

## **Final Portfolio**

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Manuscript 1

February 15, 2023

### Jaywalking

Claudia wondered if anyone would notice if she vomited into the potted plant beside her. Surely, the older gentleman reading today's paper, seated on the red, velvet couch, would catch a whiff of her bile and hear the process of her stomach emptying. She could use the restroom, but the distance to the bathroom was farther than the leafy plant stationed next to her table, situated in the corner of the coffee shop with a direct line of sight to the door. Claudia wasn't certain if the source of her queasiness was the strong scent of coffee beans or the impending doom she felt in her chest waiting for her guest to arrive. To aid her nausea and the possible embarrassment from throwing up in a public setting, she sipped her glass of water and pressed the bottoms of her shoes into the hardwood floor, grounding her in place.

Any sense of grounding Claudia had vanished when the bell connected to the shop's door chimed. In walked the woman with the ability to make you feel like the most cared for person in the entire world. Claudia thought the woman looked the exact same, but three years doesn't make much of a difference in your early thirties. However, the fur coat engulfing her figure was a new style, an outlier to her usual, simplistic fashion.

The woman swiveled her head around the space until her gaze landed on Claudia, seated on the far end of the shop with her hand grasped around a glass of

water so tight that her fingertips were a pale yellow. With her target set, the woman in the fur coat made her way across the coffee shop, passed the man on the red couch, and took a seat across from Claudia.

Looking into her green eyes, Claudia felt like no time had passed at all. She felt that familiar contemptment in *her* presence. But, the rage and betrayal she felt was sizzling from the inside out. There were many words Claudia wanted to pour out across their small table, but all she could breathlessly say was,

“Hi, Teresa.”

Claudia was petrified about living with a stranger for a year, the probability of her freshman year roommate being a total nightmare were high based on stories she had heard from friends and family. *What if this girl was a total slob? What if she has a hygiene issue? Or, what if she writes fanmail to Joseph Gordon-Levitt?* Claudia thought. Claudia even considered the possibility her roommate could be a nudist. She prayed that wasn't the case.

On move in day, Claudia's parents got into one of their quarrels while transporting a mini fridge up two flights of stairs.

“God dammit Andrew! You're going too fast, this fridge is going to fucking crush me!” Claudia's mother shrieked.

“Well maybe you're going too slow! We're holding everyone else up,” her dad bickered. Claudia was horrified that the people she would see every day in her dorm were witnessing the breaking point of her parents' marriage.

Finally lugging the fridge into Claudia's assigned room, the three were greeted by Claudia's roommate.

"Oh my gosh! Hi! You must be my roommate!" The speaker darted to Claudia and engulfed her in a hug. Claudia couldn't remember the last time someone hugged her or made her feel like she deserved to take up space in a room.

"Looks like it. My name's Claudia." She wasn't sure she could match the enthusiasm her newfound roommate possessed.

"I'm Teresa, and are these your parents?," Teresa went in for more hugs with Claudia's parents. Claudia's mother was lackluster in their embrace while her father was all too willing to accept Teresa's affection.

After their greetings had ceased and Claudia's belongings were transported into the dorm room, with only a handful of her parents' fights later, her parents said their good-byes and left Claudia to fend for herself.

"I'm sorry you had to see all of *that*," Claudia apologized, "I told them to save the fighting for the car ride back."

"Trust me, my parents were way worse when we had to get all my crap up here," Teresa reassured her.

When Claudia came home for Thanksgiving break, her parents sat her down at the dining room table to reveal they were separating. By Easter they were officially divorced. It wasn't much of a surprise to Claudia, yet the news left her shattered. It was Teresa's mission to make Claudia smile, at the very least, every day since the divorce. She would tell her dumb jokes, recount their past memories, or bring her a chocolate bar from the vending machine in hopes the gesture would brighten Claudia's dark cloud.

Teresa picked up the pieces that assembled Claudia and glued them together with her tenderness.

No movement was made to break the tension. Teresa and Claudia stared at one another, their memories together rushing back to the forefront of their minds. The time Claudia and Teresa drunkenly stole a bicycle while leaving a party. Teresa pedaled while Claudia clung to her back like a baby sloth. Teresa's operating skills were obstructed by the last shot they took leaving the party, so they hit a curb at full speed. They launched over the handlebars into a pile of leaves that barely cushioned the blow. They burst into laughter over their recklessness until Teresa's adrenaline wore off and she was clutching her wrist. After Teresa's cast had mended her injury, they laughed about the incident for months later. A small part of Claudia still laughed about it whenever she recalled that night.

Claudia looked at Teresa's, previously broken, wrist that rested on the table. Her gaze drifted to the glittering crystal wrapped around a band of diamonds fit securely on her ring finger, a reminder of Teresa's deception. Teresa, noticing Claudia's scrutiny, broke the silence first,

"Claudia, you look good. How have you been?" Her words were sincere, but Claudia couldn't help but keep her words short.

"Fine. Busy. You?"

"I've been good," Teresa paused, "Andrew sends his love. He wants you to know that he really misses seeing you."

“Please, don’t call *him* that,” Claudia pleaded. The name coming out of Teresa’s mouth brought back Claudia’s nausea. She closed her eyes in an attempt to get her nervous system under control. Teresa didn’t respond, she didn’t know what to say to make the situation better. They sat in silence, letting their respective guilt and anger simmer. A feeling that rose above Claudia’s anger was the feeling of her heart being broken. Her own father hadn’t chosen her.

