

[Don't] Step Away from the Edge:  
Anticentric Fiction in a Logocentric World

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## Abstract

Often, the way a story is written reflects the importance that the writer or the writer's audience places on logos—the Western idea based in the work of Plato and Aristotle that the words and their construction in a story hold one meaning. But, as Ferdinand de Saussure argues, there can be no one meaning for a word because the ideas, objects, and emotions that they represent are defined by that word's “not” relationships with other attempts of representation. In logocentric writing, there is no questioning of meaning, but rather a faith in reality, an acceptance of established tradition, a submission to logic, and a desire for order and evidence. Based on the work of Jacques Derrida and theories of deconstruction, this project challenges the belief in the infallibility of language. This capstone employs a new type of writing—termed “anticentrism”—and explores the idea through a collection of four original short stories. Anticentric writing lacks a center, finds meaning in the periphery of the text, allows for open meaning and has a structure that is perhaps “illogical” but, surprisingly, cohesive. Anticentric writing provides an alternative to closed, immobile text and reflects the “play” created by putting words to paper.

## Table of Contents

I. Anticentrism.....	5
II. “Ten Things I’ve Never Once Regretted Doing”.....	14
III. “Breakfast”.....	23
IV. “Stop Think”.....	27
V. “Love Fool”.....	35
VI. Critical Analysis.....	43
VII. Bibliography.....	48

## I. Anticentrism

“One says ‘language’ for action, movement, thought, reflection, consciousness, unconsciousness, experience, affectivity, etc. Now we tend to say ‘writing’ for all that and more: to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself”

- Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

### Introduction

Writing involves, at the simplest level, putting words to paper. It is the process of organizing letters to form words and words to form sentences and sentences to form paragraphs in order to elucidate the thoughts, feelings, and experiences individuals have on a frequent basis. But how those words make it to the paper, how the words are organized—if at all—and the assumptions under which those paragraphs are constructed can vary. For centuries, since the time of Plato and Socrates, most writing has been thought of as fixed in regard to both structure and meaning. But with the rupture that accompanied the rise of ethnology, it became evident that writing is not immobile, but, rather, full of play. Realizing the range of mobility that exists surrounding the meaning of both the individual word and the text, the fallibility of language and the lack of essence, truth, or presence is suddenly revealed.

Thinking and writing (and subsequently reading) in terms of deconstruction affect the significance of creative writing. Understanding that written language is not constrained to time, the limits of a concrete signifier/signified relationship, and even a traditional story arc allows those involved in the experience of writing—the author, the reader, and the critic—freedom of interpretation. Unexpectedly, writing is no longer bound to the logic, reason, convention, and order of what will later be explained as *logocentrism*, and the identification of meaning is opened.

### What It Meant to Write (Conventionally Speaking)

Traditionally, writing operates as “the unity of the phonè, the glossa, and the logos” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 29). Writing is merely a secondary convention that represents speech, which is, in fact, merely another representation—though the most “accurate one”—of an actual experience. According to Western, metaphysical thought, every person has “mental experiences.” These experiences are shared or “translated” through spoken language, where speech serves as a “first signifier” and as the most exact one because of the voice’s close connection with the mind. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 10-11). Written language, however, is yet an additional step away from these mental experiences—which Western philosophers falsely claim are the same for everyone—and is a representation of this first set of signifiers (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 11). Indeed, Plato and Aristotle called writing the “sign of the sign” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 29).

Greek philosophers—and those who expound on their thought systems—would argue that written language is but an imitation of what they would call the “truth;” it is “repeating without knowing,” steps removed from the reality of experience they value most highly (Derrida, *Dissemination* 74-5, Plato, 71). For Socrates, writing is, in essence, “going or leading astray”—a “pharmakon” of language—and is dangerous for those readers who are unable to differentiate between what is written on the page and the presence it is trying to capture in words (Derrida, *Dissemination* 71). But because writing cannot be stopped, guidelines were provided as to how to best construct a written narrative. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates claims that “every discourse (logon), like a living creature...should be so put together...that it has its own body and lacks neither head nor foot, middle nor extremities, all composed in such a way that they suit both each other and the whole” (Derrida, *Dissemination* 80). The desired discourse—if there must be

one—is writing that follows a logical, reasonable path based in reality, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

This emphasis on logic and what has become the traditional story arc is the basis of what French deconstruction theorist Jacques Derrida terms logocentrism. In his *Of Grammatology*, Derrida summarizes this ideology that he says has dominated the way writing has been constructed for thousands of years as the:

metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example the alphabet) which was fundamentally—for enigmatic yet essential reasons that are inaccessible to a simple historical relativism—nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, controlling in one and the *same* order: 1. *the concept of writing*... 2. *the history of the (only) metaphysics*... [and] 3. *the concept of science*... (3).

Logocentric writing relies on reason and rationalism to relay events to an audience. If a person is to write logocentrically, they follow a simple progression of A happened, then B, then C, until they reach the end of their story, Z. The first sentence begins in the beginning, and time follows progressively, and preferably, evenly.

But logocentrism is not only concerned with the temporality of writing; it also affects how meaning is drawn from language. Structuralists argue that a word, a variable combination of letters, serves as the full and only representation of an object, thought, emotion, or concept. The phonetic construction society has designated for an idea or thing is the encapsulation of that idea or thing's fundamentality; it is, in fact, the only way it can be expressed.

This word/“signifier” – concept/“signified” relationship is the manner through which the essence-being of the idea should be expressed when the actual object cannot be presented itself (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 90-1). However, as Ferdinand de Saussure makes clear in his *Course*

in *General Linguistics*, the signifier chosen to represent the signified is arbitrary: "...it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (69). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is founded in the desire to express the sensible and intelligible, but the signifier that has been chosen to correspond to a particular signified is not organic to the idea. In other words, the use of the word "computer" that signs for the machine used to type papers or search the internet was not inevitable. Despite this potential random assignment, the two elements, the signified and the signifier, are so intertwined once decided upon that they become merely "two sides of one and the same leaf" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 13).

For structuralists, this sign relationship, this use of written language, is infallible. A tree is that thing—and only that thing—that is planted in the ground, grows from a seed, develops roots and a trunk and leaves and sometimes flowers, and provides shade for the people sitting under it. There is no other possible, correct *definition* of the combination and repetition of the three letters "T" "R" and "E." In logocentric writing, there is no questioning of meaning, but rather a faith in the established tradition of the complete sign relationship to make the mental experiences uttered in speech "intelligible."

### **The Two Ds: Différance and Decentering**

But there is alternative writing, writing that seeks to upset this blind, unquestioning methodology established through metaphysical, structuralist thought. This writing challenges both the infallibility of language and what Derrida has termed "the structurality of structure."

Any word is essentially a series of "not" relationships with other attempts at representation. There can be no one, absolute definition of a word, because each idea, concept, thing, or emotion can also be identified by what it is not. Let's return, briefly, to the word "tree."



Not only is a tree something that grows from a seed and provides shade, it is also not grass, not earth, not sky, and not a bush. As Derrida puts forth in “Différance,” “the one is only the other deferred, the one differing from the other. The one is the other in différance, the one is the difference from the other” (Derrida, “Différance” 399). Words are essentially binary oppositions, whose existence is found in the contrast between the term and its opposite. For example, a pen is not a pencil; left is not right; love is not hate; female is not male. These fundamental differences comprise how the signifier is actually able to differentiate the thing, idea, or emotion it signifies in phonetic language.

Derrida described this opposition between terms as différance; it is an “assemblage” of the “play of differences between a locus and its operation” (Derrida, “Différance” 385). It accounts for the space that exists between a word and its foil and comprises all of its meanings at once. This différance is not the essence that structuralists argue exists in the formulation of a word (Derrida, “Différance” 390).

As such, it is impossible for one word to single-handedly fill-in and fully encapsulate the meaning of anything—an idea, a concept, an image, or a single object. Derrida writes “what we do know, what we could know if it were simply a question of knowing is that there never has been and *never will be* a unique word, a master name” [emphasis added] (“Différance” 405). A simple illustration can be taken, ironically, from the reality of life itself in order to identify the problems of logocentric writing. How can a society or an individual writer say that the four letters “L” “O” “V” and “E” are capable of summarizing succinctly and in only a few brief lines the range of human emotions and definitions that are attributed to the word? What one person may define as romantic love may not be what his neighbor has in mind at all. Thus, even if

attempts were made, it would not be possible to ever create a singular, “master” definition for the word “love” as long as difference in interpretation and *différance* exist.

