Thank You

To the following individuals and organizations for their generous contributions which made this publication possible,

The College of Humanities & Fine Arts
California State University, Chico

Humanities & Fine Arts Dean,
Robert Knight

English Department Chair,
Aiping Zhang

Professors,
Matthew Brown
Kelly Candelaria
Jeanne E. Clark
Rob Davidson
Paul Eggers
Chris Fosen
Kim Jaxon
Peter Kittle
Aiping Zhang

The Associated Students
California State University, Chico
A Letter from the President of the
English Graduate Student Council

At the close of his keynote at the 2013 EGSC Fall Symposium, Professor Peter Kittle issued a challenge to the audience to foster student agency within learning spaces; that it is when students have the space to make meaning for themselves that learning is most effectively facilitated. Learning is not a mysterious outside force that acts upon us. Rather, it is a spark within that we each actively engage. Most importantly, learning doesn’t happen in a vacuum, but through interested and informed collaboration.

This focus on student agency reflects the spirit driving the English program at Chico State. Bolstered by the dauntless support of our professors, we are fortunate to be afforded the space necessary to thrive; to make our learning meaningful and relevant to our diverse passions and pursuits. In addition to this, we have managed to cultivate a cohort that is genuinely invested in the growth and success of its members and the academic community in which we participate.

In the spirit of community, we came together at the Fall Symposium to make public the dynamic spectrum of student work within English studies. It afforded the opportunity to take ownership of our own individual endeavors as well as to
witness and support the endeavors of our peers. More than this, it invited us to revel in the moment we were creating—a moment marked by inquiry and fellowship.

This volume houses proceedings of that evening, in part to commemorate that moment, but also to extend the public reach of student work. This year, the editorial team has decided to make a couple significant modifications to our journal. First, we have decided to release an interactive PDF version so that it may reach a broader audience. Second, to more closely reflect the character of our program, we have chosen to rename the journal. We were drawn to the manzanita’s vitality and tangled beauty. We feel it is an apt symbol for our community as, like us, it flourishes here in the Northstate. Within these pages you will find poetic fervor, musings on the complexities of human interconnectivity, explorations of learning spaces, and analyses of Twain and his *Pudd’nhead*. We invite you to revel with us.

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Academic
Building Writing Self-efficacy through Recursive Reflection: From Intimidation to Proficiency

Kylie Kenner, San Francisco State University

When students enter our classrooms, they carry certain self-beliefs that can either help or hinder their ability to perform on any given task. Writing self-efficacy, the way in which one judges herself as an effective writer, has been shown to correlate with the quality of writing that she produces. However, the field has insufficiently investigated how to boost self-efficacy in order to see improvements in writing performance. If we know that the affective domain has this influence, why have we not made a larger effort to investigate how different pedagogical strategies might speak to student affect? In this piece, I will discuss writing self-efficacy and the design of my evolving project. I will then present four themes that emerged and discuss implications for three different groups within the field of composition.

Social cognitivist Albert Bandura coined the concept of self-efficacy to explain how an individual’s self-evaluation influences her performance more than her performance-specific skills or knowledge (Bandura). He also posits that if an individual thinks of herself with low self-efficacy then she will not fully engage—if at all—with that particular task. For students who enter college with negative self-beliefs about their writing ability, their success hinges on not only the acquisition of new skills but also on greater writing self-efficacy.

Literature in psychology finds that low stakes writing

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1 While there is a vast collection of data on the correlation between self-efficacy and writing performance, this paper was informed primarily from the work of Jones; Woodrow; and Martinez et al.
gives students the opportunity to negotiate various affective blocks. Test-taking anxiety (Ramirez and Beilock), aggressive behavior (Klierwer) and weak interpersonal skills (Cuenca-Sanchez et al.) can be mitigated by low-stakes writing tasks, such as journal entries or free writes, that ask students to monitor their feelings. How, then, might we use what we know about the effectiveness of low stakes writing to foster more positive affect in the writing classroom so that students perform better? The potential of recursive, low-stakes writing assignments led me, fortuitously, to Rafaella Negretti’s article and I began to formulate a plan for how I might try to merge 1) the connection between writing self-efficacy and writing performance, and 2) the connection between low-stakes writing and affect.

Negretti investigates how students use recursive reflections to practice metacognition, specifically to their understanding of rhetorical devices, over different writing assignments. While she notes great improvements in her students’ understanding and employment of rhetorical strategies, she admits that, “[a] fourth category, affective perceptions about writing, cannot be discussed here due to limitations of scope and space” (Negretti 149). Not only did students’ writing benefit from the metacognitive task because it was being performed throughout the writing process, but students were also able to use the space to talk about their transforming affect. I decided to employ a similar strategy but to look specifically at the affective realm that Negretti could not explore.

As a part of my work for an on-campus tutoring center, I led a writing workshop for a group of English 105 students in the Spring 2013 semester. The students met in the workshop twice a week for ten weeks. Borrowing heavily from Negretti, I began asking students to respond
to questions that were designed to tap into both their metacognitive and affective domains. In the last two weeks of the semester, I spoke to the students individually about their perceptions of the low stakes writing assignments and how they felt, overall, about their writing during their first year of college. Four themes emerged in those discussions, two of which speak specifically to the recursive writing in the workshop and two that pertain to writing self-efficacy in general.

The first and most pedagogically grounded theme that emerged was that students found more value in recursive, rather than retrospective, reflections because they could immediately use whatever they discovered in the recursive reflections on the drafts that they were working on. These students had to type “cover memos”—metacognitive reflections about their writing process—to submit with each final draft in their course, and they also participated in the once- or twice-weekly written reflections in the workshop. My tutees found that reflections punctuated throughout the writing process were beneficial for pre- and re-writing. All of my tutees felt that the reflections at the end of the writing process directed them to think about how they could have made their essay better without granting them the time or opportunity to do so. They found that the recursive writing was an effective way to synthesize and strategize. At the end of a session they might have been asked to compose a response to the question, “Knowing what you know now about the persuasive research paper, what will you do next [on this draft] to ensure [that] you’ll be successful?” and then given the opportunity to follow through with their plan. Secondly, students explained—whether they realized this was happening during the writing process or not—that questions that asked them how they felt about their writing assignment
influenced the amount of effort they felt had to be put into a draft. They shared that questions like, “How do you feel about your progress in this assignment so far?” allowed them to write about their feelings about their work (something that no one had ever asked them to do) and work on improving those feelings by improving their essay. Students told me that if they were feeling negatively about their work on an essay, they knew that they needed to work harder to fix it so that the final outcome (either their final grade or their level of satisfaction with the finished product) would make them feel good. One student in particular struggled to engage with the revision process. He told me that when he had to actually write about how he was frustrated with the essay and with himself, he was spurred to make more substantial revisions so that he could get a better grade, something that he said would make him feel better. Another student found the affective questions helpful because she was able to give herself credit for working hard, and this encouraged her to keep improving to feel even better.

Next, students were able to report a shift in their writing self-efficacy over time and in classes other than composition. Students were able to point to specific situations in which they used a strategy they learned in their composition course to be successful in other classes. Students did not hesitate to share that they enjoyed courses in their majors more than their composition course. But they found that, while other courses were loaded with content they found more engaging, the instructors of those classes were not willing to assist them with their essays. Students were able to point to specific skills that they used to write for other courses. For these students, being taught transferable skills that would let them find success in other classes helped them see the value of their composition course and feel more
confident as college students.

Lastly, an unanticipated finding that is worth noting is that self-efficacy improves as students construct a more accurate view of college. All but one of the participants came into college with “horror stories”—a constant stream of all-nighters, frightening and unreasonable instructors, unmanageable work loads—that made them incredibly nervous about their first semester of college. The students seemed so traumatized by the events that they were able to vividly describe the anxiety that they felt nine months prior to our interviews. Older siblings or friends who painted an unrealistic picture of college added another dimension of negative affect for these students. By the end of the spring semester, though, they were able to look back on those fears and wonder why they had held on to them for so long. Chipping away at the overwhelming anxiety that college created for these incoming freshmen was something that only they could do by themselves and over time.

Based on these themes, I would like to make recommendations to different groups of individuals in the field. I encourage instructors to implement recursive reflections in class to support metacognitive and affective reflection. Having students reflect on their writing process—in a cover memo or some other form—at the end of an assignment is helpful for students to practice metacognition, but it does not allow them to efficiently use what they’ve discovered in the reflection on their current writing project. Instead, asking students to respond to questions like, “Based on today’s session, what will you do next to revise your essay?” requires students to synthesize the skills that they are learning and apply those skills to their assignment. Instructors should also consider crafting assignments that, by design, include an affective component. Why not encourage
students to become experts on a topic of their choice that they can teach to the class so as to nurture self-confidence and engagement? Why not create an essay prompt that asks students to compare the ideas that high school seniors and college sophomores have about college to expedite a more accurate view of the college experience? In these assignments, students are learning to write effectively while also being encouraged to consider their evolving perceptions of themselves as competent college students.

Lastly, instructors must strive to imbed student affect in their teaching philosophies. Affective changes are slow and complex; students seem to only take small steps towards stronger writing self-efficacy in one semester, as this is an on-going process that I would argue we never complete. However, being cognizant of student affect is invaluable. It may be difficult for any of us to imagine the emotions provoked by the first semester of college, but we are not immune to fear, disappointment or anxiety; we must be sensitive to the fact that students may feel these ways. It is crucial to acknowledge our students as whole people in need of more than just skills.

These findings are also important for tutors because the tutoring session is a perfect place to delve into affective domains that are much more difficult to see, or address, in a classroom. Tutors should make time to “check in” with tutees about how they’re feeling about a certain task and advocate for students who are overwhelmed, frustrated or upset—whether as a response to a writing assignment, a class, or anything else. Tutors who work with the same group of students on a regular basis should consider building recursive reflections into tutoring sessions as both a tool for

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2 I found Susan McLeod’s Notes on the Heart to be especially helpful in this pursuit.
synthesizing a session and as an outlet for tutees to explore their affective states.

Researchers in the field of composition must continue to focus more attention on longitudinal studies that track students’ affective changes over time as a means of teasing out what produces these changes. Asking students to rank how they feel about anything does not capture the multi-dimensional quality of those feelings. Instead, ethnographic or case studies in which we ask students to speak to these issues will help the field uncover best practices for improving writing self-efficacy to, therefore, help students improve writing performance.

