demeanor. The same sequence of events follows, as the boy is struck. However, Carver adds more to this scene as well, relaying the driver's actions and decision to leave the scene, and giving more depth to the friend who was walking with Scotty when he was hit by the car.

At the hospital, more credibility is given to the piece as Carver included medical terminology within the hospital personnel dialogue and the descriptions of what is happening to the boy. This time, there is also more interaction between the husband, this time named Howard, and wife. A conflict is introduced between the two as it is noted that Ann feels like the is going through this ordeal on her own, until a breakthrough moment when her husband admits that he, like Ann, has turned to prayer during this time.

During the time when Howard and Ann separately return to the house, the phone conversations between them and the baker are lengthened and more emotionally charged. Ann and Howard are physically and mentally drained, and find the calls from the baker to be much like a cruel joke in the face of the trauma with Scotty.

Also changed is the scene between Ann and the other family waiting on news of their son. This time, the son is named Franklin (rather than Nelson) and the readers learn that they are a black family whose son was injured during a fight he witnessed. When Ann returns after her trip home, the family is gone, and she learns the son has died, a foreshadowing of events to come.

In a dramatic scene, Scotty momentarily opens his eyes, makes contact with Ann and Howard, shrieks, and then takes his final breath. Strong emotion is evoked from this scene, and feelings that were no where to be found in the original version of the story jump from the page.

The story does not end here. Carver goes on to take readers home with the parents, who struggle to leave their dead son behind at the hospital. His toys and things are still where he left them around the house, serving as a painful reminded.

As a final blow, the baker calls once more, harassing Ann and Howard about the cake that was never paid for or picked up. In a rage, Ann realizes who is making the calls and demands that her husband take her to the baker's shop, despite the fact that it is midnight. Ann bangs on the door until he opens it and pushes her way inside, where she screams at him in a fit of uncontrollable anger until she falls back in anguish.

The baker softens, apologizing for his actions and describing himself as a lonely, unkind hermit who does nothing but bake and try to make ends meet. He offers the grieving couple some food, cinnamon rolls that he refers to as a small, good thing. Ann and Howard stay there with the baker through the night.

Clearly, *A Small, Good Thing* succeeds in all of the areas that *The Bath* failed. Carver added the details that the original story lacked, adding depth to the evens and dimension to the characters. He is able to tie the baker into the story, and play up the connection between life and death (the birthday being the day the child receives his fatal injury, and the celebration turns into tragedy). He flawlessly presents the drama and stress between the parents as they go through the process of denial and anger and, eventually, acceptance. Further, by adding details that lend credibility to the piece, *A Small, Good Thing* becomes a successful fiction piece that feels very real and believable.

These two stories are an astounding example of the progression of styles during Raymond Carver's life, and also serve as a strong example of what revision can do for a piece.

These stories are an excellent guide for MFA students to see what an important role craft plays in fiction.