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A Reflection of Creative Nonfiction

I never thought someone would want to hear about my life. I never ever thought someone would read about my life and enjoy what was said. I was terrified writing my first creative nonfiction piece because I have a tendency to overshare and in my first draft that never graced the eyes of anyone but my own, I did. Then food was brought into the classroom and we were supposed to write about a memory associated with food. I picked a banana taffy and sat there in silence. I don't have a healthy relationship with food and I didn't really want to reflect on my five year relationship with bulimia. Taffy got stuck in my teeth and I got to thinking. My grandma can't eat taffy because of her dentures. Grandma always has candy in the cabinet, and thus *Candy* was born.

I wrote it in those fifteen minutes given to us for the exercise and went home and read it out loud to my boyfriend who had never heard my writing before. I cried while reading it because I could picture myself in my grandma's kitchen and I missed home. I then sent it to my dad who just said, "Cute." My grandma, however, who shares my leaky eye faucets, cried when I sent it to her. I knew then that I had something there, and thus it became my first short essay in my manuscript for the semester.

I took these creative nonfiction pieces and wrote them as a love letter to home. People always question why I want to move back to Iowa so badly whenever I say I'm leaving Colorado as soon as humanly possible. I want to hand them my short essays and I want those pages to

explain why I need to go home. My dad, grandma, and grandpa are my favorite people in the world. My dad got left with a baby he didn't necessarily want and raised it in the healthiest way possible (stepmoms excluded). I got the best dad a kid with aspergers could have ever asked for. When I became a recluse who never spoke outside of home, who would go a whole day of school without uttering a word. My dad would listen to me ramble for two hours straight when I stepped through the garage door. I wanted people to read stuff like that and understand why Iowa is the best place in the world for me to live.

I wrote all of these pieces like I talk. I actually talk quite a lot at home just not outside the perimeter of my safe spaces. I wanted most of the pieces to sound like I was the one speaking. There are some things that I say stupid in real life, so I put those within my work. My sense of humor is dark and self-deprecating and that's just who I am, so I inserted that as well. The other main purpose of this piece is to show that quiet people have things to say and that my stepmom didn't absolutely silence me. I have my voice still and I will use it through writing and hopefully someday I will use it audibly as well.

There are some aspects of my life that I am afraid to write about. I allude towards some of them in my piece "ROOM" but not in full detail. I will put them here as a promise to myself as a writer that they happened and they should be written about. I need to write about the severe mental and emotional abuse my second stepmom put me through that turned me mute. (This involved her murder of my rats and cat, complete isolation even from my dad, and almost being admitted to a home for being "crazy" due to her gaslighting.) I need to write about the punching of my legs and consumption of laxatives that I did to have control of my life. I need to write about having my first kiss and other things stolen from me one week into college. I need to write about me trying to end my existence. These are big parts of my life that I am too afraid to write

about because of backlash (in the case of my stepmom) and people viewing me as weak and my family does not know about the college assault because I was too embarrassed to say anything. I like to be invisible, so I am debating going under a pseudonym if I do attempt for publication. I don't know if that takes away from my story, but I think it is the most comfortable option. I want to tell the full story and all of its truths and so far I have done that. There is just one final leap I need to take to tell the full story.

“Candy”

Ashley Miller

NAMES

Ashley.

It is always smart to start with a name.

I don't like Ash despite the majority of people deciding this is in fact my nickname.

Only my childhood best friend, Emily, and my Uncle Shawn are allowed to call me this without me wanting to choke them out.

My name is Ashley. Please complete the two syllables. There are only a handful of other names I enjoy, but like Ash they are specific to important people.

My grandma calls me Sweetie and My Sweet.

"How's My Sweet doing?" Is always the first question when I enter her house as she peppers my cheek with kisses.

When I have done something to annoy her I become My Granddaughter Who...insert my alleged crime.

I usually return to My Sweet within the hour because we are besties like that.

My grandpa is the only person in the entire world that I allow to say my full name.

"Did you see [insert any sport event because he watches them all], Ashley Jade?" He says in his recliner with said sport on the TV screen.

Ashley Jade is reserved for Grandpa because he has not one mean bone in his body. I'm not getting full-named because I'm in trouble. When Grandpa says it, my name is just my name.