Now apply this fallibility of language to the level of the story. A person writes a creative piece and two people read it. There is a setting, a protagonist, plot, a time sequence, theme, and point of view. But the meaning that the first person takes from the story is completely different from the one of the second individual. The first reader believes the story is about the deception of romantic love while the second reader argues that it is concerned with the significant impact a father-daughter relationship has on the child’s love relationships. Is one reader right and the other wrong? Can a story only have one meaning?

The answer is, simply, no. Writing has a multiplicity of meanings. Just as it is impossible to attribute one meaning to a signifier, there is not and never will be one meaning for a story, because writing has no center. In fact, the idea that writing revolves around a central origin or an “organizing principle” is a construct meant to reduce the anxiety surrounding the play resulting from *différance* and the potentially mobility of a text. As framed in Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,”

The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *free play* of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the free play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. (278-9).

The center limits the play of the text within the boundaries that the supposed origin places on itself while writing searches for the essence, or being, of the text—even though it does so externally, because the metaphysical center exists both within and outside of the writing's structure (Derrida, *Writing* 279). It contains the meaning of the written language and restricts the totality of the piece. With a centered structure, endeavors are made to identify a definitive meaning through an analysis of the restricted partial play of words.

However, this center was undermined when people first began to consider what Derrida calls “the structurality of structure” (Derrida, *Writing* 289). Indeed, the center exists only for the sake of the structure and does not precede the establishment of the text. Rather, the center is a “nonlocus” and can be described as “an infinite number of sign-substitutions” as one center replaces another based on the system of the sign (Derrida, *Writing* 280-1). The inability of language to be constrained shows how it supersedes control and margins.

As a result of this lack of center, the direction the text follows is not limited. There can, in fact, be a lack of organization. Suddenly, writing can start at C and jump to J then move to U before going back to D. But this unreasonable structure that results will still have meaning, as the conceptualization of what the text signifies is no longer limited to the logos.

Thinking of written language as having a decentralized structure that challenges absolutism “inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition, but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that logos” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 10). The process changes the response of both the writer and the reader to the text and phonetic writing and challenges both parties to explore and reconsider periphery, absence, the existence of any truth, and the meaning of meaning.

### **Anticentrism: A Writing of Lacking**

So how then can this writing that lacks both meaning and structure be created? Can this “writing of opposition” be formulated? And if so, what are the characteristics of such writing?

As previously stated, creative fiction is often limited by the author’s engagement of a traditional story arc. That is, after all, how most people are instructed to tell a story: relay events logically. Start at the beginning, and go from there. It is sensible, reasonable, singular in meaning. But what if a person starts in the middle of the action? She starts her narrative at the midpoint and then relates some of the beginning and then forwards to the end, and then repeats. Creative writing that chooses to be figurative—that employs techniques such as metaphor, metonymy, and *in media res*—can challenge the traditional structure of logocentric writing. Not only can the structure of the story, the plot, veer from the convention of A to Z, it can also toy with the idea of absolute meaning on the level of both the word and the story. Certain attempts at creative writing can directly challenge the established signifier/signified relationship and idea of centered meaning.

Writing that challenges structuralist and logocentric thought will be termed “anticentric.” Anticentric writing embraces Derrida’s decentering; its assembly may be “illogical,” but it is, surprisingly, cohesive. Meaning is found in the periphery of the text. It does not pretend that the meaning the author “intended” for his or her story is the absolute meaning, but rather asserts that it is just one meaning in a group of many. The word anticentrism describes that writing Derrida argues is necessary “to twist free of the logocentric writing” that is, “to write...in such a way as to renounce this ideal” that language is in fact an immediate sign (“Deconstructionist Theory”). As such, anticentric stories do not insinuate that they operate around a core—there is no center—and each of the multiple meanings that can be pulled from the work is valid.

It is important to note, however, that any attempt to even create a term for a style of writing—anticentric though it is—is the epitome of logocentrism. As Derrida explains, “it is impossible to fully deconstruct the metaphysical, logocentric structure of written language without using words and a structure that is the result of logocentrism in the first place” (*Of Grammatology* 33). Consequently, it cannot be assumed that this definition of anticentrism is absolute by any means. Rather, this incidence should be viewed as an opportunity to understand the inherent shortcomings of a logocentric approach towards discourse outlined above.

What follows are four stories that attempt to challenge the logocentric methodology often employed by authors, essayists, and story-tellers. Each story is an experiment in anticentrism. Each piece varies in content, character, length, and style, and plays with structure in order to contest the traditional organization of creative writing. All four stories have open meaning and toy with concepts of opaqueness, allowing the reader the opportunity to interpret the individual piece’s significance on subjects of deeper meaning. By exploring unorganized structure and employing devices such as metonymy and metaphor, the stories that ensue both undermine logocentrism and probe the boundaries (if any) of anticentrism as a creative form.

## II. “Ten Things I’ve Never Once Regretted Doing”

1. Eat pizza with double mozzarella at Pizzeria da Michele in Naples, Italy.

Everyone should have the chance to explore Italy. The history, the wine, the fashion, the food, the men—*everything*—about the country is spectacular. Now my dear, you’ve spent the past seventeen years in one form of school or another, and—like your father—you’re always striving towards a goal, but I think it’s time you took a little time off. And we all know my opinion’s the most important one there is.

The first time I went to Italy was with my third husband, Peter Ramano. (Ask your mother about him. She hated Peter, and rightly so. He was a bit of what you’d call a pretentious asshole.) Peter was half Italian and half Irish and spent most of his summers in Cala Galera as a child. So when we went there for Christmas one year, Peter took me to see all the major cities of his fine country: Rome, Milan, Venice, Florence, and, of course, Naples. One night for dinner, we went to la Pizzeria da Michele, and he ordered us a pizza with double mozzarella. Now you know I hate when other people order for me, but before I could protest, he pushed a piece in my mouth and, darling, I died. It was simply divine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> So why really eat pizza in Naples? Well the fact of the matter is, you can eat pizza anywhere you damn well please (though this kind is certainly the best). But in a time when calories are constantly being counted, people consider shit like Slim Fast an actual meal, and your boyfriend tells you to try to look more like that Amanda Seyfried (for your information my dear...if you don’t want other people to know this type of thing, your mother is not the person to confide in...), I want *you* to know that sometimes the best thing this entire world has to offer is cheese and bread. So eat up.

Also, as a sidenote, never date a man who wears pants with critters on them. I learned the hard way with Peter that almost every time, that’s a sign of a man who thinks always with his wallet, often with his dick, sometimes with his head, and seldom with his heart.

## 2. Learn how to make lemon meringue pie.

Fifty years ago, my mother instilled in me the importance of lemon meringue pie,<sup>2</sup> soon

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<sup>2</sup> Today, you turn 22. When I was your age, and for a long time before then and for a long time after, I thought that the only way my life was going to mean anything to anybody was if I was able to do everything and anything at all times and always perfectly. I went to college thinking that I had to get perfect scores in every class. That I had to be editor of the school newspaper, have a large group of friends, exercise every day, volunteer at a local nursing home (because the elderly are people, too), and be engaged by the time I graduated. And I had to look incredibly good while doing it. My idea of success, my dear, was being a goddamn Martha Stewart. Except, of course, she wasn't around back then. But that's neither here nor there.

So as a result, I graduated at the top of my class, a size 4, with a big diamond ring on my tiny little finger. We had a wedding in a church at the end of the summer with 150 guests. I wore a white dress. Your grandfather wore a suit. We moved into our cute little home with its cute furniture and cute backyard that our cute parents paid for. We were cute for a year, going to dinner parties, vacationing with our in-laws, throwing birthday parties for our nieces and nephews. Your grandfather played baseball with his friends, while I went to lunch with my girlfriends and shopped for baby clothes for your mother. And then your grandfather, being the upstanding young man that he was, decided to go to Korea while I stayed home and picked out the china we'd use to feed our future family at holiday dinners. Very all-American, no?

But as it happens, one day in the middle of November I received the news that your grandfather wasn't coming home. Suddenly I found myself three months pregnant and husband-less, picking out a headstone instead of a porcelain serving platter.