As I move forward in my exploration of this topic, I encourage others— instructors in any discipline, tutors or TAs of any class, researchers in applicable fields—to continue to pay attention to the role that affect plays in students’ self-evaluation of themselves and their performance. We must continue to challenge ourselves to come up with ways to help students reflect upon and improve the ways that they feel about their writing ability. Whether that means designing qualitative studies or implementing new strategies in the classroom, being attuned to student affect, in this case as it pertains specifically to writing self-efficacy, will help us nurture our students’ emerging self-beliefs. They are writers and we want them to be confident and effective in that role. In order to be those things, though, students must feel that they can be.
Works Cited


Reading Network Theory through the Lens of a Classroom

Karissa Ringel

Introduction

With the emergence of the internet, networks and their attributes have become commonplace vocabulary in many fields. However, the study of networks dates back well before the popular technology of today. As current network researchers point out, the concept had its origin in the early graph theories of Paul Erdös and Alfred Rényi (Watts, 2003; Barabási, 2003). Today, the theory has been taken over by researchers in many disciplines, and has been used as a framework to help explain phenomena in science, math, sociology, politics, and even Hollywood (e.g. Barabási, 2003, p. 58). Interestingly, there is a noticeable gap in the research when it comes to education. Many authors have written about ‘networked learning’, or utilizing computer networks in classes, but none have attempted to apply current theories in network research to a more traditional education setting.

This article is a first attempt at reading network theory through the lens of the classroom, with the purpose that readers will be able to see classroom structures and guiding principles in a new light. It is my hope that this will involve more than putting new labels on old systems. Rather, it will help us re-examine areas of education that have been taken for granted, and help us understand how network theory can improve current teaching practices, or perhaps change our conception of education altogether.

Network Structure

It is important to understand that the term ‘network’ has become highly controversial in all fields. On the one
hand, it seems to imply something tangible, usually depicted through connected nodes as in a graph. On the other hand, many studies that employ the metaphor of the network attempt to describe actions, relationships, or people who all have different attributes, things that complicate the simple drawings of lines and nodes. That said, to begin to understand how networks function in our classrooms, we must first achieve an understanding of what they might look like. Figure 1 indicates the three different structures traditionally ascribed to networks.

![Network Diagram](image)

**FIG. 1 - Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks**

Network A, the centralized network, relies on one node to hold the entire network together. This is how we have traditionally thought of classrooms – the teacher is the central node that keeps the classroom network from falling apart, and every other node, we can call them students for now, is directly tied to the teacher. By contrast, network C depicts a network in which there is no central node. The distributed network relies on all nodes to function, and
implies that all nodes are equal in ‘power’ or connection. This model, to me, represents the idealized vision we have of student-centered classrooms, where the teacher simply becomes another node in the network and the students take up the learning for themselves. This notion, however admirable, is not practical in the current education paradigm. As long as teachers give grades, and grades have meaning to students and institutions, teachers will represent more connected and ‘powerful’ nodes in any classroom network. The model shown in network B is that of a scale-free network, where some nodes are ‘hubs’ that are more connected than the majority of the other nodes. Work by network researcher Barabási (2003) has demonstrated that many real-life networks, including the virtual links of the World Wide Web and the metabolism of several organisms, follow this structure. However, it is important to remember that these depictions are really only snapshots of pre-formed networks in action. When we think about a classroom situation, we must realize that putting teachers and students together in a room does not automatically create a network.

**Network Formation**

It stands to reason that any existing network must have gone through a period of formation, as nothing tends to emerge out of thin air. However, most network research does not spend much time discussing this fact, preferring instead to focus on the attributes and activities of pre-existing networks. The problem with this focus though, is that we ignore the underlying norms that helped form the network. Two political science researchers from UC San Diego decided to address the issue of network formation in their case study of the worldwide human rights activism network. Though currently this network presents the typical topology of a
scale-free model with no discernible center, Lake and Wong (2009) chose to look beyond the present structure, to the norms that had formed the network in the first place. When they dug into the past, they found that the entire global network began from what they call the “seed node” of the Amnesty International organization.

The findings from this human rights network case study seem to uncover parallels in the classroom. While snapshots of a formed classroom network may appear to have a certain structure, three of which we discussed previously, ignoring the underlying norms of the network gives the observer an incomplete understanding of its properties. Were students simply predisposed to collaborate with each other and the teacher? Experience would say no, that it takes time and some outside influence before students will happily sit down to discuss their ideas together, or give meaningful feedback to their peers. Which brings us back to the question: how did that network form? This is where the teacher comes in - not as a central node in a pre-existing network - but as the seed node for network formation.

When we, as teachers, step into the classroom on the first day of class (and probably even before this moment), we have the opportunity to begin developing a network. This is by no means a new idea, and many teachers will tell you that they spend the first weeks of a term doing activities that will “build community”. These icebreakers, team challenges, and silly songs are not meant to test students’ knowledge of the topic to be studied, or to begin giving them new information, but to introduce everyone to each other. In other words, to begin creating the ties that will form a network. This is not, however, a neutral process. As the seed node, the teacher plays a critical role in determining how, and even if, the network comes together. Lake and Wong (2009) describe this
implicit power of the network seed:

“by defining what it means to be a node in a particular network or influencing the form and content of participation, central nodes are exercising power over members of that network, and raising the likelihood that their preferences rather than the preferences of others will be translated into outcomes; they limit the scope of possible preferences” (p. 132, my italics).

We have now determined that teachers provide the seed node for the formation of a classroom network, and that in doing so, they can directly influence its growth in a few ways. First, as noted, they can specify certain principles that norm the network and affect its development. For instance, some university professors decide they will not allow any technology in their classrooms, not even for class-related purposes. This policy certainly has an effect on how students relate to each other, the teacher, and the non-human actors in the classroom network. Another way seed nodes display their power is by determining which nodes they will accept into the network, and which they will exclude (Lake & Wong, 2009). Although in a classroom this seems fairly pre-determined – teachers would just have to accept all of their assigned students, right? – it can actually be a much more complex idea. As we have said, simply being in the class does not make students part of a network. Therefore, the teacher has the job of inviting each of these students to join. If, through their policies, class structure, or assignments, they deny invitation to some students, they have just drastically changed the possibilities of their network. Let’s assume though, for this discussion, that the teacher succeeds in getting all students to form at least one link to the network.
With the network seeded and beginning to form multiple links, the teacher can just step back and let everything flow, right? The students know each other, they understand that they are all acting for the good of the learning network, and they will do all of their work on time and to the best of their abilities, right? Wrong. If the classroom were like a computer network, or the brain of a *C. elegans* worm, then perhaps it would work this way because all nodes are assumed to be passive transmitters that want the network to succeed. People, however, Lake and Wong remind us, are not passive.

When nodes are people, politics comes into play and they no longer automatically work for the benefit of the network. Rather, they will “attempt to manipulate others in the network to produce desired outcomes,” and they will “worry whether other nodes have incentives to perform in the way required for the network to succeed” (Lake & Wong, 2009, p. 130). Any teacher, or student for that matter, can attest to these tendencies in classroom networks, especially before a group assignment is due. First, students will often try to manipulate the teacher into moving the assignment due date. If this doesn’t work, some students might try to convince others to do all the work for them. Even if an individual student has the incentive to do well on the project, they will worry whether everyone else in the group feels that same incentive enough to complete their own responsibilities. If they don’t get this sense, or they don’t find a way to manipulate the network so that it works for them, they may “opt-out” of the assignment, or even the network (Lake & Wong, 2009).

What does it mean, for a student to opt out? Previously, we discussed strong and weak ties. To opt-out, however, is to break ties completely. If a student cannot
sustain even a weak tie with an assignment (we will talk about how these ties are formed in the next section), they lose all incentive to put effort into the activity. Similarly, if a student cannot find a way to create meaningful ties to the classroom network, they lose motivation to participate at all. Everyone has had the experience of a student or classmate who was never able to make those ties to a class and either stopped attending, or did not put any effort into network activities. What is the teacher’s role in this situation? Lake and Wong (2009) shed some light on this problem through their discussion of the politics of networks. They remind us that the implication of the opt-out possibility in networks is that “nodes must reap a return from the network that is greater than or equal to what they can achieve in their next best alternative” (p. 130). In our classroom scenario, teachers have to find a way to give students benefits that they won’t get by opting out of the network.

At this point, I don’t have a clear answer as to what these benefits look like, and clearly we have not found the answer in education yet, as more and more students continue to ‘opt-out’ of the school system every year. Perhaps it is sufficient for now to acknowledge that classroom networks are much more political than they may at first seem, and that, as seed nodes, teachers have a great deal of responsibility in successfully creating self-sustaining networks. By looking at the teacher role as the seed of a network, we gain a different understanding of teaching as a networked activity.

This section has largely ignored the non-human actors in the network, as we were mostly focusing on the human agencies involved in creating or participating in a network. The next section will re-introduce non-human actors into our conception of the classroom network. Then, we will investigate how ties between nodes are formed.
Boundary Objects and Protocols

So far, we have acknowledged that networks are based on relationships between nodes, and that these relationships are not neutral, but defined by the strength of their ties. In typical network depictions, these relationships are shown as the lines drawn between different nodes. However, we have also said that these depictions are misleading, because they merely represent snapshots of constantly shifting activities and relationships within a network. In fact, a node acting as a hub in one snapshot of the network may have only one tie to the network in another. Our first step in understanding this confusion is to determine what exactly a node is. After that, we can begin to delve into what creates the lines, or relationships, between them.

In a broad definition, a node is anything that can interact with other actors in a network. Although people are the obvious actors in a network of learning, other, non-human, objects can act as well. Let’s take, for example, an assignment description. The way this description is written and circulated affects how different students will perceive it, and through it their concept of the assignment itself. In a way, teachers are attempting to create a link between the student and the assignment. This link, or in our terms relationship, is different from the relationship between the teacher and the assignment. When an object takes on a different role as it travels through the network, such as the assignment description, it is called a boundary object (for further description, see Spinnuzzi, 2008, pp. 147-148). In the classroom, this term can be applied to almost anything, from the syllabus, to classroom technology, and even to different participation structures that the teacher encourages. The reason is that every node must form its own relationship with the object. In other words, every object exists on the
boundary of its relationships with the other nodes in the network. The question now is how those relationships get made. In order to investigate this highly abstract concept, I will turn to the metaphor of computer systems. At first, they may seem to have little to do with education, but as we extend our classroom analysis, it will become clear how the two paradigms connect.

In computer science, the rules that govern relationships within networks are called protocols. Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker (2007) offer a clear explanation, “if networks are the structures that connect (nodes), then protocols are the rules that make sure the connections actually work” (p. 29). Since there are many nodes in a network, it is not surprising that “networks always have several protocols operating in the same place at the same time” (p. 30). In computers, protocols are layered among application, transport, internet, and physical layers. These different layers are the way messages get transferred through the network. Galloway and Thacker (2007) note, “…the primary function of protocol is to direct flows of information” (p. 55).