Dad has always called me Boog and all of its variations—Boogie, Boogiehead, and his favorite when he is trying to annoy me *Boogy-Woogy-Choo-Choo-Train*. This last one is usually said in a high pitch or his version of Cartman from South Park.

As a kid when I found out the bear from the movie Open Season was named Boog I thought I was the coolest kid around. Yeah, that major studio totally named the protagonist anthropomorphic bear after me.

In truth, I have always hated my name due to it being the female version of John Smith.

My dad hates his name—Shannon—because people assume he’s a girl. He attempted to go by Chris in high school, but it never stuck with anyone except for the man who owned the town’s grocery store who still calls him Chris to this day despite the phase lasting a week.

My grandma hates her name—Phyllis—because she says it’s ugly.

Each generation of my family has an issue with their names.

But hey, at least our last name isn’t Morecock or Boner.

Which are the actual last names of people I went to school with...

Sorry guys.

ALIENS

My dad is walking with his neck craned back to look at the sky. This always freaks me out. What if a UFO actually did blip into existence in the black of the night or if one of the stars we thought was just a star started doing zigzags through the air? How was I supposed to react?

My dad is always ready though. Aliens are my dad’s bread and butter. I honestly think if an alien descended into our backyard and said to my dad, “Hey come with us. We’ll show you

how we built the pyramids.” My dad would say goodbye Ashley, it was nice being your father, and beam up into the space with them.

He’s been like this forever. At least for as long as I have known him. The mirror in the backroom of my grandma’s house that used to be his has his two interests solidified in sticker form all around the border: Aliens and car stereos.

Plus, a Shrek sticker I placed there at five.

My dad doesn’t read, but he has thirty volumes of Mysteries of the Universe Explained or whatever its called that explains everything aliens have done on Earth. My dad watched Ancient Aliens religiously, but could agree that the “experts” were dumb in some areas because they didn’t align with what my dad’s theories on alien life and their influence on Earth.

My dad claims to have actually seen a UFO before, but he is not sure if he was abducted or not.

The thing is I believe it. Neither my dad or I are religious even though we live in super-Christian, small-town-of-1800-people, Iowa. When I was asked about Jesus at Awanas, the Bible group my dad dropped me off at to just get me out of the house when I was six, I said I didn’t care about him. When one girl asked me in art class if I had been saved by God, I said no, I don’t know anything about him.

Apparently, I am going to hell.

But all I’ve ever known is aliens.

Aliens built the pyramids.

Perhaps aliens use Earth as a testing ground or as their own personal Sims.

BIKE

There are training wheels still on my bike. My five-year-old eyes are fixed on the back of my dad's already balding head. We are heading down to the elementary school so I can swing, and the only way he'd agree to take me was if I biked there with him.

"Almost ready to take those training wheels off, huh?" My dad asked before we started our trek to the playground.

I shook my head aggressively. Riding a bike was still scary with the training wheels; the thought of them coming off was terrifying.

Now I was pedaling my pink Barbie bike down the steep hill to my elementary school, and I had gotten a sudden surge of confidence and pedaled faster.

Before I know it my front wheel is colliding with my dad's back wheel, and I am soaring through the air. The only thing that greets me on my descent is the hot mid-July in Iowa asphalt. My forearms scream as the first few layers of skin are peeled off like potatoes. My bike—still upright thanks to my training wheels—scoots its way down the hill while I scream in agony on the ground.

My dad finishes riding down the hill, parks his bike, and slowly makes his way to me. No rushing. Just walking. He squats down and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"You're tough. Stand up."

I place my scratched up palms on the ground and heave my little body into standing position. My dad takes his water bottle, douses my arms, and dries the bloody water off with the hem of his grey tank top.

"Now I thought we were here to swing," he says and takes off in a dead sprint to the backside of the school.

“Oh, I hope the red swing is open,” he calls back as he rounds the corner.

Dad knows that is my favorite swing. The pain in my arms fades and I chase after him.

My bike waits at the bottom of the hill.

SHANNONOGAINS

My dad is accident prone.