“Why the sudden urgency for us to meet Teresa?,” Claudia exasperated. The sooner Claudia could escape this conversation, Teresa, and the knowledge her father married her best friend, the sooner she could go back to pretending she didn’t have a father at all.

Indiana’s high school sexual education failed Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Jenkins. Rather than teach a comprehensible lesson on how to prevent teen pregnancy, the gym teacher, Coach Nelson, passed around a bucket of condoms with little explanation about the do’s and don’ts of safe sex. Therefore, on Homecoming night, in the baseball dugout, away from the dance, Claudia was conceived.

Although they were young, Claudia’s parents attempted to produce a normal childhood for their daughter. Her mother baked an apple pie every Fourth of July at their family barbeque, and her father coached her soccer team all through elementary school. Claudia’s parents worked hard to give her a life she could flourish from, but they took the brunt of the sorrow and heartache of their futures being drastically altered before they even had their driver’s licenses. Not just their futures were impacted, but a

child was a lifelong responsibility for two people. The weight of that sentiment was catastrophic for Claudia's parents. Claudia thought often about how her parents' relationship would've turned out had she not been born.

When Claudia reached high school, her parents were terrified they'd become grandparents before their friends had any children of their own. For Claudia, she was more horrified by the looks her female teachers gave her father. He was a handsome man, and he possessed a certain charm with women that had them willing to do just about anything. Claudia's mother also noticed the gazes from other women, but what could she do, gouge their eyes out? She seriously considered the thought when she witnessed Teresa embrace her husband for the first time.

"I'm pregnant," Teresa announced with a smile. Claudia's face turned sour, she might've really needed the potted plant at that moment if she tried to respond, so she kept her mouth zipped while the reality settled in that she would become a sister. She scooted her chair an inch closer to the plant. Teresa continued,

"There's a baby shower in a couple weeks. We'd love it if you would come." Her face shined with hope that Claudia would agree, but all Claudia could envision was Teresa laying in a hospital bed, holding her baby while Claudia's father wrapped his arm around Teresa's shoulders, congratulating her that she'd done it and their beautiful baby was finally here.

"Claudia, did you hear me?," Teresa questioned.

“You’re pregnant?,” Claudia hissed. Her outrage came suddenly. She’d kept her feelings about the taboo relationship at bay for long enough. Claudia couldn’t control her words, she blurted out,

“This is just– crazy, absurd, ludicrous! First, you marry my *dad* and become my *stepmother*. Then, you come here and tell me you’re having a fucking baby! What the fuck is wrong with you!” Claudia’s yells echoed throughout the coffee shop. The man seated on the red couch looked up at the two women, averting his gaze from the sports section of the paper. Teresa was taken aback,

“God Claudia, I’ve *always* supported you. Andrew makes me happy, we make each other happy!,” she took a deep breath, “I’m sorry, I know this whole situation is messy, but I’ve never been happier.” Her conviction dwindled as she finished her sentence, what overcame her then was guilt and defeat. However, Claudia wasn’t finished yet,

“What, so you’re happier without me now?”

“No, of course not. I miss our friendship. I miss us every day.”

Claudia couldn’t fathom how Teresa could push aside ten years of friendship for a man who was supposed to value his daughter the most.

“I can’t do this right now,” Claudia choked out. She couldn’t stand to be confined in her corner any longer. She rushed out of her seat, knocking over her glass of water, and ran out the door. The bell chimed. Teresa could feel the stares of the other attendees of the coffee shop, judging her from the information revealed during their argument. All she wanted was for their friendship to be amended.



Teresa rushed out of her chair and chased after Claudia. She saw Claudia on the other side of the street, already briskly walking to her car. Teresa stepped into the road and called out loudly enough for Claudia to hear,

“Wait! Claudia, please, I’m sor—” Her words were cut off by the screeching of tires and the impact of mass against steel.

Claudia spun around to look at the scene before her. Teresa was laid on her back with her fur coat opened to the sky, revealing a small bump tugging against her cotton t-shirt. Claudia dashed to Teresa’s side and held her hand, yelling for bystanders to call for help. Claudia saw the man from the red couch, now outside, pull his phone out of his pocket.

“Hey, hey, hey, Teresa. Look at me, okay. Everything will be fine,” Claudia’s words were scratchy, her throat closing up as each word came out. A small trail of blood trickled down Teresa’s face, the source of the bleed coming from her hairline. Teresa squeezed Claudia’s hand tightly to bring Claudia’s upper half closer to her mouth. She croaked out the words in Claudia’s ear,

“I’m sorry.”

Claudia didn’t say anything, she didn’t know what to say in response. All she could do was squeeze Teresa’s hand while the blaring of sirens increasingly grew till a paramedic ordered Claudia to make space. They hefted Teresa onto a stretcher and loaded her into the ambulance, leaving Claudia behind. Claudia wanted to pry the ambulance door open, jump in, and tell Teresa that she would be fine. Claudia didn’t move. The ambulance turned the street corner and the wail of the sirens faded until the street was soundless.