The next day, my mother came down from Sacramento and informed me she'd be staying for as long as she saw fit. She helped me make food for the guests who slowly filled up our cute little house, and she hired a maid to clean the bathrooms and make the beds in our cute bedrooms. And after the funeral, she threw me a baby shower and finished the nursery and took me to the hospital when I had your mother. And even though six months is already an awfully long time to live with your grown daughter, my mother stayed for the rest of the summer to make sure I knew what I was doing. "After all, Addison," she'd say, "babies are not play-things."

Then one day in August, she came home from lunch with my Aunt Carole and the news that she had invited Walter Preston to dinner the next evening, because it was, in her opinion, time for me to move on and find a father for your mother. She said she'd take care of everything, and that the only thing I needed to do was put on a nice dress and make dessert. She suggested lemon meringue pie because she heard it was Walter's favorite, and don't we all know that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?

Back then, my dear, I was fairly complacent, even when I didn't want to be, and I quietly agreed that it'd be a wonderful thing to have Walter over, and that while I'd never made lemon meringue before, there was no reason not to try now. But the next day, somewhere between the egg whites and the sugar, the yellow flowered dress and the fuss my mother made over the curl in my hair, I realized that lemon meringue pie and matching silverware and a perfectly-clean bathroom and Walter Preston were all bullshit. I ended up laughing on the kitchen floor, with a spatula in my hand and your mother crying in her high-chair. It was the perfect scene of despair. And when your mother wouldn't stop screaming, my mother ran into the kitchen only to freeze in the doorway when she found me dirtying my dress on the floor.

"Addison!" she screamed. "What the hell are you doing down there? Walter will be here any minute."

And then I said the six words that changed my life forever—more than "I love you" or "I do" ever did—"Mother," I paused, trying hard not to laugh, "fuck Walter Preston. And you."

There's a reason your mother didn't know her grandma very well. Some would call this conversation a breakdown; I would call it a revelation. My dear, that lemon meringue pie was one of the best things to ever happen to me.

after I started my own family, and I made sure your mother knew exactly how to make it before she left for college. The recipe for that pie your mother makes every Easter Sunday? Mine. (I know.) Now since you're about to graduate, you're a little behind in the game (and, frankly, I'm shocked your mother hasn't taught you yet. She usually jumps at any opportunity for tradition). But not to worry. Not. To. Worry. The lemon part of the pie is fairly easy, and the only time it gets a little difficult—besides the crust, which is a whole other problem—is with the meringue. You have to add the sugar to the egg whites at just the right time and very slowly. I will admit it takes patience. And you can't even think about trying to make meringue in a humid kitchen—the peaks won't have a chance at standing.

So the next time you're home, have your mother show you (after all, it could be one of those bonding experiences she always talks of having). But it is a rule that every Dunn girl knows how to make this pie. And my darling, it's your turn.

### 3. Learn how to put my foot behind my head.

Flexibility is imperative.<sup>3</sup> Like me, my dear, you're on the tall side, and for people like us, there's nothing worse than bad posture. I didn't want to say anything, hoping you'd self-correct, but, my darling, your posture is atrocious. So do yourself—and me—a favor and stretch.

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<sup>3</sup> Let's talk about a skill that will get you places. After the Walter Preston debacle, I took a more laissez-faire approach to my love life. And I have found that flexibility in more ways than one is a necessary requirement for a good time. For confirmation, please see James Nordland, Michael Horner, Lionel Kirschner, Benjamin White, William Chivers, Ed Templeton, Harry Jackson (he was a cowboy), Burt Reynolds, Peter Ramano, Sasha Mortenson, Jimmy Burns, Philip Matthews, Aaron Edwards, and Sven Jansson. And yes, I do mean Burt Reynolds.



4. Say yes to everyone and everything for a day.

Do you know how many times a day you say no? I counted the last time you visited...it was nine. “No I don’t want a bag for that.” “No receipt, thank you.” “I don’t need another credit card, thanks.” “I don’t eat white bread.” “Sorry, I already have perfume.” “I’m okay on the wine, thank you” “No, I’m happy with my current religion.” “I’m just looking, thanks.” “Do you want to grab dinner?” “I’m absolutely flattered you’d ask, but no, I’m sorry, never.”

But I want you to think of how different your day, and maybe even your life, could have been if you would have said yes, at least once or twice:

- i. You might not have had to carry so many boxes. Granted you may not have been as green as possible that day, but, really, my dear, why choose a lifestyle that leaves no room for laziness?
- ii. You could have had an accurate record of your spending for once (and your father probably wouldn’t have yelled at you so much for buying all that you did).
- iii. You could have gotten enough points at Saks to be halfway to a new pair of shoes.
- iv. As for the roll...well, don’t ever eat white bread. It’s absolutely terrible for you.
- v. You could have had smelled like Ralph Lauren.
- vi. You could have been intoxicated, which would have made me feel like less of an irresponsible adult.
- vii. You could be a Jehovah’s Witness, right this very moment, traveling door to door.
- viii. You may have actually listened to an experienced saleswoman—instead of ignoring your mother and me—and now you wouldn’t be stuck with those god-awful ugly shoes.

- ix. You could be in the midst of a four month relationship with a guy named Avery. I know you're with Sam right now, and I am definitely not promoting infidelity. But Avery is an attractive sounding name. He also had an excellent ass. Which can be nice.<sup>4</sup>

5. Open a library.

Now, there's no polite way to say this, my dear, but most people you run into in this life are idiots. They lack common sense, basic intelligence, and the worst part is they couldn't give two shits that they don't have a clue what's going on in the world.

Somebody once said that "a library is a hospital for the mind." Books are the key to knowledge and with knowledge comes the responsibility of action, and with action comes change. We need a lot of change. So we had best start educating everybody.<sup>5</sup>

6. Learn yoga.

I've taken the liberty (as I so often do) of talking to my teacher about places in Palo Alto for you to try out if you decide to stay there—and I very much hope you do, the views I have when I visit you are just outrageous. Terry says there are over a hundred studios within a 25 mile radius of the city. So really, darling, you have your pick.

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<sup>4</sup> In March of 1971, my three best girlfriends and I decided to go on a Mexican vacation. Then we woke up one morning, and my childhood friend Gail suggested we say yes to everyone and everything for the entire day. Twenty four hours later, we found ourselves three hours down the coast, parked at the top of a beach, with 42 coconuts in the trunk of our car. And three weeks later, already well readjusted to the daily routine of our lives, we learned that Gail had come home with a little souvenir even more permanent than the tattoo she got in Mazatlan.

<sup>5</sup> I was an English major against my parents' wishes, my brother's advice, and my sister's intuition. I was a volunteer shelver at a library for three summers as a teenager. I broke my high school science teacher's heart when I told her I wasn't going to be a nurse. Your mother's and uncles' middle names are those of great literary characters. This is the type of thing an inheritance is for.

Also, as a rule of thumb, if you do decide to go, never wear those loose fitting t-shirts. As with most things in life, baggy is not always better, and you don't want everyone there seeing your business when you're doing a downward dog.<sup>6</sup>

7. Ask someone out on a date.

Research has shown (and by research, I mean sixty years of liking boys, three last names accrued over the course of eleven years of marriage, and countless boyfriends) that in general, asking a guy out is not necessarily a "turn-on." Some guys are intimidated by it; they think it's too forward or maybe even a little threatening. (But really, darling, you should never seriously date someone who's intimidated by anything outside the social norm.)

But while it may be risky, I can promise you that it is always a compliment for the guy when you decide to ask him out, and it will positively make you more intriguing. I can also promise you that the sky won't start falling if you go up to a guy and say, "hey do you want to get dinner tomorrow night?" In fact, something good will almost always happen, and, at the very least, you'll have a reason to go to a nice restaurant. Look at your very own grandmother, I asked out Ed Templeton all those years ago, and while it led to a marriage that may have been the greatest sham of a union, I now have your two uncles. And a house in Malibu.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Listen, my dear. Your mother's anxiety was a gift from yours truly. And from what I hear, you're well on your way to therapy. So when your shrink suggests medication, and your best friend tells you that you should probably drink more, just remember there's a Gateway of Life and that you need to breathe through it.

<sup>7</sup> Frankly, I'm afraid your mother has made you meek. I know this is my fault in a way—after all, her entire life is a conservative reaction against mine—but I cannot watch you follow her lead and not care that life is blatantly passing you by. Asking a guy out is so much more about you than it is about whoever you decide to take to lunch. The last thing I want you to do is spend your time acting like some sort of wallflower. Wallflowers are trampled on or walked over. And the last thing they are is seen. And, my dear, the world deserves to see you.