To begin, my grandma will always mention once in a while about how he was the only accident out of her three kids. The contraceptive foam didn't work.

I usually cover my ears at this point.

My dad has a small, almost invisible scar on the left side of his head from when he pulled a canner on top of him at the age of six. After a hospital visit and some staples later, my grandma decided to put the canner up higher out of the child's reach.

He also has a scar on his knee from when he was eleven and a sliver of hammer metal came off while my grandpa was mid-hammering and flew into his son's knee. The sliver of metal is probably still there as he wasn't taken to the hospital that time.

My dad almost died when he was in high school. He got in his fancy red race-car and came face to face with an electric pole. Thankfully, someone was driving down the same country road and pulled my unconscious father from the wreckage, or else I wouldn't exist.

The car blew up minutes later into a fiery ball of metal and red paint.

When he was in the hospital and my grandparents were observing as he got the skin from his leg grafted onto his face, my Uncle Shawn got a phone call. He knew that his older brother Shannon had in fact almost died and was in surgery, so when the caller said, “Sorry for your loss. Shannon was a good kid.” He freaked.

Someone else named Shannon had died. Not Shannon, his brother.

Some seven years later my dad accidentally had a child.

Hello.

My dad has had a lot of accidents during my lifetime: Stepmom number one, stepmom number two, almost becoming Mormon for a girl despite being an atheist who thinks religion is a scam responsible for most problems, blowing the windows out of his car because his stereo system was too loud, and getting pulled over every time we were in Newton for not wearing his seatbelt.

“If I had worn a seatbelt, I would have died in my crash.”

I guess he’s right. He is alive.

Some accidents are more memorable than the others—stepmoms excluded.

The one I love to tell people about took place on the basketball court of my elementary school. It was during the depressing Stepmom #2 era, so getting out of the house was already a big deal. My best friend Emily had shown up on her bike, so her and I could play Fairies on the hill.

As I am clenching my hands to control the wind, (cause obviously I’m the Wind Fairy. Duh.) my dad comes over to me and says goodbye. I can’t see his face because it is covered completely in blood. The gash stretching from his receding hairline to his eyebrow is wide and deep—a canyon of goop and blood.

“Go home with Emily.”

He walks calmly away despite his brains falling out, hops on his bike with Stepmom #2 and her two kids in tow, and leaves eight-year-old me on the hill.

I begin to cry.

Emily points out my dad's blood under the little kid's hoop on the playground.

I cry more.

Standing in Emily's bedroom window, I sob my eyes out waiting for a text saying my dad's alive, or the call like on TV telling me he has passed away, or even better my dad's car pulling into the driveway void of Stepmom #2 and her kids.

That would be a double win.

Instead the car pulls into the driveway hours later everyone inside, but I for once am relieved to see Stepmom #2 because at least my dad is alive.

"Check out my stitches," he says to me then shows off the pictures of his head to Emily's parents. This is going to be a new favorite story for him.

On Monday, I show off the blood stain on the basketball court.

"Yeah, my dad cracked his head open on Saturday. That's his blood," I say with pride.

My dad is a DJ—Iowa's Premier Mobile DJ is his branding—and throughout my childhood he used to build bass-boxes for the cars of fellow speakerheads. I would hang out inside my grandma's house while my dad crafted boxes able to hold three, four, up to eight plus speakers. He always built them to blow out the windows or to make the car's frame shake.

Sometimes when people do something a lot they get too confident in their abilities. It's kind of like how I tend to walk up ladders carrying boxes like they're stairs despite the high possibility the ladder can slip. My dad is the same way, and when I was around twelve it bit him in the butt.

I was sitting in my grandma's kitchen watching TV when my dad appeared in the front door's window. He raised his bloody hand into view and said through the glass, "We gotta go."

He had sliced almost to the nerve in the meat of his thumb while caulking the bass-box. Now twelve year old me was left steering the car back into town from the passenger seat while my dad held his shirt to his leaking hand.

I am forever relieved I didn't have to steer all the way to the hospital twentyish miles away.

He is relieved he didn't accidentally paralyze his hand.