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### Nobody

The metal bed frame and the thin mattress do little to support a restful night of sleep. I try different sleeping positions: on my stomach, back, and side, but I can never get comfortable with my head inches away from the glistening, silver toilet in the corner of our cage. By the time I get out, I'll need a hip replacement to aid my bruised bones and the aches submerged in my joints.

"Mary! Quit tossing and go to sleep! You're rattlin' the whole bed!," Victoria bites at me from above. Victoria has been here longer, so she gets the top bunk where her head is farther away from the toilet bowl.

"I'm sorry, Victoria. I just can't sleep. I'll stop moving so much," I whisper to my cell mate. She gives a grunt in acknowledgement.

I settle with laying on my back and looking up at Victoria's bed. The weight of her body concaves the mattress. One of these days, I envision the cheap material ripping and Victoria's body smothering mine. Other than that intrusive thought, I enjoy the fact I'm not completely alone behind the steel bars that keep me locked in at night.

Victoria can be short with me, but she's the only person in the facility that gives me a sense of home. This is mainly due to her resemblance with my friend, Charlotte. The resemblance between the two isn't the physicalities, in fact they look nothing alike. Charlotte's hair is long, straight, and blonde, while Victoria's is a brunette, short bob with tight curls springing out of her head. Plus, Victoria barely hits my shoulders while Charlotte is taller than me, even if I wear heels. Instead, Victoria reminds me of Charlotte in the way you were friends with someone in middle school. There is a certain

vulnerability between two people who have seen each other with braces, acne, and the beginning stages of puberty where your breasts aren't full enough for an underwire, but a training bra doesn't offer enough stability. That's how I feel when I'm around Victoria, how I felt around Charlotte— a comforting feeling during a strange, foreign time that feels like it will last forever.



I had to move back to Emporia, Kansas after my landlord kicked me out, rightfully so. I hadn't paid rent for two months and after the third promise that my imaginary paycheck was on its way in the mail, the landlord told me to pack my belongings and find somewhere else to exist. It was embarrassing to be kicked out of the west coast, and it was even more demoralizing that I had nowhere else to go. So, I decided to pack my suitcases and cardboard boxes stuffed with winter pants and books into my 1986 Honda Civic and drive where life felt familiar.

After the long drive back home, I decided to go to the *Emporia Express & Go*, connected to the town's small gas station, to buy a chicken salad sandwich to appease my hunger. When I entered the shop, I saw the flash of a blonde ponytail perusing the aisles. I followed the ponytail in hopes its owner was a familiar face, but the ponytail had already turned the corner into the chip aisle. I followed. Holding two different flavors of *Lay's* chips, the ponytail's owner stood at the far end of the aisle, the ends of her hair tickling the exposed skin on her shoulders as she swiveled her head to look at the chip options in each hand.

"Charlotte," I said, walking towards her. Charlotte turned her body to face me, she dropped the chips, and rushed to meet me halfway down the aisle.

"Oh my god! Mary! I haven't seen you in like forever!," she squealed, hugging me tightly in the process. I returned her embrace.

"I know. Wow, it's so good to see you," I responded. Her face lit up as she examined my features. I did the same and found her skin was coated in a thin layer of grime. Her shoes had mud caked on the bottoms and her jeans had small rips decorating the fabric.

She broke our evaluation of one another, "So what is Mary Michaelson doing back in Emporia? I truthfully never thought I'd see you again after you left graduation with all your shit packed into that little toy car you used to drive."

"Well, I still have the car, but it seems I'm back in Emporia for the time being. The adults weren't lying when they told us it'd be expensive living on our own," I sheepishly responded. I hadn't felt the need to conceal my reasons for returning home, I knew Charlotte wouldn't judge my financial situation.

"Honey, I'm so sorry," she comforted, "You know I was exactly where you are now a couple years ago. I even spent a night sleeping on a bench till Benny took me in."

"Who's Benny?," I questioned.

"Benny's the best, he's so kind. He took a whole bunch of us in and now we all live at the Corn Fields. I love it there, we've become this great family. We farm the land and have all our meals together. I've never felt so loved. You know?" Charlotte gushed.

"That sounds like a good setup you've got," I replied. If you looked past the communal living, Charlotte's situation really did sound like a utopia.

"You should stop by sometime and check it out. Where are you staying in Emporia, now that you're back?," she questioned.

"Still figuring that out, but I'm sure I'll sort something out," I answered.

"Well, if you ever need somewhere to stay we're right off exit 91," Charlotte said. She gave me another hug and bent down to pick up the bags of chips. She gave me another smile as she exited the *Express & Go*, her ponytail swung side to side as she

walked away. I didn't respond, not because I felt like this was a definite goodbye, but because I didn't want to give up the hope I could get myself out of my current predicament.

With the closing of the door, I remembered my initial reason for entering. I retrieved my sandwich and made my way to the checkout. I took out my card and swiped it. *PAYMENT DECLINED*. I was officially broke. I couldn't even afford a gas station sandwich. How would I be able to pay rent and utilities? There was only one solution to my problem, and it had just been presented to me.

I ran out of the building and searched for the blonde ponytail. She was sitting on the bench beside the air machine for flat tires.

"Charlotte," I approached, "Is Benny taking anyone else in right now?," I asked.

She opened one of the bags of *Lay's* and popped a chip into her mouth with a grin.



