

ENG 208: section 3

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Essay 3

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Set sun I'm an hour older
Mile markers punctuate the shoulder
Harboring delusions of grandeur
You're something like a canvas
That's been stretched and primed
You could become something priceless
Or you could be a waste of time

Autumn to Ashes: "Delusions of Grandeur" lyrics

SKIRTS

I went looking for her one dripping dark night when red tail-lights gleamed in the moisture-laden air. They told me she would likely be found downtown at a seedy little tavern called Patty's, over by Burnside, that she was a regular there. I guess I was surprised that she was a regular anywhere but even a street tramp needs a place to call home. I swung the heavy, Kelly-green door open and stepped inside. Glasses clinked. Voices buzzed. Indecipherable conversations. It felt odd to be in one of those smoke-hazed joints again, breathing in the thick oxygen-starved air of someone else's stale exhalation. I'd experienced enough street life to know better than to catch anyone's eyes directly but I noticed the glances turned my way, casually disinterested. An outsider. Not a local.

Behind the bar, glass liquor bottles gleamed under halogen lights in jewel-toned hues of sapphire, emerald, topaz, and ruby. Lambent stained-glass windows in a cheap smoky chapel. Unlike the fragrant curling tendrils of smoke rising from glowing prayer candles there was only the pervading stench of cigarette smoke. The priestess of the establishment, a matronly woman in her fifties, dispensed the sacraments: whiskey, rum, gin, and ale. Clothed in the vestments of her calling, a bleached white cotton apron and damp dish towel, she leaned against the counter, her ample backside reflected in the mirror. Yes, she knew Jan, said if I stuck around a little while she might show up. I wasn't much interested in sticking around any longer that I had to. She handed me a smudged envelope I could scratch out a message on and said she'd pass it along.

When I mentioned that she was my mother and that I had some important news to give her, I heard sniggering behind me. "Oh, *sure* she is Son," the faceless voice slurred, thick-tongued with whiskey. I didn't turn around but headed straight for the door. And wouldn't you know it? Just as I was leaving, she sauntered in, like a disheveled prom-queen, bare-legged in her scuffed white stilettos and short white skirt spattered with large black polka-dots. Even at her age, she had legs that turned heads. She might have been attractive, I suppose, if it wasn't for the butterscotch tangle of hair on her head, a home-bleached attempt at Marilyn-like glamour. She brushed past as if she didn't recognize me at all, headed to the counter for something to dull the senses, something to wash down the rancid taste of a man. At least that's what I figured.

I caught her arm and asked “don’t you know who I am?” “Sure I do,” she responded. I wasn’t convinced. I told her that that her grandmother had passed away at the ripe old age of 104, that her own mother had recently suffered a severe stroke that left her half-paralyzed and half-child. “Okay, lemme get this straight,” she said, “Grimms died and Mother had a stroke and is in the nursing home, so...do you want to stay and have a drink?” Her voice was repugnantly seductive. In disbelief, I shook my head, “No thanks.” I walked back out into the dripping, restless night. Disgusted. Bewildered. Wondering if she was possessed, insane, or so hopelessly brain-damaged from the gin-and-tonics, that reality had ceased to exist for her. The shock of cool fresh air cleared my lungs but it would take awhile longer to sort out my confusion—if it could be sorted out at all. Perhaps the best I could hope for was some back shelf in my mind, some place to set my thoughts aside, some future flash of comprehension to make sense of it all.

I was told that the delivery had been difficult—grueling labor in a stark white hospital room under glaring lights. Alone. Emotionally isolated. In those days an expectant mother had no one near during the birth, only the attendant nurses and physicians. Straining against the stirrups, the child was forcibly expelled from her womb. A boy. They quickly whisked him away to be cleaned up, measured and weighed. I was told the obstetrician, an old-school German woman with a thick guttural accent, grew impatient; the afterbirth was slow to detach. I was told how the doctor probed a bare hand inside the birth canal to remove the resistant placenta, how shocked she had been at the intrusion. I was told that the capillaries in her eyes had burst,

leaving them red and bloodshot for weeks afterward. I was told that during the intensity of the strain, something went wrong—her endocrine system short-circuited and she had no period for years afterward, wasn't expected to have children ever again.