This function is as true in the classroom as it is in computer science. After all, what are classroom networks but flows of information? In this setting, protocols can be seen as teaching ideologies. In other words, the way you think about learning, as a teacher, will directly affect how your network functions by changing the rules about how nodes can connect to each other, and to you. After all, “information is central to any system, but it is nothing without an overall logic for defining information and using it as a resource for systems management” (Galloway & Thacker, 2007, p. 57). This is not to say, however, that teachers have ultimate control over a network. Any node in the network has the
power to create protocols, or deliberately misinterpret them. In the second case, for instance if a student decides to turn in a video instead of an essay, nodes can use protocols to display or question the politics inherent in a network. In the end, protocols should be less about discipline and more about distribution and flexibility (Galloway & Thacker, 2007, p. 31).

As we end on this note, teachers are encouraged to think about the networks inherent in their own classrooms, and how they are, or are not, utilizing these networks and protocols to create the best learning environments for students so that they do not continue to ‘opt out’ of education.
References


Figure

Humor in “Character of a Native Georgian” and The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson

Athena Murphy

The influence of the tall tale is seen in both Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s short story “Character of a Native Georgian” and Mark Twain’s novel The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson. Tall tales are a narrative tradition marked by exaggeration. It is not uniquely American but it did find a home here as it seemed a fitting mode to express the complexities of the American condition—especially in the frontier regions. Both Longstreet and Twain are early masters of Southern humor and are thus part of this narrative tradition; however, each use this model of humor to different effect.

Tall Tale

In his book Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale Henry B. Wonham explains that “Tall humor grew up both in response to Europe’s uniformed critique of life on the frontier and in response to the frontier itself” (18). The tall tale serves a few specific rhetorical functions. For one, by appropriating and exaggerating criticism to absurd degrees, the speaker is able to deflate that criticism (Wonham 18). What’s more, tall tales lend themselves to highlighting disparities. Frontiersmen were able to poke fun at the significant inconsistencies between the American ideal and the American reality they were living, particularly the, at times, unbearably harsh living conditions at the fringes of the country (Wonham 18). In these cases, humor also served as a much needed form of comic relief.

Another important function of tall tales is that they
serve as forms of boundary maintenance. Most tall tales are rooted in the local environment and shared local experience. If a listener dismisses the tale, he is marking himself as an outsider as he is clearly not accustomed to the underlying truth being mocked (Wonham 20). However, if the listener accepts the tale at face value, in addition to being marked as an outsider, he is marked as a fool—which only adds to the amusements of the insiders (Wonham 23). The “correct” response is to play along.

This model is seen in both stories. Humor is used to highlight the incongruities between stated and practiced values. Longstreet is reacting to the French affectations diluting the American culture during his time; while Twain is reacting to the existence of slavery in a free country. It is also used to mark people as insiders or outsiders. What’s interesting is how each author chooses to use this model.

Native Georgian

In “The Character of a Native Georgian” Ned Brace’s antics parallel the rhetorical purpose of tall tales, so that we can understand him to be simultaneously criticizing disparity while maintaining social boundaries. In this case, he is criticizing the community’s adoption of French affectations and calling for a return to traditional values. His actions can be seen as a way to train people how to be an insider.

Brace engages in a series of pranks at the expense of the inhabitants of a small town. For example, at one point Brace “beset[s] an old negro woman to sell him half of a living chicken” (Longstreet 35). He makes the request in earnest much to the confusion of the poor woman. This joke highlights the absurdity of trying to be half a whole something. In this case, trying to be wholly American while putting on the airs of another culture.
In this way, the half-chicken episode uses humor to critique the break from cultural traditions. This is further seen in Brace’s odd display of appetite at the tavern dinner table—which succeeded in putting a lot of the others on edge. With a closer look one can see that he is critiquing the French-affected spectacle involved in refined dining. Mashing up the different kinds of breads without regard for the appropriateness of the mixture comments on the careless mixture of French and Georgian cultures (Longstreet 26). By then shaping that mixture into the form of a turtle he is poking fun at the spectacle involved—the priority of style over substance (Longstreet 27). The fact that this prank havocked his innards seems to support his critique since despite the fancy presentation the careless mixture wasn’t palatable (Longstreet 30). This indigestion seems to comment on the dangers of introducing a foreign culture on an unprepared system—that, though it may seem interesting, it can have unintended and detrimental consequences.

At the same time, Brace is training people how to be a cultural insider. For example, we see Brace take his dinner spectacle to an absurd extreme in order to poke fun of the arrogance of the waspish gentleman’s preference for French-affected dining customs. We also see him reward the humility of Mrs. Blank by including her and her husband in his joke. In his choice of target we see him communicate his objection to the French customs encroaching on the tradition of native Georgians. He drives away the waspish gentleman and brings the Blanks closer to him. The Blanks, however, serve as models for how to become an insider. They didn’t let his joke wound their pride. Mr. Blank may have been getting cranky, but Mrs. Blank didn’t take herself so seriously as to take Brace’s oddities personally. Though this left her wide open to his games, when she was let in on the joke she
was a good sport about it; and Mr. Blank didn’t let it bother him that Brace made a scene at his dinner table and got the lady of the house to personally wait on him. In spite of it all, they both laughed. What’s more, once they were insiders they were able to take pleasure in Brace’s antics. Brace’s antics communicate cultural values thereby inviting entry into the group of insiders.

**Pudd’nhead Wilson**

While Longstreet’s story is seen to fall in line with the model of the tall tale, Twain seems to take the opportunity to play against audience expectation and mess with that model. In one of David Wilson’s initial interactions with the townsfolk of Dawson’s Landing, Wilson makes the following attempt at humor:

“I wish I owned half of that dog.”
“Why?” somebody asked.
“Because I would kill my half.”

The group searched [Wilson’s] face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as something uncanny. (25)

This joke is very similar to Brace’s half-a-chicken joke in both content and authorial purpose. Technically, though Wilson is an outsider, he offered the correct response: he played along with the cultural rules by following along with the tall tale formula. However, the humor failed. The townsfolk were completely confused and instantly suspicious of Wilson’s intelligence — and thus he earned the unshakable nickname of “Pudd’nhead.”

The “half-a-dog” joke stays in keeping with the
cultural model in terms of its purpose — criticizing cultural disparity in the south. On the surface there is the issue of the European affectations exhibited by the people of Dawson’s Landing. We see this in their preoccupation with duels as well as in the pride they take in their lineage to the First Families of Virginia — proud British loyalists. On a deeper level, Twain is reacting to the practice of slavery in a country founded on the principle of individual freedom. How can America be the land of the free when it works said land with slave labor?

While the joke itself may be in keeping with the model, its function as a form of boundary maintenance is complicated. For one thing, it shows that Wilson hasn’t been in Dawson’s Landing long enough to have a well-informed understanding of their cultural values, particularly the acceptable modes of humor. Adding to the complexity of this exchange, however, is the fact that Twain’s intended audience, the reader, does accept Wilson’s humor. For one, we don’t take him seriously like the townsfolk do. We know he knows you can’t have half a living being. We recognize it as a commentary of the inconsistencies between social practice and social values. While the townsfolk see Wilson as a fool, the reader sees the townsfolk as fools for missing the joke. In this way, the reader is lured into sympathizing with Wilson.

This positioning of Wilson in line with the reader speaks to Twains authorial intent. Unlike Longstreet, Twain doesn’t want the reader to become an insider. The joke serves as a commentary on the existence of conflicting truths—a free country practicing slavery. The cultural values of Dawson’s Landing allow for this conflict. An ethical man should see this as problematic. Twain creates a group of insiders unified by that ethical high-ground. However, as the title of the novel implies, Twain sets Wilson up to be a
tragic hero, implying he is a great man who will suffer a fall from that greatness. As the novel serves as a meditation of the ethical implications of slavery, Wilson can be seen to represent America’s fall from greatness—or rather, its failure to live up to its claims of greatness. American identity is founded on the principle of individual freedom and equality; however, by practicing slavery, these principles lack foundation. Similarly, by compromising his principles and successfully assimilating into the culture of Dawson’s Landing, Wilson tumbles from his ethical high-ground. While Ned Brace trains the reader to become an insider, Wilson challenges the reader to remain an outsider. If the reader continues her sympathies for Wilson and accepts his successful assimilation into the group of insiders as a good thing (in keeping with the standard model of the tall tale) essentially the reader marks herself as a fool.

Conclusion

Longstreet’s “Character of a Native Georgian” and Twain’s Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson, utilize the model set up by the tall tale to criticize cultural disparity and to maintain social boundaries. Longstreet’s story stays true to the model; Twain, however, purposefully manipulates the reader’s role in the exchange. Longstreet is calling for a return to tradition, by utilizing the tall tale model to demonstrate the folly of those losing touch with their American identity, thereby inviting the reader to remain sympathetic to Brace. Twain, on the other hand, is challenging the reader to question tradition, by setting her up to sympathize with a character who ultimately assimilates to a hypocritical social structure. The hypocrisy underlying the half-a-dog joke parallels the hypocrisy contributing to Wilson’s fall from the ethical high-ground. While initially the reader is invited
to sympathize with Wilson, ultimately she is challenged to not let that initial assessment corrupt her understanding of Wilson's folly. In this sense, the “correct” response is not to play along with a hypocritical system.
Works Cited


The Actions of Words:  
Power of Speech Acts in Pudd’nhead Wilson

Derek Swain

Power is a prominent motif throughout Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, and is seen not through status, but through speech and performativity since Standard English and the imperative mood function as vehicles of power when contrasted to the fractured speech and dialect of the slaves.

In Twain’s antebellum Dawson, speech is power and power is granted or denied by an unseen communal voice, which is capable of elevating or exiling its inhabitants; this is why the young, white, and highly educated David is denied the authority that his speech should grant him when he immigrates to Dawson. The power that Wilson would wield in this community must first be bestowed on him by those who reside within it. But when confronted by Wilson’s ironic turn-of-phrase, a form of language that is opaque to them, they issue an invisible verdictive \(^1\) which rules its creator out of social existence.

The first reaction to Wilson is tentative: “‘Pears to be a fool.” A constative utterance, one asserting a truth value, it allows for the possibility of error; the folly predicated of Wilson exists independently of the observers, who may have erred in judging him. But the next response is ambiguous: “Is, I reckon you better say.” On the surface it strongly affirms the existential truth of the proposition “Wilson is a fool,” but it may also be taken as a declaration, “I pronounce [and thereby establish] that Wilson is a fool.” By the end of the episode, the latter interpretation is dominant and Wilson is a

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\(^1\) "Verdictives consist in the delivering of a finding, official or unofficial, upon evidence or reasons as to value or fact" (Alston 85).
“Pudd’nhead” as a result of the performative acts of naming and “electing” (Sewell 115).