Even though I would consider Victoria to be the closest thing to a friend here, I'm not sure she would classify me as a friend— an acquaintance possibly. More likely, Victoria would describe me as a scent that follows her around. I hope my smell would resemble a bouquet or hints of vanilla, but prison doesn't offer the best hygiene, especially when your bedroom and bathroom occupy the same square footage. Regardless, I choose to sit with Victoria during meal times.

"How'd you sleep?," Victoria asks me as I settle into my chair and place my plastic tray on the table.

"Not much," I reply. Victoria doesn't respond, so I choose to assess my breakfast for today. A thick oatmeal with minimal flavor, a slice of burnt toast, and a small carton of milk sit on my tray. We ate better at the Fields.

Victoria loads another spoonful of her oatmeal when a new recruit enters the cafeteria. She's big in the strong way where she could pick my body up with one hand and fling me across the floor. The woman glares at the rest of us in the chow hall, her eyes meet mine for a half second before I avert my eyes to the text on my milk carton.

"Mary, you make sure to stay clear of Lucky," Victoria motions to the strong woman, "You haven't seen her because she's been up in confinement. She's got a murder charge you know." I don't plan on interacting with Lucky, I don't have a death wish.

I'm grateful for Victoria's knowledge and when tells me information like that. Who to avoid, which shower has hot water longer, and when the guards make their usual rounds. Her guidance reminds me that I'm still a human being, even in prison.



My mom liked to say that I was the best gift she ever received. There'd be a hint of humor in her words but also some truth. On her 49th birthday, I was officially adopted into the Michaelson household. At four months old, I was the biggest responsibility they'd had for many years. Changing diapers, washing onesies, and sanitizing bottles left them exhausted. For most of my childhood, and life for that matter, my parents were tired. At dinner time they would let out prolonged yawns that made their eyes scrunch and water. After the dishes were cleaned and the leftovers were put into containers, mom and dad would retire upstairs to get ready for bed.

Growing up, I was left unattended between the hours of 8pm to 6am. It was glorious. Many nights I would try on all my dress-up clothes and wander around the house as an explorer. The bathroom was the Amazonian jungle, the living room a concert stage, and the basement was the underworld where Hades clawed at my feet.

One night, as I was practicing my long jump for the summer Olympics in the hallway, mom came thudding down the stairs. I froze. Her hair was flattened on the left side of her head and she wore her robe inside out.

“Mary! What are you doing up so late? We can’t sleep with all this noise you’re making. Go to bed!,” she chastised. It was just after 9pm. Wordlessly, I followed her up the stairs and slid underneath my covers. I kept my eyes shut for hours in hopes I would drift asleep. The sun rose. That was the last time I played make believe and my parents were awoken by my antics. They needed their sleep because they were endlessly exhausted. They were exhausted because they were older, then they were just old, and then they passed shortly before I left Emporia.



When I first met Benny, I thought he was extremely charismatic. Our meeting was after I was reunited with Charlotte at the gas station and I asked her about living at the Corn Fields. I drove my toy car while Charlotte sat in the passenger seat eating her bag of chips. She told me which turns to take to my new home. The last turn she told me to take was down a long road. It cut through miles of corn fields with green stalks that were eight feet tall. We drove through the jungle of kernels and hay to a large, brown, decaying barn.

I put the car in park and stepped out. Charlotte abandoned her empty chip bag, ran to the barn’s closed doors, and knocked three times on the splintering wood. The door creaked open to reveal an adult male. He was shirt and shoeless but his hair was combed back nicely. He wrapped his arm around Charlotte’s neck and brought her face to his. They kissed, and only when their mouths separated did he notice my presence.

“Benny, this is my friend Mary,” Charlotte informed him. He looked at my face, then my body, and then my face again.

“Well any friend of Charlotte is a friend of mine,” he proclaimed. He peeled Charlotte’s body off his and engulfed me in a hug. The bare skin of his back was coated in a light layer of sweat. As he ended the hug he gave me a cheeky smile and a wink that Charlotte couldn’t see.

“Thank you, Benny,” I said. The three of us then entered the barn. Inside, there were couches against the walls and carpeted rugs on the dirt floors. On those couches and rugs were dozens of people— some my age, some older, and a few children. They were all mildly dirty, like Charlotte, and I felt too pristine, too clean, standing next to them. That would change.



My first relationship was with an older man named Luke out west. We spent all our time in his loft with his dog watching movies. Luke’s favorite movie was *The Godfather*, mine was *The Notebook*. We never watched my favorite movie. However, we did watch the entire trilogy of Michael Corleone becoming absorbed in the Italian mob.

On Saturday nights, Luke insisted we watched wrestling. The strong men on the television bruised and bloodied each other, and when one of them was deemed the victor, Luke wanted to practice his wrestling moves on me. He’d flip me on my stomach and tell me to try and escape while he let his full weight go limp on top of me. It frightened me that I couldn’t move him off, that his body mass could keep me from moving off the bed. When he’d shown me that he was superior, he’d flip me over again and kiss my face and neck. Our Saturday nights ended with tangled limbs and sweaty foreheads.