The pregnancy had been accidental in the first place. Unwanted. Unplanned. At eighteen she had her eyes on a college degree and hopes set on becoming a concert pianist. What she might have lacked in natural gifting, that rare quality of becoming one with the music, she made up for in raw determination and drive. On Valentine's Day 1961, she had become one with a tall and good-looking serviceman who charmed her into giving up her dreams. And now this pregnancy. In frustration she beat against her swollen belly. If they got married right after graduation, it might not be too difficult to hide under the wedding dress. And she could always wear extra undershirts.

I'd been raised to believe in the Good Book, the Bible. Since I was a boy, I was familiar with the commandment to "honor your father and mother," a commandment that came with the promise of long life if you obeyed. Later in my not-so-long life, this became such a difficult rule to follow.

I had called her up out of the blue suggesting that I take her to dinner. She seemed pleased to hear from me. Jake's Famous Crawfish was just down the block and we could walk there from her sparse little studio apartment close to Burnside, where SW Alder cut across town at an odd angle. It was an old 5-story red-brick building dominated by a black scaffolding of fire-escape ladders suspended on the wall like a torn cobweb. You had to buzz the room

from outside to gain access to the lobby and from there you took a rickety elevator ride up to the third floor. It was the kind of place where you felt like you had to look over your shoulder as you walked down the hallway. She greeted me at the door and I stepped inside, making a quick appraisal of her living quarters. Cracked-plaster walls. Murky water-stains, inverted brown pools on the ceiling. Full-sized bed layered with mismatched blankets. Blocky TV-set in the corner behind the door. A second-hand chair or two. For its wear and tear, the place was tidy and bright. I placed a house-warming gift on the peeling window sill of her kitchen, an iron-cross begonia, and looked out across the street. At least there was a nice view of the First Presbyterian Church with its basalt masonry and gothic bell-tower.

From the moment she first greeted me, I knew that the evening was going to be a challenge. Our “date” was occasion enough for her to wear an emerald satin prom dress that she had picked up at a thrift store somewhere, complete with tulle underskirts. We took the ride back downstairs and strolled over to the restaurant, making small talk along the way.

As we entered the four-star restaurant, the pungent potpourri of cigar smoke and seafood wafted out of the doorway. True to form, she traipsed across the threshold and in the way only she knew how, turned heads at the bar with her flirtatious glances and awkwardly overstated outfit. We sat down at a window table just inside and looked over the menu. I had a difficult time concentrating on the print in front of me. It always went this way; why had I expected it to be anything different? Why would I expect her to be motherly? It was embarrassing the way she carried on in public, always catching the eye of men, thriving on their attention, intoxicated by it. The business-suited men, lined up on their black-vinyl bar stools

like crows on a telephone-wire, kept glancing her way. Did they assume I was just her boy-toy? My face flushed hot. They looked at her skirts in a way that I couldn't comprehend. This was my *mother*. I don't remember much more of the evening, other than I was glad enough when it was over and glad to be headed back to my dorm room, spiritual obligations satisfied.

It was always in public that the humiliation of my mother's mental state was most acute. At home, I could retreat to my room but in public there was no escape, no place to hide. Our family secrets were as uncomfortably exposed as naked skin. My stepfather had come across a few extra dollars somewhere and in order to play the normal family, we went out to have dinner at a Chinese place across town. My mother happened to be in a religious phase at the time—which was often expressed in obsessive-compulsive behavior. We had no sooner sat down at the table than she began looking nervously around the dimly-lit room. I knew what was coming. We all did. It happened every time. I slid lower in the seat and raised the lacquered menu higher. Unable to relax and enjoy our company, she got up to evangelize the unsuspecting couple at the table across from us. As she approached, they suspended their conversation and looked up, the whites of their eyes showing fear and surprise. "Jesus loves you," she nodded her head emphatically. The loose greasy roll of hair piled up on top of her head seconded the motion. She returned to the table, pleased with her obedience. The other guests were not so pleased. The woman stared in our direction, obviously perturbed. I stared back and blurted out, "What do you think *you're* looking at?" My mother was such an embarrassment and I hated her for it but I accosted the other woman with my barely