Indeed, “Mr. Wilson stood elected” by the general populace of Dawson and was assigned a moniker that “he was not able to get set aside, or even modify,” a distinction quite unfortunate since it shaped and branded his existence for the following twenty-three years (Twain 5). Wilson’s exclusion, as a result of the “fatal remark” which “gaged” him, serves to highlight the paramount importance that language holds in Dawson, for it was Wilson’s words—not his beliefs or actions—that ostracized him, just as it was a laymen proclamation that renamed him for the following 20 years (Twain 4).

Just as Wilson’s speech renegotiates his identity within the community, Roxy’s language and speech patterns are indicative of her status in Dawson; indeed “[f]rom Roxy’s manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black [but] the one sixteenth of her which was black out-voted the other fifteen parts” and made her a slave (Twain 8). This is the only line in the novel reminding readers of Roxy’s ethnicity, yet, by the novel’s end, most would reasonably imagine her as black simply because of her usage of the slave’s register, which is the result of prolonged societal training as is her inability to alter it. And yet, Roxy is only black by Jim Crow standards but is subsequently assimilated into the Dawsonian hegemony, and as a result her language becomes indicative of social standing.

Despite her white exterior, it is Roxy’s status as a slave that creates the plot’s initial impetus when her master, Percy Driscoll, assumed that the repeated thefts he’d endured must be the fault of “one of his negroes” and allows all his slaves the opportunity to confess or be sold “DOWN THE RIVER” (Twain 9, 11). Linguist David Sewell classifies this
particular structural phraseology as a periphrastic command, which focuses more description on what will occur if the command is not followed rather than on creating a typical directive. In a contemporary context, this structure is seen frequently in high stake situations such as extortions (“pay or else”), turning states evidence (“give up your friends, or suffer yourself”), and even illicit negotiation techniques (“confess or suffer”).

In response to her master’s threat to sell her and possibly her child down the river, Roxy realizes that just because her master was generous this time doesn’t mean he will be so the next time and since Roxy is one-sixteenth black, “her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave” as dictated by the one-drop rule in which the child always follows the condition of the mother (Twain 8). After realizing that her and her child’s lives are permanently conditional on the whimsical nature of her master’s mercy, Roxy swaps her child, Valet de Chambre, with Tom Driscoll, the heir of the house in an ill-fated attempt to save her son from slavery. By recognizing that the language of power and slavery are both learned forms of speech which fashion the user’s identity, Roxy creates a new heir and demotes the true heir to slavery. As Wilson’s calendar states: “Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but a cabbage with a college education” and indeed by training herself and others to call the boys by their false names throughout their childhood, Roxy creates the forms of speech they learn to employ (Twain 24). While the former Valet de Chambre (the new Tom) is addressed with submission and becomes authoritative; the new Valet de Chambre is chastised into learning the language of reverence and submission.

It doesn’t take long for this lexical conditioning to
demonstrate its effect on the boys’ identities. The new Tom’s first words are manifestations of the directive, the speech act most closely allied to power: “When he got to be old enough to begin to toddle about, and say broken words… [h]e would call for anything and everything he saw, simply saying, ‘Awnt it!’ (want it), which was a command. When it was brought, he said in a frenzy, and motioning it away with his hands, ‘Don’t awnt it! don’t awnt it!’” (Twain 18, my emphasis). According to David Sewell, Tom does not yet possess the proper “imperative mood (“Give it!”) [so he] invents his own by making the optative mood serve – ‘I want it’ means ‘do it!’” (Sewell 116). Similarly, Tom’s first recorded speech as a boy is a directive to his servant Chambers: “Knock their heads off!” (Twain 22). Indoctrinated into the white man’s community and speech practices, the false heir quickly masters the speech granted him by Dawson and forces his bidding on his “black” brother, Chambers, and shuns his true mother, Roxy, who soon realizes that she had now become “merely his chattel” to order around (Twain 22).

Yet, because the language of power requires the listener to acknowledge the authority of its use, speech is powerful only by communicative sanction and becomes impotent if the power dynamic is shifted from the status-quo. Such a shift occurs after Roxy approaches Tom in chapter eight with the wheedling and supplicating servilities of a born slave: “does you ‘member ole Roxy —does you know yo’ ole nigger mammy, honey… Oh, Marse tom, de po’ ole mammy is in sich hard luck, dese days; en she’s kinder crippled in de arms en can’t work” (Twain 42, emphasis mine).

According to Sewell, “Self-reference in the third person typifies a servile speech. The I, or ego, of independent adult speech is replaced by a form that suggests at once the
slaves status as property” (Sewell 120). In response to her submissive request for a dollar, Tom forms a behabitive command\(^2\): “I’ve a notion to strangle you! … Clear out! And be quick about it!” (Twain 42). One last time Roxy calls on her submissive rhetorical skills in a perlocutionary\(^3\) attempt to supplicate her former son, but “Tom relished this tune less than any that had preceded it, for it began to wake up a sort of echo in his conscience” and orders her not to bother him anymore (Twain 42). At this point the novel describes Roxy as assuming “an erect and masterful attitude,” almost as if to signify an ephemeral shift in lexical power. After Tom responded with his “natural thing … [of] bluster and mockery,” Roxy proposes a threatening commissive\(^4\) to tell Percy Driscoll “every las’ thing I knows ‘bout you… [unless you] git down on yo’ knees en beg” (Twain 44-45). This has an entirely different perlocutionary force that “stupefies” Tom into adopting Roxy’s former speech form, which utilizes the same third person self-reference as the slave’s speech: “Oh, Roxy, you wouldn’t require your young master to do such a horrible thing” (Twain 44, my emphasis).

When the duo reconvene at the haunted house, Roxy completes the shift of power by appropriating her old master’s periphrastic command structure: “You’s a nigger!—bawn a nigger en a slave!—En you’s a nigger en a slave dis minute;

\(^2\) "Behabities include the notion of reaction to other people's behavior and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or imminent conduct" (Alston 85).

\(^3\) A perlocutionary speech act is one that produces "certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them…" (Austin 35).

\(^4\) "The whole point of a commissive is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action" (Alston 85).
en if I opens my mouf ole Marse Driscoll ‘ll sell you down de river befo’ you is two days older den what you is now!” (Twain 47, my emphasis). Tom attempts rebuttal by calling Roxy a liar and “the whole thing moonshine” but is quickly beaten into a servile speech pattern as a result of Roxy’s periphrastic command: “Come back, come back! … I didn’t mean it, Roxy; I take it all back, and I’ll never say it again! Please come back, Roxy!” (Twain 48, my emphasis). Though the onset of this utterance vaguely recalls the imperative structure typical of Tom, the nucleus denotes Tom’s first apologetic behabitive of the novel, and by the coda Tom is completely submissive to Roxy’s authority.

Just as Percy Driscoll once used the periphrastic command to reveal the petty thief and inspire Roxy to switch the babes, Roxy uses it here to gain control of her young master. Only after Tom has performed the symbolic action of kneeling does she use the plain imperative: “Git up… Fetch it!… Gimme de dollah bill!” (Twain 45). The language of command entails a language of submission and this linguistic duel is no exception. Unfortunately, when destitute of social sanction, black speech can retain its authority only by force of individual threat, which simply changes white for black while preserving a linguistic and social system based on inequity. As a result, ironically, the subversive act that Roxy commits against the white society is a confirmatory one.
Works Cited


Poetry
Every wise child is wild.

Their screams
are whispers. In winter,
they whither. Their eyes

glisten
with glitter. They are songs
without melodies. They are the future’s
remedies.

Every wise child is wild.

Roots grown deep

with no structure. Photographs

with no pictures. Not a dot

of sweetness in their photosynthesis process.

They are angels
with no wings,
but still fly.

All truth,

no lies. All laughter,

no cries.

They live alone
in blank space. Embracing rosy cheek’s
warming grace.

Grown into the unknown

with the whole world to call home.

They survive--

they are the fittest.

The Wittiest of the

wittiest. Making the best jest

out of any mess.

Every wise child is wild.
From a Life of Stress to a Life of Finesse

Nobody is strong enough to tie me down. The closer one gets, the farther I run. Abandoned at age seven by my mother. My father? Never knew him. We were chased out of our hollow home as if there were a fire devouring it. Separated. Neglected. Left to grow wild. Left as some random’s responsibility to teach me that:

*It is impossible to fail, if you make it possible to succeed and you can succeed, so it is possible!*

From home to home to home to home to home I went. Just an evanescent foster child, a hand-me-down. Begging to tear apart tall walls blocking a will to bloom—I don’t want to die a rosebud. As my fury flooded into lakes of ink that bled like my arms, I eventually found no harm in life’s charms. That’s why I admire the color yellow and brilliant bold royal blues, eager emerald greens, and powerful purples. Yet, my pure devotion is anchored somewhere deep in love potions where I often ponder that:

*It is impossible to fail, if you make it possible to succeed and you can succeed, so it is possible!*
Although being a wild child had it’s own hell, 
the smile on my face will never tell of the days 
led from light, where I hid under covers—
I had discovered a strict strength in not being a lost lover. 
As much as I crave, I don’t satisfy the hunger. 
I only focus on me, my goals, my dreams, 
no matter how selfish that may be. 
I have become bold as my blues, 
eager as my greens 
and powerful as my purples. 
I have turned mud into water and ashes into fire. 
I have built my own silk nest knowing that:

*It is impossible to fail, if you make it possible to succeed and you can succeed, so it is possible!*
My Birthmother’s Clothes

Into a cloak of nightfall,
draped black on black on black.
Tightly smothered.

Plastic leather, pleather, too cheap for leather.
Studs, spikes, chains
threaded throughout like a refrain.

Black laced shirts split so low
to the tiptoed edge of bare nipples.
Covered in coal-smeared eyes, brazen.

Fingernails long and fake ice-skating across her bare chest.
Heavy, rubber boots dancing
over fires of a warranted potential.
Why I Could Never Be a Whore

If your soul does not flicker into your eyes
and fuel your every essence of being when in my presence,
then don’t touch me.
If your goal is to just get laid tonight next to the moonlight
and to drool all over my existence,
then get the fuck out.

Yes, sex sells, but so does respect.
It seems the only way nowadays
for a woman to make good money
is to strip her down to her naïve native self
and to sell that self as a cryptic art,
a fragmented statue for boned eyes to expire upon.
Or to fuck her into the ground
until she bleeds out of her mouth
as she bites off her own tongue
to resist undeserved salvation.

Fuck fucking just for the fuck of it
or else you might just get stuck with a child like me to omit.
I keep my legs crossed and don’t get tossed
until time lingers on and on and on and on
and proves himself worthy—
until he falls onto his scraped knees:
admires, worships and begs.
Admires, worships and begs.