He decided to end things after he asked me what I was doing when 9/11 happened. When I told him I had just been dropped off for Kindergarten in my mom’s minivan, his lips parted and his eyes searched my face. I assume he was looking for



signs of youth in my features. His eyes landed on my cheeks, how they were still full and I didn't have any lines across my face to show my experience on earth. He told me that he was driving to work that morning. Luke then told me he'd walk me to my car and that he'd reach out soon. Whenever I tried to call his phone after, the call never went through.



Benny said it was our duty as the People of the Fields to keep the corn growing. In the mornings, we'd harvest the corn stalks before the sun got too hot on our backs. After lunch, we'd shuck the corn husks in a circle, throwing the scraps in a big pile in the center. At dinner, we'd eat grilled corn and tell stories while we snacked on popcorn. This was my routine for the months I spent at the Corn Fields.

Our sanctuary was shattered when the pop-up amusement park arrived in the summer. Men driving big trucks flattened the corn stalks as they made space for their large tents and booths. They sprouted rickety roller coasters and placed a merry go round at the center of their destruction. Benny proclaimed we had to do something about it at dinner,

"These are *our* fields!," he yelled, "We're not going to let these outsiders destroy what we've built! Tonight, we're giving them the same treatment they gave us!" We put down our grilled corn and handfuls of popcorn. Benny placed mason jars with towels sprouting out of the tops in our hands. Then, he came around and poured gasoline in our jars and twisted the caps tight while handing out small lighters.

"When the sun goes down, we're taking back what's ours!," he rallied. We all raised our jars in the air and let out a battle cry.

When the sun had set, we ventured into the fields with our cocktails in hand. I didn't know exactly what I was meant to do, but I knew Benny was our leader and our

corn was hurting. So, I followed the group through the corn stalks until we reached the amusement park.

Wordlessly, Benny raised his jar in the air. In his other hand he revealed his lighter. He sparked the lighter and held the flame to the end of the towel. When the fire traveled the length of the material towards the lip of the jar, he chuckled the cocktail at a concession booth. The booth went up in flames, the tarp material turned into a billowing blaze of thick smoke.

“Light it up!,” Benny commanded. I took my lighter and lit the corner of my towel. With my jar in hand, I surveyed the park for a target. The merry go round sat untouched, the ponies frozen in mid stride. I grasped the glass material in my hand and hurled it at the carriage attached to a spotted horse. Instantly, the contraption was swallowed in flames. The horses’ manes and hooves were eaten in the fire. The mechanical innards of the machine were revealed, the merry go round was a skeleton of its basic functions.

The inferno we made kept growing. The surrounding corn lit up and the air was more smoke than oxygen. In the distance, I could hear the blares of a fire truck and sirens from police cars. I looked around at the scene and couldn’t find Benny, he’d vanished into the jungle of corn.



I wanted to be a mermaid growing up after visiting a tourist attraction in Florida. The mermaids were separated from the public by glass, but it truly felt like I was underwater and experiencing their world. They had purple and blue scaled tails and their hair was weightless in the water. Effortlessly, they swam against the current and did flips under the water’s surface. The audience clapped and awed at the enchantment of mermaids.

I placed my palm against the glass for the mermaids to do the same. Even though a glass barrier kept them submerged in the pool, it felt like I could feel the contact and pressure from their fingertips through the glass. They smiled sweetly and let small air bubbles escape their mouth and nose. After a few minutes, the mermaids would swim to the surface and disappear. However, moments later, a new set of mermaids dived down to entertain the crowd.

When I grew up, I learned that the mermaids were just normal, human girls wearing fishtails with chlorine burning their eyes. The magic of mermaids faded and the realization that life was a series of deceptions took form.



I'm swirling my spoon in my oatmeal when Victoria nudges my foot underneath the table.

"Lucky's coming right at you Mary," Victoria warns me, her eyes darting to the figure that's approaching me from behind. My eyes go wide, but I don't dare turn around.

Lucky's meaty hand slams on the table beside my tray. Surprised by her action, I drop my spoon onto the floor. Her mouth lowers beside my ear.

"I heard you're one of those corn freaks," she whispers, "Well are you?"

I keep my lips sealed. If I say something, she might use my words as weapons, and I don't feel like getting a black eye today. I look to Victoria for support. She's watching this interaction, but she doesn't make a move to intervene. Lucky's hand that's placed on the table pushes against my shoulder. I fall to the floor while the other inmates watch in anticipation.

"Hey I'm trying to have a conversation with you kernel," Lucky patronizes. I stay on the floor, scared that if I stand up she'll perceive my actions as an invitation to fight.

“Just leave her alone. She’s nobody,” Victoria interjects. I lift my gaze upwards to see Victoria has stood up from her seat. Lucky ignores my body on the floor and approaches Victoria.

“Why do you care? You said she’s a nobody,” Lucky’s fingers bend to form a fist.

“She hasn’t done anything to you,” Victoria retorts. Her conviction dwindles as she notices Lucky’s fist inch backwards. I must do something before Victoria is hit.

My abandoned spoon sits on the floor. I grab it and grasp the handle tightly. Unsteadily, I stand to my feet and raise my spoon in front of me.

“Lucky. Leave us alone.” My words lose volume as I finish my attempt at a threat. My spoon shakes from my weak arms. Lucky now approaches and stands inches from my face.

“And what’s that spoon gonna do?,” she mocks. Faint chuckles echo in the cafeteria.