## 8. Protest.

Our government leaders become stale at an incredibly fast rate. And it's important that we, the people they represent, keep them on their toes. So when there's something that we disagree with, it is our job as citizens to tell our politicians that they're not doing theirs. So march on the Capitol—not everybody's cup of tea, though I highly recommend it. Call your representative. Email. Write a letter. Go to a town hall. Attend a rally. Donate. Sign a petition. Vote. (Your mother tells me she doesn't think you voted in this last election. If you did, but don't want her to know you voted for a liberal, then it can be our little secret, but if you didn't vote at all...well then, my dear, that's worse than voting republican.)<sup>8</sup>

## 9. Learn how to change a flat tire.

There's nothing like getting caught on the 10 and having to wait for AAA to send out a guy to not just fix your tire, but try to ask you out to dinner while he's doing it.<sup>9</sup>

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When you break up with this current boyfriend of yours—which I do hope is soon, because, frankly, my dear, the guy is an ass, and unlike your mother, I don't care that he'll have a Stanford medical degree in four years—what you need to do is ask a guy that you maybe, sort of, kind of really like out on a date. For dinner, for coffee, for alcohol, whatever beverage (or food) you prefer.

Because taking charge of one's romantic adventures and, ultimately, one's life is thrilling, though terrifying. It must be done.

<sup>8</sup> This one is simple, my dear. Find your voice, and use it.

<sup>9</sup> As a girl, it is necessary to learn how to change a flat tire. It has been my experience that guys like to paint themselves as knights in shining armor, ready and willing to save us, the damsels in distress, at all times. They'll willingly step in to do anything they deem "manly," like take out the trash or kill the occasional spider that finds its way into the shower. And we of course let them, simply because it makes them feel good about themselves. They don't usually stop to consider that we have two hands and are more than capable of doing such things. After all, how do they think the trash finds its way to the curb when they go away on business?

But learn how to fix a tire, my dear, because one day when your gentleman friend is not around you may actually need to know how to do it. And because it can also come in handy when someone, say, your father, thinks that you are incapable of living on your own (read: without a man).

After your grandfather died, and I refused to rebound into another marriage for the sake of your mother, my father came down to Long Beach—which was just such a big to-do because he hated the ocean—to tell me that I was, in

In plain, non-mechanic English, this is the easiest way to do it. First, pull over to the side of the road—not in a deserted spot, my dear—and make sure the car is in park. You should also put rocks behind the other three wheels in case the car decides it wants to roll away. (This may seem obvious, darling, but you’d be surprised by all the idiots out there.) You’ll need a spare tire, a jack, an empty pipe, and something called a lug-nut wrench (your Uncle Michael knows where to buy these things). Remove the hubcap, and loosen the lug nuts on the flat tire, but don’t take them off. Then you’ll have to jack up the car. Make sure the jack is on pavement (no sand), and place it in the slot behind the tire you need to replace. Take out the lug-nuts and then the flat tire, and put it in the trunk (the flat, not the nuts). Put the spare tire on so that the air pressure valve faces out, and tighten the lug-nuts by turning to the right. Bring the car back down to the ground, put away the jack, and finish tightening the lug-nuts. Put the hubcap back on the tire, and you’ve got yourself a new set of wheels, sunshine.

#### 10. Do something illegal.

Do something you’re not supposed to. Or allowed to or expected to. Now I’m not talking about stealing cars or tax evasion or anything like that, and, usually, rules exist for a

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his own words, bat-shit insane. (You can see my penchant for vulgarity was learned.) He spent most of the week yelling at me to find another husband, spewing off the names of sons of his friends back home and pointing out guys when we went out to dinner. Or the grocery store. Or the park. On the afternoon before he left and after I told him for the hundredth time I was more than capable of taking care of myself and your mother, my father stopped what he was doing, looked me in the eye, and simply said, “Prove it.” He had run out of arguments, or maybe steam. And so he carried your mother while following me around the house as I took out the trash, changed a light bulb, fixed a leaking pipe, cut the grass, washed the car, and oiled a door hinge. After surveying my handiwork, he then grabbed the sharpest knife I had from the kitchen, passed your mother on to me, told me to follow him outside, and walked right up to my car and stabbed the tire. Before I could call him an idiot for destroying a perfectly good piece of rubber, he took back your mother and said, “Go ahead, Addy darling, fix that.”

And when I did it without his assistance and faster than he had ever thought possible, my father just stood there and said, “Well damn, Addison Dunn, I guess you’re not as crazy as I thought.”

It’s the small victories, my dear.

legitimate reason. But sometimes the best thing you can do is break them. For the rest of your life, my dear, the government, your friends, your co-workers, your parents, and your grandmother, are always going to have opinions about what you should or shouldn't do.

Everyone's going to have advice and suggestions, and often they'll have rules and expectations. But the world will not come to an end if one night you decide to be illegal.

There are too many other problems for us to focus on. So don't be afraid of what might happen. Trespass. Steal something. Drink in public. Speed. Jump in a fountain.

Live big. Don't get caught.

And whenever you pass a property that says "please don't step on the grass," please do.

Piss those idiots off.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Let me take you back to when I was your age. One of my college roommates—Lenore—was an astronomy major at Smith. A huge damn nerd. And senior year was a little rough for her—she broke up with this idiot she thought she was going to marry and her classes were hard, etc., etc.—so for her birthday we decided to have a rather large party. The four of us lived on a house on campus, and you weren't allowed to have any parties after 11 and no more than 20 people could be in the house at one time. And obviously, we weren't allowed to have any boys over after 10. So at 11:15 when we were just about to take our party elsewhere, we heard the assistant warden knock on our front door.

I answered the door with a drink in one hand, your grandfather's hand in the other, and a bow on my head. (It was a costume party; I was a present. I was also a fool. Don't judge.) I, of course, thought it would be a wonderful idea to invite her in and pretend like nothing was happening. When I asked her if I could make her a drink as I waltzed back towards the kitchen, she followed me saying, "Well, Addison, I'd just absolutely love to see what's going on here." So I swung open the door, and there were 40 people, half of whom were boys, not even trying to hide and a layer of beer on the kitchen floor. After Miss McGuire had sufficiently kicked everyone out, reprimanded the four of us, and told us she expected the entire house to be clean for a 9 am check-in followed by a 9:30 meeting with the actual warden the next day, Lenore was ready to throw in the towel on her birthday. Granted we had just been yelled at, our parents would have to be informed, and we were more than likely going to be fined large sums of money. But it wasn't even midnight.

So instead of cleaning up the kitchen, the three of us dragged Lenore out of the house and went over to the Amherst campus. Lenore had *the* biggest crush on one of your grandfather's friends, Jackie McLaughlin, and he was head over heels for Lenore. Jackie and some of the other boys had gone back there, and we thought it was only fair that Lenore still got her birthday present. So while I went to get the keys to the field house, one of my roommates picked up Jackie and a large collection of blankets, and the other went down to wait with Lenore. When we all met up, we passed the keys to Jackie, stole a blanket and a bottle, and promised to keep watch for the rest of the night.

My dear, that entire night was against the rules, and if we would have gotten caught, there's a good chance the four of us could have been arrested and Jackie expelled. But we were fine. And it was one of my favorite memories of all of college. And one of Lenore's favorite memories of all time. Four times in six hours? My dear, that's a fantastic night.

### III. "Breakfast"

Kathryn watches the clock strike nine o'clock, four, five, six. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Marina waiting in the corner for her and Geoffrey to finish eating, for dishes ready to be cleared away.

"Geoffrey," she starts, cutting her cantaloupe with the edge of her fork. "Our relationship has become rather absurd, don't you think?"

Perhaps she should care more that Marina can hear everything. But then again, Marina probably knows more than the two of them have ever given her credit for. Marina has probably been waiting for this conversation for years.

"What do you mean, darling?" Geoffrey asks, then adds, "Pass the orange juice?"

"Well now really, Geoffrey, look at the two of us." She hands him the pitcher. "I'm on my third affair, and your newest girlfriend is my lunch date at the club tomorrow..."

Geoffrey refills his glass. "Well at least you're friends with this one."

"Well yes, Geoffrey, you did pick an interesting one this time around. At least there's some substance to that perfectly styled head of hers."

"I'm glad you like Lara, my dear. And I thoroughly enjoy Jackson. I get free golf lessons from him, you know."