ROOM

I have left my room for something not required of me twice this week. The first instance was a rare occasion where I built up enough confidence to make my way into the cafeteria and use my meal plan. The second was when I went Doordashing on Sunday and couldn't find the specific hospital my recipient was at because she didn't put in the address correctly and the fact that Minot has literally three hospitals all named the same thing but roads apart.

When I finally got her Arby's to her my hands were frozen and there were tears streaming down my face. She offered me a cigarette, I denied, and she took her food.

Back in my car, I finished out my panic attack and tried to bring life back into my hands. I get back to my dorm and sure enough I managed to drop my student id somewhere downtown and was thus locked out of my dorm. After waiting in the chilly November North Dakota air someone finally comes out and I slip back in.

I have stayed in the small confines of my dorm ever since. I only leave to go to practice and class, but immediately rush back to my depression chamber. There are piles of laundry on

my chair and floor, the dishes sitting on top of mini fridge stink with being unwashed...my anxiety won't let me go to the bathroom to clean them unless it is 3am. My TV hasn't been turned off in months; it has been my only friend during my first semester in this hell.

There's signs of being a mess everywhere, but no one ever questions me or asks if I'm alright. I'm very good at pretending.

I'm doing good in track. I have a 4.0. Ashley is smart. Ashley is just quiet.

In reality, Ashley is very very lonely.

And sad. Very sad.

I leave my room for another practice. I actually like practice because when my lungs feel like they are going to explode and my feet burn with effort I can pretend I'm not sad. Also, I often think morbidly, I'd be grateful to have an asthma attack and die on the track.

Double win.

But something is different that day when I get back to my dorm room because for the first time in a long time I am something other than sad: I am mad.

So fucking mad.

Mad at myself for being an antisocial loser weirdo who hasn't made a singular friend in two years. Mad at myself for shuffling back to my room instead of attempting conversation. Mad at myself for being stupid enough to think moving seven hundred miles away would magically cure my neurodivergence. I'm mad for making my grandma cry when I moved away. I'm mad I didn't change my mind and go right back home instead of staying here after seeing my dad sob when he left. I'm mad my friends always need my help, so I can't ask for theirs.

I'm mad.

And more importantly I'm tired.

And with my tiredness, I cry.

I cry and cry and cry. I ball my hand into a fist and do what I do best: Make bad decisions. After beating my own thighs into a mural of blue and purple bruises I pass out with a plan in mind. If I wake up mad, I'm gone.

My eyes open and the rage is still there.

I cram a couple of shirts, my laptop, the current book I'm reading, a notebook, my wallet, and Farty, my best friend who happens to be a stuffed bear, into my duffel bag and don't even bother to lock my door.

My car needs an oil change. I have a couple hundred dollars to my name and a month of a semester left, but I leave. I am one hundred miles outside of Minot before I take time and think. I think about going home. I think about my bed. My house. My friends. My family. I am going home. And even though I am running away, which is not very "responsible twenty year old" of me, I cry with relief.

I drive the twelve hours home straight, only stopping for gas. No one knows I am coming home except for my dad who I texted once I hit Minneapolis eight hours in. Four hours later, I pull into my dad's driveway and practically sprint from the car. He has COVID at the time but I couldn't care less. My feet carry my inside and into my dad's open hug.

He has been worried about me, so he doesn't question my sudden return or judge me. He's just glad I didn't do something more drastic, which I had been thinking about daily. I cry with relief and after our quick reunion I leave to go to my house in town. (My dad moved out when I turned eighteen; after the mess of Stepmom #2, he didn't want to disrupt my place.) I don't want COVID from my dad, so I don't stay long.

The garage creaks open like usual. My dad's hoarding problem greets me but my car fits. The floor inside is ice cold because my grandma turns off the heat when I am not home. But it's home. I walk the long hallway and enter the final door on the right. My ceramic cats are where I left them all fifty of them. My K-pop boys are still looking pretty on my walls. My computer waits to be booted up and running Sims. I place Farty on his side of my full bed and climb into mine.

I'll go back to Minot in January, I tell myself. It will be okay.

But for now I don't mind staying in this room.

CANDY

The cabinet to the left of the sink always has candy in stock. Whether it be the peppermints my grandma pocketed from Pizza Ranch, my grandpa's fruit slices, or the occasional free candy bar from Kiwanis, there is always candy present. Whenever my dad or I step foot into my grandma's house, the first thing we come face to face with is the cabinet to the left of the sink.