Without a response, I take my spoon and jam it into her eye socket. Lucky lets out an ear splitting scream as she falls to her knees. Blood leaks out of her eye and onto the floor. I’m shocked at my actions, that I so easily blinded another person.

The commotion in the cafeteria causes the guards to sound an alarm. They start yelling for us to get on the ground and they raise their batons in warning. I run to Victoria’s side of the table and she clutches my shoulders, bringing our bodies to the ground. We lie with our chests on the floor, and I raise my head to look at Lucky writhing on the floor with a metal spoon sticking out of her eye. I then look at Victoria beside me, her face is stuck in a shocked expression with her mouth parted.

“You’re definitely not a nobody around here anymore,” Victoria informs me.

Eva Waldron

ENG 495 Fitzgerald

Manuscript #3

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\*Selected story from Pam Houston is *The Whole Weight of Me*\*

### Hell is a Hot Place

Some would describe me as an atheist. I prefer the term indifferent. I've never thought much about God or religion— except for the time I was so hungover I couldn't stomach oxygen. My head rested on the toilet seat while I tried to remember any prayers I could recite to hopefully end the spinning in my brain. I could only remember the tune to "We Three Kings," and the lyrics of frankincense and myrrh sent my remaining stomach acid into the bowl.

Usually, the times I reflect on God and the universe are at funerals. When my grandfather died of a brain tumor, I saw my father cry for the first time at his funeral. He sat in a pew of the church with his elbows braced against his knees and his forehead rested atop his balled fists. I'm not sure if he was in the prayer position or attempting to conceal his grief, but I made my own prayers that day that I hoped the dime-sized bald spot on the side of his head wouldn't become cancerous as he grew old.

Today, I pray to whatever's out there that I don't break down in choked sobs of tears and mucus at the service for Edith Richardson. Though I never met the woman, I always become an emotional wreck during times of collective suffering. Mom tells me

that Edith was the favorite mother of her friend group growing up. She'd have freshly baked chocolate chip muffins waiting for her daughter and her friends when they got home from school. Edith even let the girls have seconds. The thought of a warm chocolate chip muffin in my hand threatens a tear to slip out of the corner of my eye and down my cheek as my parents and I drive to Trinity Southern Baptist Church.

The parking lot is a sea of automobiles and black linen. The older crowds wear tights underneath black slacks while I pull at the ends of my dress to reach mid-thigh. As we walk into the church, Mom searches for Anita, and Dad won't make eye contact. We find Anita and her husband greeting the funeral attendees at the last row of pews.

"I'm so sorry about your mother, Anita. We all loved her," Mom consoles Anita in a tight hug. Anita's dark eyeliner is smudged underneath her eyes. Dad and Anita's husband embrace lightly the way men do by smacking each others' shoulders.

"Thank you for coming today. We knew this would happen soon, but the dementia made the ending much harder," Anita says.

"I know Ant, but it's nice you were able to spend her last days together," Mom responds. They hug tightly once more and Mom kisses Anita's cheek, whispering words of support into her ear. I stand silently on the periphery of their meeting. I feel out of place and wish I was never forced to attend today's service.

After being ushered further into the church's nave, we choose a pew to sit in. I'm sandwiched between Mom and Dad. Mom is wiping the remaining tears from her greeting with Anita, and Dad is looking straight ahead— he always becomes stoic at these events. For me, I choose to chip away at the nail polish coating my fingers to

distract from the weeping funeral guests. My lungs feel heavy and I'm acutely aware of how the seams of my dress tickle my skin.

The church is beautiful. Stained glass lines the walls and the sun's rays cast rainbows across the floor. Blue, yellow, green, orange, red, and purple dance down the church's aisle and across withered faces. Dozens of lily and chrysanthemum bouquets demand attention at the front of the church as they surround an enlarged picture of Edith. In the image, she smiles with closed lips, but her eyes are warm and comforting. My staring contest with Edith ends when Anita, her husband, and the pastor walk down the aisle to their seats. The church silences as the pastor stands before us.

"Welcome all. While this of course isn't ideal circumstances, Edith and her family are happy to celebrate her life with people she loved and who loved her," the pastor greets the congregation.

"I am Pastor John, for those I haven't met before, and I've been with Trinity Church for about twenty years now," he says, "Over my time here, I have never met a more devout Christian than Edith Richardson." Women with big hair and age spots nod in agreement.

"And because she devoted her life to Christ, we know for certain that Edith will spend her eternal life in heaven," Pastor John proclaims. His eyes are closed and arms raised high as he says his words. The congregation murmurs in agreement.

Pastor John continues, "Now, if you would all rise as we sing one of Edith's favorite hymns: 'How Great Thou Art.'" We stand from our seated position on the cushioned pews, some attendees using a crutch to aid their rise. Music plays from the

tall speakers stationed at the front, and a woman sitting in the front row with a microphone in hand takes center-stage.

She parts her lips to sing the lyrics, “Oh Lord, my God. When I, in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made.” She’s a horrible singer and her notes are off-key, but she continues to proudly sing Edith’s favorite song.

“I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder thy power throughout the universe displa—,” the woman stops singing while the music continues playing. The crowd shares looks of confusion.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I need to start over,” she says without explanation. The music halts and the church is deathly quiet for four seconds until the notes of the hymn start from the beginning.