"I do try to be economical. But, really Geoff, that's beside the point," Kathryn looks over at Marina. She thinks about whispering. She decides there's no point. "I mean, we've always been a sham, Geoff, but now it's like we have no shame. We don't even pretend to sleep in the same bed anymore when we have overnight guests. I just think it's a bit ridiculous. Are you even listening to me?"

“I’m sorry, darling,” Geoffrey folds his newspaper in half. “It’s the President. He’s being an ass again.”

“Well he’s a Republican, Geoff. What do you expect?”

“Indeed. So,” he looks up and through his glasses. “We’re shameless, are we?” Kathryn affirms with a shrug into her sweater. “And what exactly would you like us to do about this?”

Kathryn scrapes the bottom of her yogurt and holds the spoon on her bottom lip. “I don’t know. Maybe a party? We can get Caroline to do the invitations, hold it in the garden. People love garden parties these days. And we can invite Lydia from *Q*. I’m sure we could get a nice spread in June’s issue.”

“Well, yes, darling. But why not do something even more exciting than a garden party?” Geoffrey smiles. “Something shocking, even? Something people would never see coming. We could renew our vows.”

Kathryn’s spoon hits the table. “Oh I like it Geoffrey. Like one of those surprise weddings that all of the celebrities like to do. I don’t think we know anyone who’s done that yet. We’d be the first.”

“And we do like being first.”

“Of course.”

“Do you think the children will be for it?” Geoff asks excitedly.

“Why don’t we ask Marina? She’s clearly been listening this entire time,” Kathryn turns towards her right. “Marina? Come here, my dear.”

Marina gracefully, quietly moves over to the table.

“What do you think Marina? Do you think Grace and David would enjoy a good wedding?”



“I don’t know Mrs. Hall...” Marina’s accent is still thick.

“Really, Marina,” Geoffrey interrupts, putting a hand on her soft, old arm. “You’ve been with this family from the beginning. Kathryn and I want your honest opinion.”

“Well, Mr. Hall, Mrs. Hall.” Marina looks up. “I’m sure it’d be a beautiful occasion and a wonderful party. And Grace and David would love to show off the house to all of their school friends. But I don’t think anyone would honestly believe you love each other for a second.”

Mr. and Mrs. Hall look at her and then at each other and laugh.

“Oh my god.” Geoffrey turns back to the seasoned maid, clapping his hands, “Marina, you know us too well.” He looks to his wife. “I mean really, darling, Marina is completely and utterly correct. No one would ever believe a damned moment of it.”

Tears roll down Kathryn’s cheeks as she nods in agreement. “Especially if we invite Jackson. And your whore of the moment.”

Geoffrey continues laughing. “Kathryn, I think we should do it. The whole nine yards. Embossed invitations. Party favors. A live band. A sit-down dinner. It’ll be better than the original.”

“And the best thing” Kathryn says, wiping away a tear. “And the best thing will be that they’ll all pretend like it’s the most romantic event they’ve attended in ages. Jacqueline Simpson will come over to us and say, in her fake RP accent.” Kathryn stops to take a drag from her invisible cigarette like Jacqueline Simpson does from her real one. ““Kathryn. Geoffrey. Really dahlings, this is the most splendid wedding I’ve been to since Margaret and Edward’s. And even theirs pales in comparison. And by the by, who did your flowers?””

Geoffrey finishes the scene. “And I’ll grab your hand and say, ‘Do you know, Jacqueline, my darling, that all of this was Kathryn’s idea? How lucky am I? To be sharing my life with such a wonderful woman?’”

Kathryn is really laughing now, “I’ll just smile and shake my head, and say ‘Now isn’t my Geoffrey the sweetest thing?’ Or is that too much?”

Marina sighs and shakes her head. She reaches for the bowl of fruit sitting in front of Kathryn, untouched except for the one piece of cantaloupe cut in half. “Are you done, ma’am?”

Kathryn doesn’t even bother to look at the trusted old maid. She waves her hand toward Marina, in the kind of way that says “I’m finished.” She looks up at Geoffrey, still laughing and says, “Of course we are, darling. Why, we were done before we even started. Isn’t that right, Mr. Hall?”

Geoffrey, trying to catch his breath, looks at his wife of thirty one years. “Mrs. Hall, I don’t believe we ever stood a chance.”

#### IV. “Stop Think”

“You ready?” he asks. We’re in the front seat of his car. We were supposed to be in his bedroom right now, but then his parents came home early from their double date with the mayor and his wife at the drive-ins. Apparently, they didn’t have a back-up plan for the forecasted rain.

Tonight, Cory Robbins and I are supposed to do it. We had it all planned out. We went to dinner in Rexford and then we rented a movie—*A Walk to Remember* because it’s my favorite and Shane West is super attractive—and then we’d still have enough time to go at it. Then his parents came home, and they think he’s driving me back. Except we’re actually in the far corner of the school parking lot.

\*

“Angelica Marie,” Amber said when I told her our plan. “Not a good idea.”

“Just because we’re twins doesn’t mean I’m going to get knocked up, too.” I replied. Three months ago, Amber gave birth to Brianna. Our grandma watches her when we’re at school or when Amber’s working at the Target over in Latham. You wouldn’t know that Brianna has a dad except for the few times every couple of months he decides to come visit with his mother so that she can have some sort of relationship with her illegitimate granddaughter.

Andy left Amber right after Brianna was born because he decided twenty-one was too young to have parental responsibilities. It didn’t matter that Amber and I were only sixteen at the time. Or that it was his kid, too. It seems the only real commitment Andy can handle is his job at the Wal-Mart loading docks, and he’s not even very good at that. So, you know, it’s not his problem that Amber has to finish up high school so she can eventually be management material at one of America’s finest retail outlets. He left her without warning or money, trying to balance motherhood and teenage-dom all by herself. She practices her *Julius Caser* speech while giving

Brianna a bath. She adds the finishing touches to our “sexy senior” t-shirts while trying to warm up formula. (The irony is lost on no one.)

So while Amber’s busy being the twin who is a living example of what can happen when you have too much fun, I’m busy being the brainy, weird one. I’m the one who gets good grades, who’s overly involved, who does the grocery shopping and works two jobs. I’m the one who’s going to go to college while Amber stays here with Brianna and tries to find a replacement father for her daughter. I’m the one who’s only supposed to visit during major holidays and occasional weekend trips home because I’ll be able to afford them when I’m out working in California or Atlanta or Boston.

Both of us know this is how it’ll be, too. Before Brianna happened, Amber and I used to plan trips to see each other in what would be our newly adopted hometowns. I’d fly to Miami to visit her and we’d spend all of our time at the beach, drinking margaritas and flirting with guys that were too tan. Then Amber’d come visit me in New York City, and we’d visit museums and meet guys with dogs (who were also, preferably, doctors) in Central Park. But then, suddenly, Amber was pregnant (though our grandma likes to say she saw this coming ever since we hit puberty), and we started talking about the swings at Central Park rather than the dog-walking doctors and my trips home for 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> birthday parties.

I’m pretty much okay with being the good twin. After all, every set’s got to have one, right? Hallie and Annie. Benji and Joel. Mary-Kate and Ashley. I’ve been the good one for so long that I don’t know any other way to exist. I mean, Ashley can’t all of the sudden just develop an eating problem and join the ranks of young women with problems. She has to maintain the twin status quo. And honestly, when I look around at what I’ll be leaving behind in the next year or so, I can’t say that I’ll be too upset. Weddings are really the only exciting thing that happens

in Schenectady anymore. Whenever anyone dates anyone for more than six months, people automatically assume that there will be a reception to attend in the next year or so. Last year, when Amber and Andy were still together, everyone thought they were going to go all the way. Even Amber. We'd all be sitting in the cafeteria at lunch and Shelley and Marie would lean in real close and ask Amber if they should start looking for dresses. It was so stupid. Like any marriage at the age of sixteen (or twenty-one)'s going to last.

Because Amber was the "fun one," she got to do all of the exciting things when we were growing up, while I covered for her and her frequent mistakes. When we were six and playing soccer outside, Amber kicked the ball so hard it broke our neighbor's garage window. But I was the one who went over to the Lincoln's and apologized while Amber hid behind the shed. In the third grade, Amber put a wad of Bubbalicious bubble gum in Sandy Schaeffer's hair because she called our then-alive mother a drunk. When Sandy threatened to tell Mrs. Lakowski, I cut the gum out of her hair in the girls' coat closet myself and then promised to give Sandy twenty pogs and my Lisa Frank slammer to keep her from squealing. When we were thirteen, Amber stuffed lace underwear up her sweatshirt sleeves at the Victoria's Secret at the Mohawk Mall while I distracted the sales lady by spraying all the tester perfumes at once. (I'm still not allowed to go in there.) And during our first two years of high school, Amber would sneak out of class to drink, make out with Billy Dunlap under the gym bleachers, go to Wendy's, or watch Maury Povich on the WB, while I would tell our teachers she was at an appointment.