"Get your hands out of there!" My grandma tells us, as we beeline towards the sweets.

But it's routine. We have to see what candy is in stock. It's not like we are pillaging the entire cabinet. The second and third shelves are only home to Shake'n'Bake, instant potatoes, and Jello. We just want a quick bite of candy.

"That's why Dad is so fat," Grandma says—dad meaning grandpa, "always in his fruit slices. Look at you Shannon, you have the same gut."

My grandma goes over, pats my gut-having dad on the shoulder, and takes some of her black licorice. She just nags because she cares, but we all take from the cabinet. Herself included.

It's normal. Everything at my grandma's house is normal. My grandma always has her book on her lap. Her glasses are probably on the shelf in the bathroom. My grandpa is reclined in the living room basketball, baseball, football or track on the TV. The cats are outside hanging out on the mat except for Anna because she hates her fellow felines. Solas is probably on the roof surveying because he thinks he's the leader of the cats...in reality it is Goose, his brother. The house creaks on the ramp in the kitchen. There's a huge red jug on the counter with the best ice water in the world readily available. The drawer by the sink is filled with zip-lock baggies Grandma washes with the dishes and reuses. The bedroom doors remain shut at all time because my grandma thinks it saves her money on heating. The bathroom nightlight waits to be turned on at dusk. The candy is in the cabinet to the left of the sink.

My grandma does the dishes the minute a meal is finished and I do the drying. My grandpa goes outside to do one more check of the cows. My grandma waters her tomatoes right before the sun goes down. The cats disappear back into the barns for their night's sleep. My dad tells my grandparents they need to stop working cows. Grandma says she'll move into town one day. She never will; she hates people too much. My dad tells them maybe they should switch to goats they're easier. My grandma ignores him to spy on her neighbor and her son, who probably steals their corn. My dad and I load up into his car and head the four miles back into town.

Tomorrow, the candy will still be in the cabinet to the left of the sink.

GRANDMA BEFORE THE GRAND

Just the other day I was taken aback by the simple fact that my grandma used to wear miniskirts in college. My grandma who, today, would say you're dressing like a harlot wore miniskirts? Absurd!

"Well yes, it was the clothing of the time."

Thinking about my grandma as someone other than the woman I've known my whole life is mind-blowing. My grandma today hates most people and sits and reads all day. She spies on her neighbors through her binoculars and whenever she calls me she informs me of their doings. It's weird to imagine her as anyone but my grandma. It's honestly hard to think of her as my dad's mom even though there are enough anecdotes of my dad's childhood shenanigans to write a book about—herself present in every one of them.

Who was Grandma before she became Grandma or even before she became Mom to my dad and uncles? Who is Phyllis?

Well, first off don't call her that she hates it. Ugliest name in the whole world if you ask her.

"Who'd name their kid ____? Well at least it's better than Phyllis," she says often.

Phil, as she is rather called, grew up in the boonies of Southern Missouri outside the tiny village of Des Arc in a house built by hand with no running water and the only heat came from the wood stove. Their bathroom was outside in an outhouse, and the well water was so bad my grandma lost all of her teeth and got dentures by age sixteen in 1965.

Her grandma lived with them up until her death. She was an old, bitter Native woman who hated my grandma's mom for trapping her son in marriage with the birth of my grandma's older brother. Phil was probably a watchful, hardworking, and disciplined child, but I know she

was a happy one. Her dad drove the wood truck and would be gone from dawn til dusk delivering wood to neighboring communities. (He would also stop at bars and flirt with young ladies if you asked the townspeople.) But when he came home he made sure to bring his three kids something sweet and would often take them to the circus or other events to let them make the happy childhood memories that he didn't get to have.

Her mother on the other hand was trapped at home with the grandma who hated her guts. She never learned how to drive. She had to put up with her husband's infidelity. She stuck to her kitchen and ruled it with an iron fist. Phil was not allowed in said kitchen. The only time a foot of hers could enter was when she loaded another piece of wood into the stove.