I, too, am an art.
It hurts me to say no,
to not help out drifting boys when I am capable,
yet I create new ways creatively every day
to let them down calmly onto the uneven ground,
alone, sullen and unsatisfied.
It’s not my fault that you are horny.
Go masturbate.
Go watch true sexual masters arouse you.
I am not a sexual vixen.
This is my decision, my vision.
This is my remedy for ladies
to have no regrets and no secrets,
and this is where I get
all this brave synergy
that will never leave me tainted,
just painted.
For Every Person Against Love

For every person against love,
I welcome you.
How bold a statement
to hate a fragment of goodness
that is so beautifully lit
with passionate reds and traces of amber
that clamber into hopes of a complete reality.
When love is there,
oh, it is there,
the closest to physical it can possibly become.
It settles deeply
into the dimmest cavities of your soul
and captures it, softly.
Like a warm breeze,
it spreads until your entire body is cloaked in cordiality,
and with ease,
it heads to your head to finally convince thee,
that yes, this is love.

There was a time in my life when I hated love too.
I found my head hanging in the gallows,
disappointed, impatient.
I had to dig into my hollows
where my subconscious hides.
Fear lives within my subconscious though,
which can blur and stir my mind into a
 fuck love, just keep on the grind mood
that creates an ugly attitude.
Do not let fear scare you away
from a life of risks and dares
that keep you alive and aware.
Love is not meant to be fair—
it is just there to care,
to enchant the air.

To feel love ignite your soul aimlessly
in the midst of a rigged night
might just be what you need--
it was for me.
I found myself on his doorstep.
Bones frigid, vulnerable, livid.
Hot whiskey breath, dressed like death.
1 a.m., ashamed, yet tamed.
He let me into his warmth.
My body quivering as I
crumbled into his arms.
Such a simple touch
from a winter crush
that cleaned the mess of my loneliness.
The day I threw love away,
never to believe again,
was the same very day it threw itself to me
desperately, forcefully, thankfully.

Like waves,
days come and go,
people come and go,
love comes and goes.
When love is there,
chase it,
embrace it,
lace it up in silk
and don't replace it.
Just know that waves
always come back
like days,
like people,
like love.

So, for those against love,
I understand you have taken your stance.
However,
there is no reason to hate on something
as soft and soothing
as a pillow of love
to rest your heavy head upon.
I ask you to give love a second chance,
in the sense of embracing
the sweet trance
of this crazy world’s rare romance.
Living Alone

I’ve always enjoyed living alone until the other day, when my next door neighbor called, said her roommate almost got kidnapped right outside our houses. Some visceral excuse of a man put a plastic bag over her head, while trying to drag her into his car. She got away, thankfully, by kicking and screaming with all her valor.

I’ve always enjoyed living alone until the thought coalesced in my head that if I were to die in my home alone, no one would even know until days go by and my work wonders why I didn’t show up. Even then, I don’t think anyone would come by to check on me. Eventually, my dog would eat my icy, deserted body to save himself of starvation, drink my blood to keep himself from dehydration--I wouldn’t blame him.

I don’t really enjoy living alone anymore.
The Venomous Pony and Other Poems

Stan Upshaw

The Venomous Pony

I want to tell you I find myself falling more easily and that this bothers me. Also, the woman across the hall refuses to look at me and I’ve gotten the idea it’s her putting butts out in my peephole. At night I hear the planets accusing one another or else making love, and once also during the day. Listen closely,

they’re there. This whole damn city seems brown, silvery brown, and it’s Autumn which doesn’t help things. Sometimes I think I need a good punch in the mouth, and sometimes my eyes seem gilded, encrusted with dusty little seahorses.

Look into these creases in my hands, do you see them there? Little opals, I swear to you. If I could just get them out I promise I’d make us rich. Will you help me?

These packages haven’t stopped arriving. Mostly just topographical maps or prayer books but one time a whole box full of feathers! Who keeps sending them? Meanwhile, the ghosts of our dead grandmothers sit around laughing quietly, clapping their hands every time a door slams.

Won’t you tell me who’s sending them? Won’t you help me? Please?
The lesson that nice policeman taught us
when we were younger: I can’t remember it now.
And my windows: they won’t stay closed.
Even now, I feel myself floating closer and closer and closer
to the edge.
November Images
—After James Wright

The grocer’s son
hawks pearls from a bonfire
in the center of the earth

Your mother’s breath—
mercury rolling
off the rafters
in the gallows

Like chicken pox—
snowflowers blooming
on the sun
The Mosquito Hawk

(Think for a moment
of that photograph
of me you took
that time by the lagoon.
Maybe it has a life
like ours, but
not quite.

Maybe it’s been walking
along a path
made of old bricks.
It has come a long way.
The path is bordered
by a garden wall
with a hole,
maybe it stops and peers
through to the other side.

Maybe this photograph
sees a meadow
filled to the brim
with circus animals.
An ungainly giraffe,
a stubborn, hulking elephant,
a tiger’s gently morbid
breath-smell.
Amazing!
It laughs.
Climbing up onto a hill
it can see the lights
of some oriental city shine
like a hundred-thousand
little newborn meteors.
It sees you
there, also,
maybe.

Maybe this photograph of me
sees a painting there
in that strange city.
A body in profile
holding a trombone,
daytime stripes her wrists,
paint daubs for an earring,
a smear where
her bush should be.
Can it be you?

Imagine that it stops
to rest for the evening.
Smells you in its sleep,
a drop of perfume
that lived behind
your ear for a week.
The photograph floats
down the streams
of dreaming to the pools
of Shangri La.
Maybe it reaches for you.
Half-waking,
it can easily see you.
You’re wearing a negligee
and boots suitable
for walking on the moon.
It smiles and rolls over.

In the morning
it continues its journey.
The sun shines into its eyes.
It seems to be a long
way from home.
Maybe it’s forgotten
how long it’s been walking.

Do you think it will make it?
Are you waiting for it?
Are you there it calls?
I’m looking for you.
You it calls,
you.)
Prose
Now we’re in our late thirties. We have two miniature versions of ourselves and we’re lucky if we get an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep a night. We’ve added two more beds into an even smaller house and have been paying off the purchase of a much nicer mattress for two years now. We’ll officially own it in another two years. It sits upon a bed frame we bought when we were both working and had thirty thousand dollars in the bank. Now we are about that much in debt, never get to have sex without the door locked, and go to bed with one child and may wind up next to the other sometime right before the sun rises. We’re lucky to have a moment alone to spoon in our very own mattress.

Just this morning I snuck out of our master bedroom in the dark, peeling Morgan’s arm off of my own, to go snuggle with my husband in her room down the hall. I whisper, “Can I join you for a little bit?” He rolls over, either out of habit from hearing someone beckon, or because he’s just as excited to get a quiet moment with me before the pitter-patter of the day begins. Either way, I’m thrilled to feel the warmth of my favorite bedmate next to my body – even if it’s in a trundle bed with polka dot sheets in a room tattooed with butterflies and pooh bears. It doesn’t matter at all that we can’t fit in it together or that it was purchased off of Craigslist to save a buck. Gone are the days when alarm clocks were set to wake us. Gone are the days of privacy and uninterrupted moments of ecstasy. And yet, our life has never been more full. Some nights may feel like hell on earth, but the days are filled with clouds sent from heaven.
Our home and our beds may not have the consistency it once had, but pillow fights and jumping on the bed has taken on a whole new meaning. After what we'd consider to be a normal night of sleeping, one, then the other monkey join us for morning laughs and tickles before we tackle the day ahead. And there's never been a better way to begin. When I think back to the beds of my youth, the rooms that suffocated me, or the walls I stared at for hours on end, I cannot help but realize that each pillow my head happened to fall upon all led up to this one, though it might be a little lumpy at times. As we keep waking up each day, next to someone, or simply solo, in the custom mattress or one covered by a pee pad, I find all the comfort I need in knowing my days (and though it hurts to admit, nights too!) come along with precious moments like never before.

Should we share our beds? Keep them with us when we move? Roll around in the hay as it were with other times in our lives as we venture into a new life. Think of your childhood bed, grandmother's bed. All the nights slept there, days napping. Hospital beds, your baby's crib. What is in store for those lying there?

Bed of Roses, Bed of Nails

For my 12th birthday I was given a new bedroom set. Held up by tall, light-brown wooden beams, the canopy bed was draped with a dusty peach material and laced with vintage off-white trim. The bedspread and pillow shams were of the same fabric but were lightly padded and gracefully tied together with clear stitching. The collection made the tiny flowers on my wallpaper come to life, springing out to anyone who might want to lay their head down and get lost in nature. The desk and dresser completed the space and
provided places to hide away any pre-teen treasures. On top of the dresser stood a large mirror framed with the same honey colored wood and was crowned with scallop detailing. Within the timber that made up each piece of furniture were dark knots that seemed to look at me, watch over me. As a young girl I remember being filled with a sense of safety, enveloped in that elegant, old-fashioned tent surrounded by smells of rosebuds and bark.

The reflection in the mirror revealed only a dream though. Outside of those four posts and out from under the covers I lived within a fractured home, one with a crumbling foundation that only had the appearance of sturdy furniture. Most of the time I sat on that bed listening to the screams of my parents, not the chorus of beautiful scenery. They fought most of the time – and every night. Waking to the sounds of their yells was like waking during camping, frozen by the bitter cold air. Laying there the rest of the night, awake, hearing only the echoes of the howling coyote or cooing owl.

Getting older, I didn’t want to feel smothered any longer; I couldn’t have my view blocked by the delicate awning above me. Like most adolescents I began to feel cramped and uncomfortable beneath the sheets. I chose to rebel against my mom and dad, and their fighting. I wanted to pull back the blankets and jump out of bed – a bed that wasn’t a bed of roses, but a bed of nails.

In an attempt to change perfect appearances into what I was feeling inside, what I saw in the mirror’s image, I asked if I could have a new bed and redecorate the room by myself. I had a sleepover with my girlfriends prior to painting when I was 16 and we tried to rip the wallpaper off. When that didn’t work we resorted to writing on the half-torn parts with permanent markers. We felt rebellious as if we were actually graffitiing something we shouldn’t. I painted the
walls and ceiling the darkest purple I could find and applied the paint right over the wallpaper and those cheery flowers. Emerald green carpet is what I chose to cover the floor. All of it was hideous, shocking; just the statement I wanted to make.

To this day, even 20 years later, and what seems like a whole other life to me; my parents have yet to repaint that room. They’ve tried to cover the walls with picture frames and more furniture, shoving as many tall bookshelves, which reach from ceiling to floor, as possible into the room. The built-in cabinets and drawers, and ceiling can’t be concealed. Plenty of that purple upheaval glares through into what has now become the home’s man-cave. It remains a dark reminder of isolation the entire house embodies for me.