I was the one who took care of Amber every day she was pregnant. I was in the room with her when she told Andy, and then when he left her crying on the porch steps. I was there when she told our Dad about the baby, which resulted in him chasing Andy out of the trailer with one of his guns. (One of the best moments of my life.) And when Amber threw up or needed a

sonogram or missed school or had to pick a name, I was the one who sat beside her and told her everything would be all right. (Though for the record, Brianna was never in my top ten.)

Sometimes, though, I think it's time for Amber to cover for me. After all, I've done it enough for her. Which is why Cory's currently on top of me, waiting for an answer, and she's at home telling our dad that I'm sleeping over at Chiara's house.

Anyways, I think I did a pretty good job picking Cory for my first time. Not like there are many suitable options in this town. But as with every big decision I make, I did my research and am certain that Cory's the best guy for the job. He's in all of the higher level classes at school (a.k.a. he's a nerd so I'm sure he's all sorts of excited that he's going to get any type of action). We're not in all of the same classes together, so if things don't go so well, I don't have to see him that much, and he's on the tennis team, so he's got endurance—a lack of which Amber always complained about.

But maybe the biggest reason I decided on Cory was because he can actually hold a conversation with me. I have a problem being around people who I think are idiots. For example, once Andy and I tried to have a conversation while we were waiting for Amber to finish applying her eyeliner, and this is how it went:

“You know, Ang,” he started. “For being twins, you and Amber sure as hell aren't anything alike.”

“Wow, Andy. I had no idea you were so observant.” I looked up into the rearview.

“Look. I'm just saying, you know, that maybe you should loosen up a little bit. Take some of that edge off.”

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean, people would probably like you more.” He smiled to himself. “You could probably get a boyfriend. Hell, maybe you could even get laid.”

I then watched him check his teeth in the mirror and scratch the back of his neck. He was gross. “You know, I think I’ll take my chances.”

See? So stupid. But Cory doesn’t say shit like Andy. We actually talk about things that matter. Like college. Or soccer. Or movies. Talking to Cory doesn’t make me want to curl up into a small ball and die like talking to Andy did. So I think he’s one of the few guys I could’ve picked for the big night.

Plus, if Cory thinks of telling anyone about this, I know for a fact that he peed his pants during eighth grade gym class, and I am not above sharing that knowledge with the school during morning announcements. Which I’m in charge of. Bam.

\*

The other day, Amber asked me if I was nervous.

“It’s going to hurt like a mother,” she said.

“Well it’s got to happen sometime. I’m the only one of our friends who hasn’t done it yet. Might as well be now.”

“You don’t even love Cory. It won’t mean anything.”

“Well I’m pretty sure I like him a lot. And Cory already told me that he loves me. So he’s all for it.”

“Cory loves you?”

I rolled my eyes. “And why is that so surprising?”

“You’ve been dating for, like, two seconds.”

“Please. I’m incredibly endearing.”

Amber sighed and switched Brianna to her other hip. “Are you even on birth control?”

“We’ll have condoms. It’ll be fine. We’ve got it all planned out.”

“Yeah? Is he gonna take you to the Red Robin beforehand?”

“No. He’s taking me out to Rexford. Then he has something planned for me back at his house—which we’ll have all to ourselves. And really, Amber, you’re in no place to judge here. Andy took you to the quarry for your first time. Plus you’re the one with the baby.”

“Right, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

Amber thinks that Brianna is the perfect reason not to have sex and often likes to mention that while she loves her daughter, she wouldn’t be stuck in Schenectady if she didn’t have her. And while the sight of Brianna’s birth and the experience of staying with Amber during the numerous mornings she needed to vomit before going to school might be enough to deter some people from sex for years, I have no intention of being stupid about the whole thing. So I’m not that worried.

\*

“Angelica? You there?”

“Give me a sec?”

I forgot Cory was there.

\*

I don’t know. I mean, if we’re going for honesty here, it’s not like I really like Cory all that much. He’s really nice to me and everything, and we get along real well. And we always have fun when we’re together, but I’m not very attracted to him. I still picture him as the twelve year old kid who asked to copy my English homework before Mr. Kearns’s class. (I was mad skilled at diagramming sentences.)



It's just that I never had someone who liked me enough that they wanted to do it with me. Or at least said they did. Don't get me wrong, I thought Amber and Andy were disgusting most of the time they were together. (They liked to make it real awkward and fool around on the bottom bunk when they thought I was asleep or whenever they thought I had my headphones on. I could always see their reflection in the plastic mirror hanging on the back of the closet door, though, and it was bad. Andy was kind of overweight and had bacne, and Amber wasn't very flexible.) I was never jealous of Andy in particular. But I always thought it'd be nice for someone to like me as much as he seemed to like Amber when they were together. I imagine it'd make you feel wonderful. And I've never felt wonderful.

If my dad had any idea what was going on in my life (he thinks my biggest concern is what we're going to eat tomorrow night) I'm sure he'd probably tell me that I don't need to sleep with some boy to feel good about myself. Or that I can't depend on another person to make me happy. Or that I'm wonderful just the way I am. But, frankly, there's a difference between your father telling you that you're awesome and a boy who's generally thought of by the high school population as within the limits of social acceptability.

And what's more, I am fully aware that just because Cory says he loves me now or thinks I'm pretty fantastic at this very moment, doesn't mean that he'll love me forever. And because of this, I don't see why I necessarily have to wait for anyone special to come along. From both personal experience and observation, every guy will cheat on you, shortly lose interest in you, or have commitment issues that prevent him from planning anything more than a week in advance. So even though Cory says he loves me now, I wouldn't be so surprised if, in a few months from now, he decides that Christy Sanders has a better chest than me and starts spending all of his

time with her. I mean, wouldn't it almost be worse for me to sleep with some guy I actually care about than someone who I know will forget about my existence in two months?

So when I have the chance to cross this sex thing off the list, I figure I might as well go for it. Who knows when this opportunity's going to come along again?

I sure as hell don't.

So I've read my Cosmo. I've stretched. I even bought a bottle of Nair. I'm more than ready for this to go down. Granted a car's not the most ideal place for it—a bed would be nice—but at least it's a VW and not a Chevy.

\*

"Ang?" Cory leans back and looks down at me. "We don't have to do this, you know. We can just hang out here. It's not a big deal."

I stop, think for just a second. About a high school parking lot and my senior year and the groceries I'll need for tomorrow night and Amber and Brianna. But it's only for a second, and then I smile, grab a hold of his shirt, and pull Cory Robbins back down.

## V. “Love Fool”

My mother says she believes in soul mates and perfect matches and leagues and lofty ideas like that. If she were a teenager now, she'd probably be the type that takes all of those compatibility quizzes; she'd probably check off boxes in shiny magazines. Are you way too picky when it comes to guys? Are you enough of a bad girl? Then again, my mother is the type of woman who picks the mascara off her lashes when she thinks no one's looking. She dyes the front of her hair blond and the rest of it dark brown because she thinks it's trendy. Cute and cutting edge. I want to tell her she really looks like a middle-aged fool of a woman. The type who, when you see them buying a cheesecake from the freezer aisle, you assume is only for her. First you judge them, and then you feel bad for them.

So I can't.

Because I do just that: I judge her, and then, almost immediately, I feel sorry for her. Because my mother is the type of person who believes that the pathetic excuse of a man—who also just happens to be my father—is actually worth the energy of a single thought. I can't tell her she's ridiculous in her bedazzled denim jacket, and I can't tell her to stop pulling at her eyelashes. Instead I just watch her in the passenger seat, looking out her window as the world rushes past. I watch her fidget with the stop of her earring and pull at the pleat in her off-white pants. (Because that's what she does when she's nervous.) And she's oblivious of the fact that I can see her out of the corner of my eye. She doesn't realize that our trip today is worthless. That my father doesn't deserve her or me or my brothers. That making a three hour drive to see him during his four allotted visiting hours is giving him much more than he has ever deserved.