Unknowingly, I’ve let a sly smile settle on my face. The situation is horribly awkward and unexpected, but no one else gives any indication they feel similarly. My grin leaves my face when Mom pinches the skin on my upper arm. I look at her stern face and she motions with her forehead to face the front and sing. I hum to the tune because I don’t know the words.

The woman hits the final high note of “thou art” into the microphone and the audience claps. *Is that proper etiquette at funerals?* The woman takes a bow on the stage. I’d think she was enjoying herself except for the downturned edges of her mouth and the scrunching of her nose. The woman and Pastor John switch positions on stage as she resumes her seat in the front row.



“Wow. I can feel God’s presence today!,” Pastor John rejoices, “But you know where you will never be able to feel him with you? In Hell. And let me tell you my friends, Hell is a hot place.”

*Is he fucking serious?* My eyebrows raise high as I glance at the people in the room. The older crowd is nodding furiously and whispers of *amens* echo off the stained glass. I look to see Anita and her husband shifting their body weight in their pews. Anita sits taller and her shoulders tense. Mom and Dad share a look across my frame. I notice most of the tears in the room have dried up and tissues remain laid in laps.

“We are all sinners!,” Pastor John shouts at the congregation. Edith’s picture behind his shoulder seems smaller now compared to Pastor John’s booming words. The funeral has become an indoctrination sermon for Christian guilt.

“We can never be God’s glorious children because we are human,” he continues.

The southern baptists have a way with words to make you feel like a bigger sinner than Pablo Escobar. *Does my inability to truly believe make me worse than the world’s most successful drug dealer?* Pastor John might say yes. Edith’s smiling picture makes me think she agrees with Pastor John too. Her eyes meet mine again and I feel transparent.

“But there is salvation. All I ask is you give yourself over to the power and authority of Jesus Christ,” Pastor John says. I ponder the option of devoting my life to Our Lord and Savior. No smoking, no drinking, no premarital sex, and no fun or joy whatsoever for the rest of my life. I’ll pass.

My previous anxiety about having a breakdown at Edith’s service has turned into a lecture I didn’t want or consent to have. Dad takes a prolonged breath in and expels it

out with a deep sigh. He then snaps his neck to the right, the crack of his neck rings in my ears while Pastor John continues to reinforce we are all akin to criminals and sinners.

“Edith Richardson. A heavenly woman who will live peacefully in eternity. May we all strive to be and live like Edith. Amen,” Pastor John finishes. He raises his Bible high in the air and makes eye contact with each funeral guest. When his gaze meets mine, he purses his lips and bites the inside of his cheek fat. I know I’m made to feel guilty and I deserve to burn in the lava pits of hell, but I don’t. Instead, I smile with teeth and picture hitting him over the head with the Bible in his hands. He shifts his sight to the next sinner until every attendee has been faced with the intensity of God’s general.

Pastor John lowers his Bible and resumes his seat. The singing woman takes the stage again with her microphone, and the tune to ‘How Great Thou Art’ fills the church.

“And when I think that God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die,” she screeches into the microphone, “I scarce can take it in that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin.”

Her lips are pressed against the microphone as she sings the words, the clink of her teeth against the electronic bulb echoes from the speakers. As she finishes the last note, she raises a pointed finger in the air and points to the ceiling. Her finger stays raised as the music comes to a close. When the church is silent, she opens her eyes and brings the microphone to her mouth again.

“At this time, you are all invited to the Fellowship Hall for finger foods and refreshments,” she announces. The woman steps off the stage and marches down the aisle toward the Fellowship Hall.

The rest of us follow her lead and towards a back room where deviled eggs, coldcut sandwiches, and iced tea wait to be devoured. Standing in line for my glass of tea, I listen to others' conversations.

"That was a lovely service," one woman wearing a black blazer comments.

"Edith would've loved Pastor John's kind words," an older gentleman says.

"Yes, his words were powerful," another attendee remarks.

I would chime in, but I feel my true words would leave them astonished. Dad finally makes eye contact and speaks to me,

"Can you get me a cup? I want to get to the turkey subs before they've run out," he says. He doesn't wait for a reply as he walks across the room to the sandwich table.

With our glasses of iced tea in hand, I sit down across from Dad at a folding table. He's already halfway through a sub, dipping the bread in a pile of mayonnaise, and his dark tie is thrown over his shoulder to keep the fabric from dragging in the condiment. I place his glass in front of him and he picks it up, swallowing the tea and bread in one gulp.

"So, what do you want to do today?," Dad questions. *What do I want to do today? Didn't we just do what needed to be done?* I shrug my shoulders and sip my iced tea. Dad doesn't attempt to further the conversation, he only asked to fill the silence.

Mom is hugging Anita again in the corner of the Fellowship Hall. They hold each others' elbows and are talking intensely. A line of withered women wait behind Mom, each wanting to express their condolences. The room is a combination of side conversations, chewing of stale bread, and slurps of chilled tea. I sit in my chair with my feet grounded on the floor and wait until lunch is over.