Inevitably I’ve grown and moved on. I now sleep in a different house, in a different bed. Actually I’ve had several beds over the years – I’ve learned I don’t have to take drastic decorating decisions to make statements, or changes. Like a flower I can cultivate my own flowerbed, bloom and lie down in the bed I make.

_Beds do not have to travel with us. They can stay behind in the rooms, structures they were placed in. Pillows on top, covers strewn about remain back in time to wait for another slumbering person, body to lie down, fall asleep. We move our beds with us only if we want – city after city, apartment after apartment, homes and houses. Load up our mattresses and memories of what we were doing in those days when we came home at night to crash. The jobs we had. The schools we attended. The people we loved. The roads we took – always coming back to those beds to sleep it off. Dream it away._
In Bed With

My husband and I still laugh, 13 years later, about where we bought our first bed. We were newlyweds and naïve, not quite knowing who we were in bed with. Neither of us had lived with anyone else except roommates of the same sex as college students. We were raised to believe sex should be something shared between two people who were married. So living with someone of the opposite sex, especially if you were sleeping with him or her, was not acceptable. Even though neither one of us were virgins, and had already slept with each other, we felt a pressure to get married before we could move into an apartment together. One of the first things we bought as a married couple was our bed. His parents had offered to pay for it as a wedding gift. We went to the first place we saw as we drove into our new city – the ever-impressive Freeway Furniture.

We had a small one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a reconstructed Victorian-style house. It had to be least 100-years-old. The maroon carpeted stairs hit you right as you entered the building and creaked liked those of a haunted house. Each step was wide and long, larger than any others I’d seen before, and seemed as if they could be beds themselves for the homeless that slept on the sidewalk just outside the front door. Moving all of our junk in, climbing those stairs over and over and combining our two separate lives into one seemed like such a daunting task at the time. I remember wondering where everything would go. Would we really keep all those baseball cards? Would he like my grandmother’s old quilt as our bedspread?

It didn’t matter. The bedspread was rarely used as it wound up on the floor most nights, days, and all the times in between as we pounded away at our newfound sexual freedom. The mattress was more for padding as I experienced
my first orgasms. The unstable head and foot-boards made of pine were more for holding on to as we tried new positions. My memories of that bed are not of rest or sleep but of exploration of a new world I’d found. It began at a place called Freeway Furniture and traveled many roads as the years merged on.

Making our beds: Having control over where you sleep, how you sleep. Having to live with the choices you make – good or bad. Beds promise a good night sleep; when they fail to deliver we are tired – tired, weary tourists through life. It’s easier to stay put and never venture out – never try new things, see new places – remain embedded. But then we never find our favorites. Never know what it means to wake refreshed, with a new day ahead, and live out our desires.

Deathbed

We walked into the hospital room. The lime green pea coat Jennifer wore stole the show – but only for a moment. Once all my senses came into play, the reason I was there became just as vivid, jaded. My grandmother hovered over his wilting body oblivious to the tubes protruding his arms and nose, deaf to the beeps spilling out of all the machines surrounding her husband of nearly 65 years. “Don’t leave me,” she sobbed.

James, another cousin of mine and a giant of a man, sat next to his sister wearing the blinding jacket. They were on the other bed in the room, the vacant one, or the one soon to be joined by another empty bed. It was the only thing in the room not distraught by the scene laid before it. That bed was used to such sights. We were not. My two aunts wailed as they watched their mother moan in front of them, pleading for their father to stay with them. They knew, as we
all did, these were our last moments with him. These were the final memories we would have with a man who was the center of our family. He had been the core to all of our lives for so many years. Inside, each one of us was calling out like Grandma for Grandpa not to die.

In addition to his large frame James also had a large voice. Trained in opera his tenor range was something we were used to admiring in performances or weddings, or in the car driving around with him, not in places like this. Grandma asked him to sing after we’d all said our goodbyes. His song became Grandpa’s final act of an amazing life, his finale to an encore- warranted life.

“Then sings my soul, my Savior, God to thee . . . How Great thou Art, How Great thou Art,” James belted out. In my mind I can still see Papa taking his last breath as James hit his highest note.

Wake up! Feel the pricks of the nails you lie on, let those bugs bite. Get into bed with your children in the mornings... help them sleep through the night. Rock them to sleep, forget about hours of sleep lost and enjoy the waking hours. Cribs turn to Beds turn to Death Beds.

Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep

Among the many baby gifts we received after our bundle of joy arrived was a Precious Moments doll. When squeezed she recites the well-known prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep, 
I pray the Lord my soul to keep, 
If I die before I wake, 
I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.
I wasn’t taught this prayer as a kid, but I was taught to pray. For many years I would kneel by the side of my bed and pour out my heart to God. Most of the time I remember crying, as praying turned into a session of pleading for a life I didn’t have. As an adult I don’t kneel to pray. In fact, I don’t really pray anymore. I live. I am grateful for what I have been given. I pray in another sense, through living.

The first night I brought her home from the hospital, I laid my daughter down in her unused, blemish-free bassinet. The four white bears above her danced to a lullaby as the mobile spun around. She looked up at me and said with her perfect eyes, “Mom, everything is going to be okay. I have just come from Heaven and there is nothing to worry about. Let’s enjoy each other, this life. No matter where we go, which beds we sleep in, you will be my mother, I will be your daughter and we will be together.”

I have hope that my daughter will be happy. I tuck her in at night believing she will find her own prayers, her own beds to make.
My father was a mad man.

Standing at the gas grill, tongs in one hand, a generous scotch on the rocks in the other, my father lifts the London broil for a moment, looks absently at the white oak, and takes a long sip. I open the screen door slowly, avoiding the creak, and ease it all the way back to close behind me. His blue Bermuda shorts and black socks make me cringe, even though there’s no one else here. Walking towards the backyard, having been charged with the mission of retrieving a couple of tomatoes for dinner, I make a wide arc behind him as quietly as possible. I don’t look back but I can feel him looking over at me. “Get over here.” At first, I pretend I don’t hear him, but think better of it and say “huh?” He’s looking at me like I might be a stranger, his eyebrows sticking straight out, at least half an inch, black caterpillars, yelling at each other, yelling at me. “Get over here, now.”

I walk over noticing the rhododendron, the giant white oak branches, the violets interspersed in the grass, looking at everything I can possibly look at during the ten yard walk to the grill. There’s smoke swirling around him, further obscuring his intentions; I’m Dorothy approaching the great Oz. He’s staring at the meat, he takes a big swig, looks down at me and says “those legs look like they’re ready for the pork factory.” He sets down the tongs and drink on the tray next to the grill, and circles his leg above the knee with the forefinger and thumb of each hand. “I can put my hands around my leg.” I hated him right then. I was ten years old.
Forty years later I rarely wear shorts and am prone to measuring my leg, right above the knee, the same way, making certain that my thumbs and forefingers still meet.

* * *

Friday after the last Thanksgiving, we are shuffling down the hall of Heritage Home together, my arm hooked in his arm, his beige stretchy pants are a little stained, it might be coffee or juice, his shoes, lighter beige, have Velcro closures. One of the aides, a sweet faced Filipino woman, walks past smiling at my dad. She says “Hello poppy, your daughter is pretty and you are so handsome.” He grins, says something in gibberish—he can’t really form words anymore. It doesn’t have meaning, he has no idea what he’s saying, but I interpret it anyway as a thank you of sorts. Another Heritage Home resident comes barreling towards us; she looks very frail, but is approaching at a surprisingly high speed, hugging the wall in her wheeled walker, like a giant baby high-chair. She stops and stares at my father, her mouth gaping open. He puts his hand out to shake hers, she’s confused. Another aide comes over, “No John, remember, no hand shake, only this” and he gently demonstrates a fist bump, holding my father’s hand and touching it to the air near the lady, where her hand might have been had she any idea of what was happening. He is just as confused, yet he’s still grinning. Turns out my father is banned from shaking hands. He squeezes too hard and it frightens the other residents. I think he doesn’t mean it; he’s just friendly, exuberant. I recall him extolling the importance of a firm handshake, and I feel so sad for him.

* * *
My father, John, used to be in advertising sales. He was a real-life real mad man, although his office was on Park Avenue instead of Madison. He wore sharp suits and bright, white shirts with shiny gold cuff-links, and always had a cloth handkerchief. He looked great in a suit. He rode the train into the city from the town in northern New Jersey where he lived in his second house, big enough for five children, two cars and a well-stocked liquor cabinet. The first house was closer to the city, in a slightly less affluent town, where the schools were not considered “the best.” His relentless travel for work, sometimes two weeks at a time, every month, and the ensuing commissions, allowed him to move his family and his stature upward to more room and superior schools. “Even better than the Catholic schools,” he claimed. He wooed clients over three-martini lunches, and had to go to Cleveland every month. At night he took the train home, sat in the bar car, regaled the smoky, boozy crowd of other mad men with his stories. When he came home, exhausted, inebriated, a little or sometimes a lot, we kids scrambled to either disappear, or at least look busy. He needed time to deflate, and after that he might be playful and fun with bags of penny candy he bought for us at Grand Central Station, or he might not be.

Family and friends used to call him “Jack,” a nickname borrowed from the Kennedys, because he was good-looking, like a Kennedy, not to mention Irish and Catholic. He was first generation Irish. His parents crossed the pond landing in Brooklyn where the neighborhoods were segregated and defined by ethnicity. The Irish neighborhood was next to the Italians and beyond that was where the Jews lived. You could tell he was from Brooklyn by the way he “tawked.” Interestingly, his regional dialect grew stronger the further away from Brooklyn he moved. He didn’t talk very
often about growing up in Brooklyn except now and then would soliloquize about playing stoop ball, or eating a Charlotte Rousse, a treat you could get from the ice cream man, which, he explained, was a cup filled five inches over the top with whipped cream. My brothers and sister and I liked it when he told these stories.

The dinner table was his final forum of the day for a table-pounding story of the ineffectiveness of that son-of-a-bitch Dick Degraff, or the latest ridiculous whim of Roger, the firm’s owner and CEO. Roger, the boss on the T.V. show Mad Men, is so similar I wouldn’t be surprised to learn my father’s boss was somehow the real inspiration for the character. My father wanted to be heard, and he often wasn’t, he wanted respect, and he didn’t always get it, and he wanted a title, more than anything else, and he never got the one he wanted. I know this now but at the time I just thought he was mean, and so angry, like a junkyard dog, something to be avoided and feared. I now know that this was a barely controlled anger that came out in interesting ways.