Luckily for Phil, she was smart, really smart. She claims she didn't take hard classes and that's why she got valedictorian of her tiny Missouri high school, but I think she's lying. My grandma is a walking dictionary in present day. Anyway, Phil at age sixteen graduated at the top of her class and her dad decided she was smart enough that maybe she should be the first Ursery to go to college despite being a girl and him being a misogynist.

Because of this my grandma became the first woman in her family's history to learn how to drive. Only so her dad would no longer have to pick her up on the holidays while she was away. During college, my grandma was in a sorority, which is mind-boggling—my prude grandma in a sorority house. She shared her room with another girl who was weird and disappeared mid-semester. The janitor spied on the girls who walked around with only their bras. Not Grandma though, she would never. Phil looked out her window to spy on Vinny, the tennis player she had a crush on—who we tracked down on Facebook two years ago. She wore miniskirts, took a swimming class, and wrote in her diary everyday.

During the summers, she didn't really go home except on the occasional weekend. Instead she worked at a family owned truck stop for twelve hours straight and lived in the upstairs room every weekday. The family would give Phil 15 cents an hour and she saved every penny. Eventually she graduated, got her own car, and a job teaching second grade.

She was the first Ursery ever to graduate from college, work a non-blue collar job, and the first Ursery woman to have a car of *her* own down in the Missouri basin. She taught two years of second grade and worked in the nursery during the summers with her best friend Hazel.

Hazel is mighty important because was dating a man named Hop, who was stationed at the nearby Fort Leonard Wood. Hop had a friend who he brought as a blind date for my grandma for their movie night double date. The young man was tanned with blocky black framed glasses and a plastered on genuine smile. He introduced himself as Dave Miller from the small town of Monroe, Iowa. He had been drafted alongside his two older brothers for the Vietnam War, and he was her date. Dave was super nice and polite and just as nervous as she was.

But Phil in true Grandma-fashion sat as far away from Dave as she possibly could in the car, but she did kind of like him. After their date he went back up to base and began writing her letters every day that she'd pick up on the weekends. Today, she claims they were full of complaining and silly, but obviously then they were effective because after three months of letters back and forth and a handful of in-person dates, Dave asked Phil to marry him—three times.

She finally said yes.

They were married at her parent's house with no audience except for the witnesses of Hop and Hazel and the priest. Dave would be discharged and take Phil up to Iowa to join him on the farm. Dave and Phil would have three sons Scott, the genius; Shannon, the accident and my

father; and Shawn, the baby. Phil would become Mom then Grandma and thus favorite person to ever exist.

TRUCK STOP

One time my coworker found heroin under the lid of the toilet water chamber in the men's bathroom. Or was it the women's? I don't remember that detail, but I do remember the heroin.

"Uh Ashley, there's a little baggie in the back of the toilet."

And thus, the police were called. That wasn't the only time we called them when I was on the clock. Nor was it the last drug related incident we—or me—had to deal with either.

There was also the time in my summer of solo mid-shifts when the cop circled our parking lot four or five times before coming inside when the store was empty and asking me if I had "seen this woman." He flashed the phone at my face and in a panic I said no.

He left.

I pondered.

Then I remembered she'd looked a lot like the lady who came behind the counter with me to look at the rolling papers we sold up close. I had let her back there because she seemed nice, but she also paid a hundred dollars cash and got in her fancy car despite looking like she rolled out of bed in the east side of Des Moines.

Maybe they were the same person.

Did I let a criminal escape!?

I didn't get paid enough to really care.

She was a paying customer. She was kind to me, the mere cashier at the small town truck stop—who usually got berated by middle aged individuals—and thus, she gets to run free. I free you criminal lady just don't come back and rob me.

Just this last summer, I was behind the counter at Casey's alone for eight hours minimum a day for six days a week. The regulars asked me if I ever went home. The answer was "No, I sleep on the mat back here."

I know their Casey's Rewards numbers. I have their cigarettes memorized. I know which customers want a receipt and who want bags.

My favorite customer tells me she is trying to quit smoking while buying her 'last' pack. Her husband comes back in the next day to buy more for her. He tells me she's sorry she let me down.

I'm just touched she remembers me enough to have him tell me this.