But he's your father! you say.

I say I don't care. I say he stopped being my father the moment he decided that his "habits"—which is what he always called them—were more important than the rest of us. Because isn't that just the thing that dads aren't supposed to do? Every choice they make, everything they decide—shouldn't their main concern be the kid sprawled on the living room floor drawing with crayons, just waiting for them to come home and ask about their day? He was more concerned about getting his next fix than my brothers' baseball game. So, no. I don't care that I'm tall like him or that we have the same color hair. Or that when I laugh at something really hard, my voice disappears and my eyes start to water, just like his. Because he's not my father anymore; he's just a man I see every 30 days whose eyes I just happen to have.

But I digress. We pass through Weiser and then through Emmett, and before I know it, my mother turns to me and goes, "Only 30 more miles, Jess. We're almost there." With every mile, she gets more excited. She continues on about what she thinks he'll be wearing and if he'll have a beard this time. Clean shaven—it just really doesn't suit him, does it? That's not how she pictures him, you know? "I like him with a beard, Jess. A big dark beard with those flecks of grey in it. When he shaves that face of his he looks like some goody-too-shoes, a boring 9 to 5 kind of guy." (Why yes, of course, a stable job would just be so terrible, wouldn't it? I mean, good guys who work 9 to 5 probably come home to their families when they're done at the office. Good guys probably play ball with their sons and have tea parties with their daughters. And, we most certainly would not want that.)

And when I don't respond, my mother leans forward, the seatbelt cutting into the soft top part of her chest. She turns on the radio, finds her station, and sings along.

Because Billy Joel and Elton John make everything better.

She mouths the words and occasionally messes up, trying to hide it by turning towards the window when she doesn't remember the lyrics. Life comes at her, faster and faster; catches up with her and matches the speed of that crazy world passing her by. The past twenty years come to a head, and she finds herself confronted by what her life has come down to: a monthly car trip to prison. But rather than taking it, accepting it, or even challenging it, she ignores it. Makes it more tolerable by blasting the music and singing off key. Sometimes tapping her fingers along the inside of the car door.

Life, after all, has no concern for us. We're just in the way. But it would be wonderful, wouldn't it? To tell life, "Stop. Please, wait. I'm not ready. Let's sing the Piano Man instead."

Is this how we're supposed to be? Is this what my life or your life—because I know you're thinking about this, too—will be ten, twenty, thirty years from now? Is this what my mother wanted all those years ago? It can't be. But. If she would have known this is how she'd end up, with two boys that don't talk to her except when they're in trouble, a husband in jail, and a daughter who can only stand being home for two days at a time would she have changed her mind? Would she have put her tiny little foot down, touched her pregnant belly, and said to my father, "I'm sorry, Irv. No more"?

I can picture it now. My mother with her long hair in braids, five months pregnant with me, twenty-one years ago, walking barefoot through the house and picking up sweatshirts and dirty socks.

"What are you doing?" he asks. Standing, useless, in the living room. He doesn't know what to do with his hands.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she grabs cans of soup out of the cabinet. “I’m done. We’re leaving.” Never angry, never loud. (That’s the thing about my mother, she doesn’t fight. Or yell or explain. She just gives up.)

“So you’re taking the boys?” my father checks, just to make sure.

“Of course.”

And my father, like my mother, is unable to articulate how he feels or what he wants, or maybe he’s just too lazy to try. He takes the keys off the hook by the door and says before leaving the house, “Call your mother and have her pick you up. You’re not taking my car over to that hellhole.”

And just like that we leave my father’s life before I’m even in it. It’s better that way. My mother tells my brothers when they get home from kindergarten that we’re spending some time at Grandma’s house. No, Daddy won’t be coming too. They complain at first, but when she reminds them that Grandma makes cake whenever we visit and that our cousins are already there, they cheer up and make sure she doesn’t forget to pack their toy cars.

But this, of course, did not happen.

I tried once to tell her that he wasn’t worth it. That we should forget about him. A few days after he was shipped off to prison, I started to pack up his clothes and put away the things he’d left on the kitchen table. It was as if he deliberately left them there, his way of saying, “Hey. Don’t forget about me. I’m coming back.”

And it worked.

“Jessie, don’t,” my mother said when she saw me throw his magazine into the trash bag I was holding open.

“Why not?” I move into their bedroom and start on his side of the closet. “Don’t you think it’ll be a little out of date in eleven years?”

“Stop being a smartass.”

“I’m not letting you leave his shit here, Mom,” my voice louder than I intended. “He left us, remember? So I think we can throw out a goddamn piece of paper that he wrote on.”

“Jessalyn Kelly,” my mother said calmly. (If she’s really mad, she’ll swear to God.) “I swear to God, if you get rid of one thing of your father’s—one thing—you are leaving this house and not coming back. He is my husband and this is my house and I get to decide what stays and what goes.”

Four years later, his stuff is still on the counter; his clothes still take up half the dresser. After all, my mother says it’s only 2463 more days, right? 1369 if he behaves himself.

My father’s things aren’t going anywhere because my mother believes now, like she did back then, that he is her soul mate. The Antony to her Cleopatra. A modern-day Catherine and Heathcliff: destined for one another, but kept apart by life—that miserable, plotting son of a bitch.

So, growing up, when my father came home three days later than he was supposed to or when he missed my brothers’ basketball games because he was too high to stand up or when he was asked to leave my eighth-grade graduation because the principal could smell the alcohol on his breath, my mother stood by him. She cleaned up his vomit, showered him, and learned not to ask questions. Every time, my father would cry in her arms because he disappointed us and her once again. Every time, my mother would say it’s okay and that he’d get clean and that he better not do it again because she couldn’t imagine her life without him.

Every time, my brothers would go to their friends' houses and spend the night and maybe the next one and the one after that, depending on how angry they were with my parents for letting this happen again. They'd ask me if I wanted to come along, but I never did. Instead I'd run down the street to my aunt's house because she was a nurse and she was my mother's best friend and, unlike my parents, she always made me feel okay.

"Aunt Carol!" I'd yell when I'd reach the front yard. "Aunt Carol! Aunt Carol! Aunt Carol!"

She'd open the screen door and meet me at the top of the porch steps, "He's sick again, isn't he?"

"Yeah. Mom's with him. But I thought I'd come get you."

But, once, on a ten-degree day when my aunt had worked the night before, all she did was resent the fact that she had an addict for a brother. She grabbed her coat and then my hand and said the truest words I've ever heard: "You know, Jessie, I love you. And your father. I really do. But most of the time, he's a worthless asshole."

So. Soul mates? you ask. Really? you ask. Yes. Soul mates.

When I was in high school, my twelfth grade English teacher made us read *The Symposium*. In it, Aristophanes said, that, originally all humans were joined together. They had four arms, four legs, and one head with two faces; he called them "twin souls." But Zeus, that greedy, self-centered god, was worried that humans were gaining too much power and might eventually rival him for control of the universe. So he split them up. The King of the Gods created pairs of people—two women, two men, or a man and a woman—who were meant to be together; who, in essence, completed one another. And as a result, humanity was condemned to spend the rest of their lives looking for their other half, looking for their soul mate.



When I told my mom the story at dinner one night, I called Aristophanes a moron. She called me a judgmental, unforgiving snob.

Love ruins your brain. Turns it to mush. Erases any and all standards you may have had for other human beings. Behavior you wouldn't stand for in a friend is suddenly excusable. Because all you can do is think about Brian or Jamie or Evan or whoever. Your boss asks you a question, and you don't have an answer because you were thinking about what you'd wear when you met Sonny later that night. Brad's forty-five minutes late for the dinner you made him and he has a shit of an excuse, but you overlook it because you want him to spend the night. Or you're suddenly my mother and you don't know where your husband's been for the past 48 hours. You're raising three kids on your own and all your money goes to support his love, not for you, but for bourbon and a large amount of coke. But he stumbles in one night in the middle of dinner—noodles with ketchup because you can't afford the pasta sauce—and instead of kicking him out, you put clean sheets on the bed.

But let me ask you this: when did sleeping alone become such a bad thing?

I want to tell my mom that there is no such thing as a soul mate. That she's wrong. That Aristophanes was wrong. That all those Lifetime movies she watches and Cinderella stories she reads has given her unreasonable expectations of love. That while Heathcliff may have been The One for Catherine and vice versa, love is never an excuse to let someone treat you like shit.