He screwed the cap of the toothpaste tube on so tight that no one else could ever open it, when he shook hands he squeezed too hard grinning at the pained expression on the poor recipient’s face; he slathered butter on toast thicker than the slice of bread. He needed to be the center of attention and he charmed and delighted people with his stories, embellishing tales that had a nugget of truth, and were just shy of being completely outrageous. According to John, he sang with the Metropolitan Opera, invented licorice flavored ice cream, was sent on a secret mission during the Korean War, grew tomatoes in nothing but sand, and met John Wayne with whom he shared a drink and his acting tips. He actually did meet John Wayne once in an airport. A lot of pretending went on in our house, and fast thinking, which certainly prepared me for my
work in theatre and later for my career in fundraising. The ability to make things up on the fly, and to charm and amuse, are skills that I used and continue to use in both lines of work. I find it hard to admit the influence my father has had on my daily life, especially at work, but the truth is I am good at what I do because of him.

It was in his genes, the propensity for tall tales, an Irish tradition no doubt encouraged by his mother Norah who herself was a well-known seanchaí. She told her grandchildren one time that she was changing a light bulb, when a snake came through the empty socket in the ceiling, so she quickly grabbed her big shears and cut it into nine pieces, and the nine pieces of cut snake didn’t die until sundown. John’s stories were a way to be more, bigger, the best, famous. He was afraid of being mediocre and even worse, that maybe no one was listening, that he might not be heard. You could see him shift the gears during a story, bumping up the fiction a notch, if he noticed any lessening of the audience’s attention. I was hyper-aware and critical of his hyperbolic tendencies, and I now also share his fear of mediocrity and of not being heard.

He loved to argue, especially about politics, and above all if he could engage someone with liberal leanings. His arguments were won, or he at least exhausted his opponent, with his presentation, volume and big gestures, hands and eyebrows raised to the heavens, rather than the facts and figures. If he met a teacher, he would say something provocative about the teacher’s union, hoping they would take the bait. If he was at a function where there might be non-conservative types, my mother would seek them out and try to warn them in advance. He once argued with his Italian brother-in-law, who owned a restaurant in Hoboken and whose mother was from Italy, about how to make the best marinara
Thanksgiving was at my mother’s house, we now say “my mother’s” instead of “my parent’s.” After the big meal, my mother and I go to visit my father at his home, Heritage Home. The rest of the family found reasons to stay away. To be fair, they live closer and are able to visit him more often. Although, my brothers are still grappling with the reality that the father they knew is no longer, but now a shuffling gentleman in beige who grins at everyone he sees.

As my father and I slowly move down the hall, which is the only thing we do when we visit him, he suddenly breaks into a little shuffle dance step. I do it with him. He grins and it makes me laugh. Alzheimer’s is a horrible disease, but I find I like this gentler version of my father. We see my mother sitting in one of the ugly worn chairs in an alcove off the long hallway, one of the few places to sit and visit. She’s doing the crossword puzzle. She comes to see him four or five times a week. He says, loud and clearly, emphasizing the verb, “I love you.” She looks over her reading glasses, with a small, self-conscious laugh, says “I love you too.” He says it again, my mother doesn’t respond, so to me he says “I love her.” She laughs again, not a happy laugh, and says “Oh, John.” She tells me it’s all he says, over and over, it embarrasses her. I’m amazed that this is what is left; these words are the only ones he can speak and seems to know. How did this disease, making Swiss cheese holes in his brain, manage to miss the spot that held those words, and the place that lets his mouth still say them?
He cared for us and loved us, but we weren’t a family that said those particular words out loud. I think about the things he said. He was decisive, opinionated, fiercely Republican and a very proud Irish man. He told us that to be successful in our careers, we only really needed to read the New York Times, every day, every word, cover to cover. I still read most of it, online, almost every day, and am also decisive, opinionated, and fiercely liberal. Some of the things he said were helpful, and I know now he meant well. But he also called my brother a clod while knocking him on the side of the head, and more than a few times I was told to wipe a look off my face, or it would be wiped off for me. He and I were alike in being drawn to confrontation. I was praised for being able to speak easily with adults, but was also admonished for making provocative statements. More often than not, rather than wiping the look off my face, I would extend it and add a daring, and sometimes unwise, bratty and precocious comment. This usually led to a slap unless I was able to run away, and wait until the incident was forgotten, or anesthetized by his evening cocktail.

Junior high was an especially provocative time in our relationship. I recall the decision to invade his liquor cabinet compelled by my growing rebellious spirit along with a sort of “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” mentality. Both my brother John and I would dip into his various bottles of clear and light brown burning alcohol, and then fill them up with water, or in what we thought was a brilliant move, a little of my mother’s perfume that was the same color as the scotch. Somewhere along the line his drinks had a little tinge of Arpége, the perfume he bought my mother every year for her birthday, until she finally told him she didn’t like it anymore.

One day I came home at lunch when my mother was
at work, and for some reason, I still don’t know why, I pulled out the gin, the bottle with Queen Victoria’s portrait on the label. With a black magic marker I drew a wart on her nose, hair on her chin, and wrote my sister’s name, Kelly, underneath the picture. I must have been angry with her. Then I poured an inch or two into a cup with some orange juice, gulped it down, and went back to school. It wasn’t noticed until months later. I recall hearing a roar of “what the hell is this,” didn’t know what it was about exactly, although the gin incident crossed my mind as I tried to make myself scarce. We three older kids were hauled together in a line-up and questioned until I broke. The punishment wasn’t the worst, a flash of severe anger and grounding for a couple of weeks. I considered myself fortunate. When we were younger, punishments involved spankings with a metal hair brush. I remember thinking how funny it was, with the gin bottle graffiti incident, that I wasn’t in trouble for drinking.

* * *

Somewhere in my mid-forties I moved into a house in Northern California with a big yard, fruit trees, and a partner who, soon after the move, didn’t work out. My parent’s visited, hoping to help during the aftermath of the failed relationship, by saying they wanted to help with the very big yard. My father and I are in the garden. He steps on the top of the shovel, shoves it down with all of his weight, then pulls up a block of grayish semi-frozen dirt in the raised bed, turns it over and breaks it up, with a ferocity that one might use to kill a snake. “You want to turn the soil first, let it sit, get some air; break it up a bit, get the chunks, the hard parts, get the rocks out.” He says to mix in three maybe four bags of fertilizer, pronouncing it fert-lizer, losing the second syllable.
“Steer manure, it’s the best,” he says. I’m both annoyed at being told how to garden in my own backyard and glad that my father is doing the hard part, turning the soil over. He says he loves this, meaning my yard. Looking around he talks about what he could do if he could come up and stay for a couple of weeks. I cringe at the thought, and then feel guilty. I think about how we’ve not spent more than three days under the same roof for twenty years, and I don’t feel so bad. The truth is I only really like the last part of gardening, planting the plants bought at the nursery, or actually, even more than that, I like the last, last part--picking the tomatoes. Most of gardening is about getting rid of things, weeds, hard dirt, and rocks. My father is working hard, helping me, doing one of the only things he really enjoyed after retiring. He stops to admire the soil under the crusty top layer, dark and rich, like steaming coffee grounds. I thank him, hoping he’ll keep going, finish turning both raised beds.

My father was still lucid then, although he wore two hearing aids and still couldn’t hear. When he didn’t follow a conversation, or hesitated when asked a question, we attributed it to a combination of him not hearing, and not being interested unless it was his story. I still want him to know me, to ask me a question, and listen with interest at my story about some great thing I had done at work. He can’t do it. Nevertheless, he’s turning my soil so in thanks I offer a compliment “Hey Dad, I loved the peonies you used to grow, I should plant some here.” He looks at me blankly. I shout, “Your peonies, I loved your peonies.” I try not to sound frustrated and shout again “Peonies, the flowers, you used to grow.” He says “Oh yeah, yeah.” I realize he doesn’t know what I mean. He acts like he does for a moment and then goes back to shoveling the dirt. I pull clumps of grass out of the dirt and throw them in the wheel barrow. He no
longer knows what a peony is, or at least in that moment he can't remember. We keep digging and weeding, my mind lost in thought and memory.

* * *

About a year ago my father could still engage in a conversation. It usually didn’t make sense but there were recognizable snippets of stories, names and words. The old tales were still there but not in the right order. It was as if he tore the stories up into small pieces, threw them in the air, and then picked them up, piecing them together in random order. He talked about New York saying it was “the place you better know where you are.” He talked about someone named McCloskey who taught him everything he knew about gardening, and who also happened to be a spy with him during the Korean War. He repeated himself, sometimes twenty or thirty times in a half an hour. He confused my sister and me with his wife, and me with my daughter. He still knew his sons; would point at one of them and say “that is the best damn guy you’re ever going to meet.” He danced with my mother at a wedding. He still knew how to dance and he still looked great in his suit.

My father was a great dancer. He could waltz, swing-dance, lindy, jitterbug. As we shuffle down the hall at Heritage Home, towards his room with no pictures, no nice things, a beige blanket on the bed, he does his little dance step again. He’s smiling. I say “How about New York Dad, do you remember New York?” He tries to make words come out of his mouth, I can see he wants to say something to me, he blurts out something that sounds like “New York, you’re there, you’re on” but his words disintegrate into gibberish. I say “Yes, you are!” I say “Let’s dance Dad – do you want to
dance?” He sits at a table, and starts eating the chocolate chip cookies I’d brought, one right after another without stopping, until my mother takes the box away. She says “That’s enough now John.”

My mother mouths to me “We have to go.” He sits on his bed. The room is a pale green, the window looks out onto a cement block wall. I can’t stand to leave him in this place. My mother says he doesn’t know the difference anymore. We say we’ll be right back and leave quickly. We’re nearly to the locked door, the one we have to be buzzed in and out of, and he calls to us, upset sounding gibberish. The door buzzes, my mother pushes it open saying “Hurry.” I see him for a second standing in the hallway. The nurse’s aide is there gently pulling him towards his room. I hear him say “hi dee, di, dee, di, dee, di” to her as he does a little dance step.
Baby Girl
Non-Fiction

Dani Fernandez

I became a thief when I was 19 years old. I had never stolen anything in my life and in that moment, I wasn’t even aware that I was stealing something until it was too late. But now, looking back, I realize that I have in fact stolen something precious. Something that I can never give back. And, if I am honest with myself, it is something that I would not give back even if I could.

* * *

I had been babysitting since I was 14-years-old and I truly connected with a child for the first time when I was 18. To me, her name was Baby Girl and, to her, my name was Mommy. She was going on three-years-old when I first started watching her and her two older brothers. Little Man, the middle child, was four-years-old and Big Brother, the oldest child, was eight-years-old. I watched her and her brothers for six to twelve hours a day, Monday through Friday.

Both parents work from their beautiful, expensive home. The father has a home office and the Mother trains and breeds Arabian horses on their property. From the moment I walked through those doors each morning, the office door would shut and the Mother would race outside to work with her horses. I would be left with all three kids all day long.