When it is finally time for us to depart, Mom hugs Anita one last time, and Dad sneaks a turkey sandwich wrapped in napkins into his pocket. We load into the car and the black, leather seats are boiling from the hot sun. The seat's material burns the back of my thighs and the condensed heat in the car makes my upper lip sweat. Mom starts to complain about the air conditioning— how it's not cool enough and how Dad is hogging the air vents. The backseat doesn't have any air vents, so I put my window down all the way. Mom and Dad continue to bicker as we drive away from Trinity Southern Baptist Church. The breeze from my window has a minimal effect to aid my overheating, but the wind lifts my hair off my clammy shoulders and I feel lighter.

“Put that damn window up. You're letting all the cool air out!,” Dad demands.

I reluctantly obey and close my sole source of fresh air, and I choose to tie my hair up into a ponytail. Our family car is a hot place to be after Edith Richardson's funeral service.

## Reflection Paper

I was nervous entering ENG 495 this semester. Prior to this semester, I had only completed one fiction writing class at JMU, and I felt maybe I wasn't ready for an upper level writing course. However, this class has made me a more empowered and informed writer and reader.

With the apprenticeship, I was able to hone my abilities and style into one project, that project being Pam Houston. I was initially drawn to her and her work through her ability to make mundane actions seem more exciting and beautiful. I feel I like to write this way as well with my word choice and the lyrical tone to my writing. As my relationship with Pam Houston grew, I felt she was the perfect author for me to apprentice this semester. I love how she straddles the line between fiction and nonfiction, and I think I was subconsciously doing this in my own writing. Additionally, what I really liked about her writing is how she doesn't feel the need to inform or submit to the reader what they would want to read. She unapologetically writes what she feels and connects with, and she writes with freedom. This is something that guided me when I wrote my manuscripts this semester. I didn't want to have to hold my reader's hand or get too in my head about small details and how the dots connect. In the past, I've been a more analytical and a research writer because of academics and assignments. But, with my Creative Writing minor, I've entered a new faction of writing surrounding creativity and what a writer's style really is. In my presentation, I detailed my writing style as keeping my reader 'guessing' and wanting there to be an underlying meaning or interpretation. I like to write this way because I read more critically where I want to find out what the author is saying between the lines on the page. I felt I read Pam Houston's

stories more critically and I loved how each individual reader assigns a story meaning because of experiences in their own lives.

For the first manuscript, I think I did a decent job at copying Pam Houston's prose. In my manuscript, *Jaywalking*, I focused on making my sentences and scenes more jarring because Pam Houston typically has shocking sentences sprinkled throughout her stories. Pam Houston also utilizes the blank spaces on the page to indicate time changes and past memories that aid the context of the present. I copied this as well with my flashbacks of Claudia's parents and Claudia and Teresa's past friendship. With this manuscript, and with most of my writing, I had some difficulty with the ending. I wasn't necessarily happy with the ending where Teresa is hit by a car because it feels a bit rushed. However, I wanted to show through the ending that friendships can be complex. Claudia struggles with hating and being concerned about her ex-best-friend, and I wanted to show this struggle with her inability to do anything when panic ensues. Additionally, with this manuscript, I struggled with inserting dialogue because Pam Houston didn't include a lot of dialogue in *Waltzing the Cat*—the story I paired with my first manuscript. However, I think my dialogue in the story is adequate for the characters and their conversations flow naturally.

With the second manuscript, I wanted to have fun with the "randomness" of the structure. Following Pam Houston's *The Best Girlfriend You Never Had*, I mainly focused on the in-and-out of the past and present of the story's structure. I diagrammed the past and present and focused on following that pattern, but I wanted to have lots of creative freedom for my manuscript's plot. That's where I came to the storyline of *Nobody*, where a woman joins a corn cult and is ultimately jailed after lighting a

merry-go-round on fire. I also had a lot of fun with the past memories in this manuscript. The blonde ponytail, corn fields, older boyfriend, and the mermaids offered a lot of creative freedom and different, smaller stories I have been wanting to write about. Additionally, I thought the past memories made it a more interesting story for the reader because they had to think about how the past got Mary to where she is in the present. Following this structure of past and present was relatively easy, and I loved how it gave me more opportunities for creative freedom.

For my homage manuscript to Pam Houston, I wanted to play with this line between fiction and nonfiction. In Pam Houston's writing process, she adds aspects of her own life and her imagination. In my last manuscript, *Hell is a Hot Place*, I took a recent experience I had and embellished a lot of the details and characters. This writing process of weaving the personal and make believe was very easy, and I found my fingers couldn't keep up with my brain and everything I wanted to get onto the page. With this manuscript, I wanted to keep Pam Houston's advice about connecting with the world and the five senses on the forefront of my brain. I tried to include lots of details about sight, touch, and hearing throughout the story and different characters. I chose to pair my manuscript with Pam Houston's *The Whole Weight of Me* because I could tell this character and their experience in the story is very personal. My story about attending a funeral is also personal because 80% of the story is based on my experience. With this line between fiction and nonfiction, I mainly tried to keep with the basic facts of the experience, and the fiction came in with enhancing each character and sometimes making up something that seemed interesting in my head.

I have transformed into a more confident writer and reader this semester.

Through the apprenticeship and Pam Houston's influence, I have a better sense of "how" to write. As a reader, I have a better understanding of reading a story and giving feedback through our critiques and workshops. I loved coming to class every week and workshopping stories because I could feel myself becoming more of a writer surrounded by similar creatives. Going into future writing classes, I know I won't have as much self doubt and nerves about my writing and sharing what I create with others.