The main thing about my job is that I bitch a lot about it. I am there more than I am home. I see the regulars more than I see my family. My feet ache and my already permanently injured back screams with relief when I finally sit in the front seat of my car after my eight and a half hours of straight standing. (Iowa does not have mandated breaks.) And although I bitch and complain about my job, I do it with pride.

That sounds stupid I know. I have fell victim to the evil entity of capitalism. They are overworking me, underpaying me, and giving me no help or even a singular coworker to let me go change the trashes at the pumps without having to run because what if a customer shows up while I'm changing trash number eight out of thirteen, but I care about how my store looks when I leave.

Key word: my. That Casey's last summer was mine. The counters were clean because of me. Customers got in and out in a timely manner because of me. The bathroom was free of pee puddles and the literal poo on the toilets seats and walls because of me. I did it all. The Casey's ran from two or three p.m. to eleven p.m. because of me.

It was clean, efficient, and open because I took it seriously.

With the pride in my store and the trust of my manager I took a lot of manners regarding asshole customers into my own hands. For example, our diesel pumps had shoddy card readers and one particular woman with a stick firmly up her butt came storming into the store. She had black long curly hair like a lot of Iowan Karens do and wore her bootcut jeans like they didn't go out of style a decade ago.

"Tell me why your pumps won't read my card!" She demanded not responding to my hello I greeted every customer with.

"They have issues sometimes. You can prepay inside and anything you don't use will go back on your card, or I can come outside and see if it's just being tricky," I respond quickly because I was the top-dog efficient problem solver.

"I expect you outside in less than 60 seconds," she stated before storming back outside.

Thankfully for her, the store was empty. I would never leave my register unattended to help a rude person. Being rude automatically puts customers lower on the priority list. We met up at her pickup with horses whinnying in the back and I tried to reset the keypad and get her card to read.

Spoiler alert: it didn't.

Then she turned to me and said, "If I knew you were retarded I wouldn't have asked for your help."

First of all, the r-word. Really? Grow up.

Secondly, I said, “You are banned from this Casey’s.”

Thirdly, I turned my back to retreat to the store and she called out, “You can’t do that. I’ll speak with your manager.”

“I am the manager,” I lied with all of the *umpr* I could muster. “And you are banned from this Casey’s.”

Her foul language followed me into the store where I began helping more customers. The grind never stopped.

I prayed for the rest of the summer that she would try sauntering back into *my* Casey’s and have a problem with *my* pumps because if there’s one thing I learned from my dad it is to hold a grudge.

Her face was burned into my memory and if she had the balls to come back in I was ready.

It would have been so awesome.

WELCOME

Shannon has been kicked out of the delivery room for trying to record the birth of his first born child. He was too close according to the birth-giver. The baby is supposed to be a boy; it is also an accident baby. Now, at twenty-four, he is going to be a dad and the mother of his child is someone he doesn’t even really like.

There are rumors circulating that the kid isn’t even his, but he is the boyfriend, so it has to be. If it comes out looking too far off from what he expects, he can always use that as an excuse to leave. But, then again, the kid would be left alone with her as a mom. He can’t do that.

Shannon had waited to tell his own mom he knocked up his current girlfriend until she was obviously showing and about to burst. He knew how she'd react; she'd call him stupid. And she had done exactly that plus some more. How could he be so stupid? Of course the accident was the one to have an accident of his own.

None of that matters right now. Today is the day, he is going to become a dad.

Finally, around 4 p.m. on July 24, 2000, he is called into the room to meet his son. Instead, he enters the room and meets his daughter who has already been named without his input. He is surprised that the mother gave the kid his last name instead of her own. He doubts they will be together forever, but he will try to give the baby a two parent household.

His daughter has a full head of hair and an angry face like she can't believe she had been born to this unprepared couple who don't even like each other. He loves her the minute he lays eyes on her. Who would have known the community college graduate in robotics who instead became a waiter at Perkin's true calling was being a dad? Shannon? Goofball, crash his car into a pole and almost dying then getting caught buying alcohol for a high school party Shannon was going to be a good dad? Incredulous.

But if anyone saw the way that immature goof of a young adult held his baby girl they would know the answer:

Of course he was.