constrained rage instead. We dipped naked pink prawns in blood-red cocktail sauce and ate in silence.

She seemed to go through phases. 1976 marked the bicentennial and she dressed in a navy blue polyester pantsuit, red neck scarf, and white blouse for much of the year in order to demonstrate her “patriotism. “ We *all* wore red white and blue that year. In her bicentennial phase, for this is how I remember it, she also became obsessed with strict self-imposed religious asceticism. I say self-imposed because that is what it was. In her mind however, her disciplines were personally directed by God Himself. He spoke to her. She was chosen. She was better than the common person and proved it by her obedience. Her fasting. Her walking. Her meditation on the Scriptures. Her evangelism. Her lack of vanity. Some say “cleanliness is next to godliness.” She didn’t ascribe to that doctrine. Washing one’s hair was a sign of worldliness and should only be done once every two weeks. Looking like a demented geisha, she rolled her greasy hair on top of her head and wore it that way day after day, month after month. I came to despise that hairdo for what it represented. Crazy. Depression. Alienation. We were all affected. Out of habituated obedience at first, and then novelty, I tried her shampoo routine for a while, just to see how slick my hair would get if I didn’t wash. I haven’t mentioned yet that I was thirteen at the time, the height of puberty. By the end of a couple of weeks I could almost wring the oil out of my hair. Soon classmates started to make comments. I resorted to subterfuge by sneaking shampoo to school and washing my hair in the locker room before class. Disobedience was the lesser of two evils.

Years later, the uniqueness of her direct line with God was demonstrated in a name-change. She began to hyphenate her name with –Christ. It was a calling. She had a mandate from God to spread His message around the world—and in order to finance this mission, she was entitled to receive tithe. Untold hours were spent in the Multnomah County Library, scouring phone books for addresses and phone numbers of prominent film stars, musicians and politicians. The fortunate beneficiaries of her attention were sent personal messages “from God” and financial offerings were requested as proof of their gratitude. It is likely that she spent much more on postal stamps than was ever returned by way of “tithe.”

Delusions of grandeur can be symptoms of many different mental disorders: schizophrenia, delusional disorder; bi-polar disorder. Causal factors of delusional disorders include “early childhood experiences with an authoritarian family”—particularly where the child exhibits a sensitive temperament: creative, musical, and artistic (Springhouse). A narcissistic tyrant of a father would never be able to recognize the possibility that he had anything to do with her mental illness, her bizarre claims so completely out of touch with the reality perceived by most of us. Grandiose or paranoid delusions can also be a sign of schizophrenia, particularly (in my mother’s case) when it is combined with other symptoms such as grossly inappropriate dress, a decline in motivation, social and occupational dysfunction (for example, an inability to care properly for herself, relate with others or hold a job), and long durations of time where symptoms of disturbance are evident (American Psychiatric Association). Manic-depressive disorder can also be a source of delusional thinking. During a

manic episode, signs of the disorder may include hyper-religiosity, grandiose delusions, and obsessive-compulsive behavior (Wikipedia). Was my mother delusional? Definitely—or else a really good actress that had the rest of us fooled. Manic-depressive? Probably. Was she schizophrenic? Perhaps—even likely. We will never know for sure.