I want to tell my mother that it's all about timing, not meeting someone when you're sixteen and calling it a day. That anyone can be good for anyone if it's the right moment. I'll admit that my father may have been wonderful for my mother when she was young and when the biggest responsibility she had was to get to her part-time job at the local Sonic on time. He may have been just right for late nights and sneaking out and drive-in movies and stealing from the

convenience store. But he wasn't right when it was time for her to leave Barrett. And because he didn't want to get a new job or make new friends, she stayed and raised her family in a town where the only growing business was the liquor store.

When I told my mom that my first real boyfriend, Chris, and I were over, she said he was weird like me and that I'd regret leaving him for as long as I live. But Chris was made for the Jessalyn who went to high school dances, who had first dates and kisses and nights and "I love yous." Not for the Jessalyn who wanted college and different countries and had big dreams and plans of leaving Idaho.

I want to tell my mother that Chris was my Irv, right for me when I was sixteen, but not so great when I wanted to get out. I want to tell her that I made the right decision when I learned from her mistake and left him on his front porch with the ring he had given me the night I graduated high school. That the life I have two states over and 600 miles away from Barrett is so much better than the one I could have ever had only two miles away from her.

But then I look at my mother all dressed up in her turquoise top and painted nails and I put the car in park and say, "Here we are."

## VI. Critical Analysis

Each of the four stories presented above are attempts to produce antientric writing. Some are more successful than others, or perhaps more exemplary of antientrism than their counterparts, but each story is an exploration into the characteristics and qualities of antientrism outlined above—highlighting, to varying degrees, mobility of the text and the multiplicity of meaning.

“Ten Things I’ve Never Once Regretted Doing” is essentially two stories within the frame of one. The textual story—Addison Dunn’s list of memorable life moments—is a birthday gift for her granddaughter. Addison gives a reason for each life experience’s appearance on the list, but she supplements each with an additional story in the footnotes. The life experiences chosen by Addison are varied; sometimes it is as simple as making a lemon meringue pie, while other times, the task at hand is more complicated or requires significant amounts of time, money, or resources—opening a library, for instance. But it is important to note that the list is not meant to be one for Addison’s granddaughter to check off, but rather to inspire her granddaughter with the life of a woman who lived, generally without regret, outside the bounds of traditional social norms. While the “recommendations” provided in-text are more directed towards the granddaughter’s life (Addison found yoga studios for her), the footnotes provide more valuable insight into Addison’s own character and why she values what she does. The information provided in the supplemental provides another story for us and the granddaughter. It is in these footnotes—one for every story—that we understand the actual reasons Addison chose each event. Sometimes the footnote takes the reader down a completely different path than the one explained in the main text (see footnotes one, nine, and ten, for example), while other times, the footnote expands on the event’s significance in her life (see two, five, and seven).

This duality presented in “Ten Things,” two stories within one, undermines the logical progression of events found in the logocentric structure of a story. In fact, it is impossible to even diagram a plot line for this piece, let alone try to account for the presence of multiple stories. The text is recounted in the present, but for each event, there are two sections often occurring at separate times and in different locations. For example, footnote four exists in three different spaces: first, the unidentified present, as Addison tells her granddaughter to say yes more; secondly, a time in the recent past when Addison’s daughter and family visited her; and thirdly, on a Mexican vacation in March of 1971.

This choice to use footnotes and create multiple moments of action and instances of time underscores the various messages found within the piece and reflect the range of difficulties encountered by a woman as she struggles to find her own happiness and the tension that her decisions have caused within her family. Structurally, this story shows complete disregard for the traditional order expounded upon by theories of logic and reason. Anticentrically, there is no center to this text or even central action. While there is a thread that connects each story—advising her granddaughter—the link is just a construct used to set the scene. The real meaning of “Ten Things” is found in the interplay of words and events.

Similarly, “Breakfast” challenges the structurality of structure, as it employs the idea of sudden fiction. The piece is merely a conversation at the breakfast table between a jaded, sarcastic husband and wife. “Breakfast” is perhaps the story with the most “logocentric” structure, but only because of the sequential action that exists in the meal’s coming to an end. There is no preceding action, no setting of the scene, no rising action, climax, or dénouement to speak of, so any logical structure is limited at best. There is no consequence to what little action

occurs in the story. “Breakfast” consists almost entirely of dialogue, and the piece operates almost as if it were a scene in a play.

But while the action of the story cannot necessarily be plotted, there is a story to be found in “Breakfast.” From a back-and-forth conversation between the Halls and their brief interaction with their maid Marina, the reader is capable of forming a clear understanding of the Halls, their relationship, their social standing, and their thoughts on issues ranging from politics to family to socialness. Breaking from the logical construction, “Breakfast” works as a literal snapshot of life and illustrates that a reader does not need to be led through complicated or conventional action in order to gain meaning. There are multiple ways to describe what this story is “about,” and whether it symbolizes the deterioration of romantic love, the reality of marriage for social convenience, the complacency of individuals when it comes to matters of the heart, or the deception that pervades the lives of the wealthy, any interpretation is valid.

What’s more the significance of “Breakfast” is inferred. The conversation about the vow renewal is not active—the Halls are not exchanging vows at the moment—and, in fact, the reader does not even know if the Halls actually hold a ceremony. But the conversation’s importance lies in the extrapolations the reader can make from it. “Breakfast” shows that meaning is not literal, but rather can be found in the play and *différance* that exists between concepts and words.

“Stop Think” is a stark departure from the style, tone, and structure of the comparatively light-hearted “Ten Things” and “Breakfast.” Unlike the previous stories, “Stop Think” is an example of a story that starts *in media res* and then breaks into the narrator’s mental streaming (to be differentiated from stream of consciousness). The thought process related to the audience is comprised of the metonymic thought reactions of Angelica in the moments before she decides to lose her virginity to a high school boyfriend. On page 29, for example, the reader is in six

different spaces—ranging from age six in the backyard to the current moment: age seventeen in the front seat of a car. How the audience is transported through the story is the result of how Angelica's mind works. One moment she is talking about her sister's job at Target, and then the reader is transported to the twins' lives after graduation, and then, suddenly, to weddings in Schenectady, New York (see pages 28-9). Outlined on paper the jumps between these three events seem irrational, but the narrative has a cohesiveness unique to the mental experience of thought.

While "Stop Think" mostly occurs within Angelica's head and thus challenges a logical progression of events through most of its structure, it is anchored in the logical sequence of reality. The piece is bookended and interrupted by moments of present time, specifically Cory's questioning. This inclusion of the present narrative serves to maintain a structure for "Stop Think," and this interruptive tool is related in a progression of A, then B, then C.

"Love Fool" varies slightly from "Stop Think" in that it is complete stream of consciousness, exemplified by the work of such authors as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The lack of chronological flow, of conceptual time, and the imagined scene with the narrator's parents more than twenty years before her present undermine—like the other three stories—the idea that a story must be told in sequential order for cohesiveness to occur.

In addition to ignoring sequential organization, the narrator breaks the fourth wall frequently, directly addressing the reader with "you." This self-awareness of the story's nature as a way to relay a message also challenges traditional ideas of the relationship between the story and the reader. In "Love Fool," the reader becomes a character in the story, a person the narrator is talking to.

Similar to “Stop Think,” the narrator of “Love Fool” travels down several tangential asides related to her own metonymic thoughts that are sometimes, but not often, related to the reality of her current situation—a car trip. The course she takes to ask questions about the active participation of an individual in life and on the justification of treatment of partners is unfocused but not random—a reflection of a person’s natural thought process. Jess questions life, the existence of soulmates, and the idea of romantic love when she reflects on something she sees or when she is able to articulate ideas she has been considering for several years. However, her narrative is not grounded by flashes to “real-time” like its preceding story, but rather the present, the past, and the future are all referenced at the same moment, because there is no delineation of time or sequence; temporality becomes nonlinear.

Finally, the meaning of “Love Fool,” like that of the three other pieces, is open to interpretation. At any one time this story can be about love, a mother and daughter’s relationship, soulmates, or having a parent in prison. What this piece means for one reader and what another may take away from it may vary completely. Perhaps reader one has had certain personal experiences that mean he associates “Love Fool” with a very specific event, while reader two has no experience with poverty or romantic love or estranged parents, and so the story means something else for her. This piece, like the other ones, directly challenges the ideas of conformation of structure and encourages the reader to consider the discrepancy between thought and feeling and action.

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