Was she capable of mothering? Occasionally. Rarely. I don't mean to make it sound as though my entire boyhood was emotionally tortuous. No childhood is completely perfect. No childhood is perfectly incomplete. There were bright flashes of contentment and connection with her. Fleeting. Ephemeral. But bright enough to offset the darkness for awhile and create memories worth holding onto. Hikes down Vermont hill to the Presbyterian preschool where we cut construction paper into the shapes of Halloween black cats and pumpkins. The walks back up the hill after school, collecting oak leaves gilded in the oranges and reds of autumn. The Halloween ghost costume—a simple white sheet with my cutout black cats and pumpkins pinned on. Cinnamon and sugar milk-toast on mornings I was getting over the flu or chicken pox. Thick creamy chocolate batter licked from a beater after the cake was mixed on my sixth birthday. But like the cold metallic cut of the beater on my tender pink tongue, there were violent events mixed together with the deceptively benign: milk jug flying across the kitchen counter, white liquid trailing behind until it came to rest on the floor, milk slowly gurgling out into an opaque puddle on the gold-pebble linoleum; wrought-iron fireplace poker, tip glowing red-hot, menacing in jealous accusation. “I saw you looking at her. There’s *lust* in your eyes, you bastard.”

It was a long slow decline over the years. In my memory, isolated events of emotional dysfunction seemed to meld together into longer stretches of time until years defined a particular mental state. A peculiar mental state. A state of mind that no one seemed able to live with for long or be able to comprehend. The kind of mental state that left tongues wagging and heads shaking. And she was oblivious. The world was crazy. Not she.

She eventually traded in her religious phase. Being Christ to the world was an impossible job assignment. She threw off her calling and her shoes and flew west. This was her Flower-child phase. The carefree life of a middle-aged hippie, camping on the white sands of Hawaii, gave her some respite from the rigors of religion. Snapshots came in the mail: orange-hued hibiscus flowers in her hair; tropical-print wrap around her waist; golden skin and golden smile. She seemed happy. You wanted to believe it was so. But eventually the balmy trade winds turned chill and she scrounged up enough money to catch a flight back state-side. I was raising my own family by that time, three small daughters and a son, trying to get parenthood right. She drifted in and out of our lives until eventually I lost track of her.

I had heard she was staying with my aunt on occasion—when the streets were too cold and there were no beds available in the shelter. One of those nights, her heart made its last feeble effort and seized up. They found her body in the morning, face-down, purple-blotched where the blood in her capillaries had pooled and coagulated. They covered her in a patchwork quilt cut from old grey business suits that she might have picked up at the Salvation Army, loaded her body on a gurney and drove her across town to the morgue. We followed to

pay our last respects. The coroner pulled the quilt back from her tired face and her butterscotch hair spilled across the stark white sheet beneath. When the coroner left us alone, my sisters' father rummaged through a desk in the unoccupied office next door, found a pair of black steel scissors, and snipped off a bleached curl to remember her by. The act was disturbing to me. The whole situation was disturbing. I wanted to feel something. Anything. But there was nothing I could summon from my soul to make sense of her life—and death.

Later that summer, we went through her things: boxes of writing—some obscene, some simple and childlike; old family photographs; condoms and lipstick; a collection of skirts and blouses as wispy and colorful as butterfly wings. My sister became the Keeper-of-Poetry. My daughter picked out a Hawaiian print wrap and tied it around her waist.

What biological processes, what hereditary predisposition, what familial experiences combine to create mental illness? What small twist of chemical disorder can throw a life into such disarray? What singular traumatic event or recurrent oppression can throw the whole superstructure of sensibility into complete dysfunction? I too have had my dark moments of being curled up in a ball in the back of a closet like some wounded animal in a den. I can also be a tyrant and have to consciously and deliberately work on dethroning the monster. My children are happy to assist. We are frail creatures for all of our bravado at living. Some are stronger than others. Some *think* they are stronger than others. At the end of the day, perhaps it is best to think less and live more, smile at someone you love. Smile at *anyone* just to brighten their day. Share an icing-beater with someone. Collect leaves in autumn.

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