A few minutes early, I walked up to their impressive front door, took a deep breath, and opened the door. Immediately my ears were assailed with Baby Girl’s screams and
four dogs would race up to jump on me. I walked through the entryway into the kitchen to see Baby Girl sitting on a barstool with tears streaming down her face while the Mother tried to brush her tangled blond curls.

The Mother was probably in her mid-30s—although, if you ask her children, she is eternally 21—and she always appeared extremely frazzled. Her bottled-blonde hair was tossed up in a ponytail every morning and she had a habit of slapping on foundation to hide the sunspots marking her face.

“Good morning,” I said with a smile. Then I winced as Baby Girl let out a particularly loud shriek.

“Good morning Dani,” said an annoyed looking Mother with a tight smile. Baby Girl wiggled off of the barstool to run across the kitchen and wrap her little arms around my legs. At two and a half, Baby Girl was slim with waist-length blond curls, deep dimples, and a small cleft in her little chin. After detangling my legs from Baby Girl’s arms and wiping the tears spilling from her blue eyes, I took the dreaded purple hair brush from the Mother with a patient smile.

“I’m off to go feed the horses and I’ll be back up around lunchtime. The boys are around here somewhere. Bye babe!” The Mother called over her shoulder as she escaped from her zoo of a household. I heard the boys screaming at each other from the playroom over the chorus of Mario Kart. With a deep sigh, I smiled down at the little girl.

Walking into the playroom, I found Little Man and Big Brother arguing over the PlayStation. Pillows and blankets were thrown all over the room, both TVs were on, and socks in various sizes were scattered everywhere. No matter how clean the house was when I left in the evening, it never failed to look like a train had gone through each room when
I got back in the morning. Turning off the game settled the first argument of the day and the boys shoved each other on their way down the hall to get dressed. I pulled Baby Girl onto my lap and slowly started brushing her hair. The Mother’s method was to rip the brush through her daughter’s hair as quickly as possible. Baby Girl did not react well to that. Every morning, I sat her down with a movie and waited until she was fully absorbed in whatever mystery Scooby Doo and the Gang were trying to solve. Then I slowly brushed her hair with the dreaded purple hair brush. Before Baby Girl even realized what had happened, I had her hair brushed and in a French braid. She raced into the bathroom to look at my handiwork. I had no idea that I was on my way to becoming a thief.

* * *

Later that day, I leaned against the wall in the hall-way with the bathroom door cracked, listening to Baby Girl. Turns out, potty training is trickier than it sounds and that’s why most women prefer not to have to attempt it at 19. Baby Girl loved her big-girl panties and enjoyed having her own bathroom but the act of actually using the toilet was a difficult concept for her. In retrospect, she might have been a little young at two and a half but I was tired of changing diapers. Baby Girl was open to the idea of trying so there I was, standing outside the bathroom door for the third time that morning while she tried to go potty.

Thinking about the many tears and accidents Baby Girl had already, I hoped for success that day. I remembered when the kids’ Welsh Corgi puppy had another accident in the formal livingroom, his favorite pee-zone the week before. The Mother was absolutely furious and I was absolutely
thrilled that my nanny duties did not include the dogs.

Little Man, Big Brother, and I had been sitting in the playroom, quietly giggling about the puppy’s accident when we heard the front door slam. Apparently the mess had been cleaned up because the Mother had stormed outside, back to her horses. The boys and I were about to resume our game of Hide and Seek when we heard Baby Girl crying and the sound was coming from the formal livingroom. We walked into the room to find Baby Girl standing in the middle of the room, crying her eyes out. I realized that she, too, had an accident.

I picked her up and ran her into her bathroom past the boys. My poor Baby Girl was so upset that I tried to console her by explaining that potty-training is tough and everyone has an accident while learning. Then Baby Girl cried, “I had an accident and Mommy is going to take me outside and call me a little shit just like the puppy!” I looked up to see her brothers laughing until they cried in the doorway of the bathroom.

I was pulled out of that memory by the sound of Baby Girl screaming from inside the bathroom. I pushed her door open to see what had happened and her eyes were huge as she squealed, “I’m doing it! I’m going potty!” Somehow, I still hadn’t realized that I was becoming a thief.

* * *

A few days later, I was standing in front of the island in the middle of the giant kitchen with Baby Girl, Little Man, and Big Brother sitting on top of the counter, facing me. I watched as they carefully rolled fresh cookie dough and placed the misshapen rolls onto a baking sheet. My rule was this: the cookie dough was to be rolled into balls and
placed on the baking sheet. It was not to be eaten. The only way you could eat the cookie dough is if you accidentally dropped a small piece on the counter. Naturally, a healthy one-third of the cookie dough was casually dropped on the granite countertop. After dropping the small piece, the cookie-dough-dropper looked up to see what I’d say. I stopped rolling my bit of cookie dough, counted the number of dough balls on the baking sheet, and said, “yes Baby Girl/Little Man/Big Brother, you may eat that piece.” And so we carried on that way until we each held in our hands the last, precious piece of cookie dough. That piece was also eaten.

I was sliding the baking sheet, loaded with hot, gooey, precious cargo, out of the oven and onto the stove to cool when Baby Girl said it for the first time: “Mommy, will you help me get down? My hands are all sticky.” I stopped in my tracks. After a moment of deep breathing, I slowly turned to look at her big blue eyes. She was waiting patiently for my answer with her little hands opened wide so I could see that they were indeed covered in gooey cookie dough.

“Baby Girl, what’s my name?” I asked, trying to keep my tone light and not betray my panic.

“Dani,” she said with certainty. Her little eyebrows pushed together in confusion at my question.

“My name isn’t Mommy, honey,” I reminded her gently.

“Oh,” the little girl giggled as I helped her down from the counter.

After we all washed our hands and the kids sat back down on their barstools, it happened again. I was taking cookies off of the baking sheet to give to the kids for being such big helpers when Little Man asked, “Why aren’t you our mommy?” I stopped in my tracks. Again.

“Wellllll, I’m too young to be your mommy,” I said
simply. I settled for an honest answer. Little Man considered me for a moment with narrowed eyes. His cute little face would scrunch up when he was thinking hard about something.

“Oh,” he replied.

I waited for him to ask another question but he and his siblings appeared satisfied with my response. I should have known then that I was a thief.

* * *

It was cold outside. I was on Christmas break and the three kids were all bundled up in jackets and jeans as they rode their bikes back and forth across the long driveway. Little Man was racing Big Brother down the driveway when the Mother and I heard a scream. We whipped around to see Baby Girl on the ground, under her sparkly Barbie bike, tears sliding down her red cheeks. I stood there, worried that she might have scuffed her little hands but I knew that the Mother was standing right there and she would take care of it.

I was in the middle of turning back to the boys when Baby Girl cried, “Mommy!” and I suddenly felt her little arms wrapped around my legs. I looked down at my girl to see her adorable, now 3 year old face staring up at me. Her cheeks were red, her eyes were filled with tears, and her blond hair was slipping out of her braid. She looked exactly like she did every morning when I got to work and she was crying because the Mother was trying to brush her hair. The only difference was that this time, she had ran past the Mother to Mommy.

I was certain that I would lose my job right then and there. I cautiously looked up at the Mother to see that she looked just as shocked as I was. She just stared at me and I
saw Baby Girl’s blue eyes on her mother’s face. Baby Girl was still crying but I could hardly hear her, blood was pounding in my head. Here it is, I am about to get fired for the first time, I thought as I tried to brace myself for the Mother’s reaction. The Mother stared at me a moment longer, turned around and walked back down to her barn and her horses. Baby Girl kept crying until I offered her a princess BandAid for her hands. I am a thief.

* * *

I didn’t lose my job. I went home that night and returned to work the next day as if nothing had happened. In a way, nothing had. Baby Girl had called me Mommy, just like she had been doing for weeks. The Mother heard the words and had no reaction. Perhaps another mother would have fired me right then and there. Perhaps another mother would have said, “Thanks for all your help, but I’ll take it from here.” The Mother wanted me to be a surrogate to her out-of-control children. She wanted me to take the reins for a bit. Every time the Mother went down to her barn, she left moments spent with her only daughter in the house for me to pick up, like socks and throw pillows. The Mother wasn’t ready to mother. So a child became a mommy in her place.

Three years have passed and, every once in a while, I walk up to that impressive front door, take a deep breath, and open the door. Just one dog jumps up to lick my face now and the house still looks as if a train has gone through each room. The only differences are the Mother and Baby Girl. The Mother still trains and breeds her horses, but now she also packs her kids’ lunches and picks them up from school on time. I still call her daughter Baby Girl but, to her, my name is Dani.
Marty Salgado

I had a problem with being Mexican.
It wasn’t until kindergarten when I began to grasp that there were differences between me and the other kids in my classroom. I wanted to be viewed the way I saw myself—normal. Mexican was not normal to me.

I was afraid that I would be labeled by the other students as living in the Huntington Beach “Slater Slums”: a barrio between Slater and Warner streets with the biggest cross street being Beach Boulevard. The busiest street that takes you all the way downtown to the beach. The “Slater Slums” consisted of a collected row of one or two bedroom apartment buildings attached to one another with old chipped white and beige paint. Those apartments consisted of either two Mexican families or one large family. Inside the neighborhood tract were tiny houses that were built in the 1970s with cartoon bed sheets for curtains and black wrought iron gates dividing the end of the yard from the sidewalk.

While driving to school, I would pass this neighborhood in the morning. On one side of the street were mobile homes and on the other, Mexican men standing, talking, and waiting for somebody to drive by and ask for help. I didn’t want to be perceived as Mexican because I felt that I would be associated with these men.

The other neighborhoods in Huntington beach did not look like the Slater Slums. They were full of four bedroom homes with lawns that were kept as neatly as how I imagined the insides of the homes to be. Even though I didn’t live in the Slater Slums, I still didn’t live where all of the other kids
lived. My family and I lived in my grandmother’s one story, three bedroom house with light brown exterior and dark brown trim. The house was located in Norwalk, CA, a hot city in L.A. County. It was in this neighborhood where my mom grew up. The house was about an hour commute in heavy morning traffic. The drives were fun. When I think back to my childhood, most of my memories were sitting in my family’s green Toyota Tercel or in the back seat of our red Toyota Tacoma truck. It was always a time for me to unload everything that I had kept in all day. I would talk, and talk and talk and my sister would be so annoyed, “Will you stop talking!” she yelled. In the backseat of those cars, I listened to music, I listened to my mom talking to my dad, and I constantly looked out the window watching the cities roll by and catching glimpses of neighborhoods from the freeway with kids playing in the street. We were always in transition going to school, being picked up from school and always waiting.

* * *

I spoke English, my native language, and I spoke it as well as any other six-year old could. I realized though that there were other students who were Mexican, but they didn’t sound like me. They had accents, and they dressed differently. My mother usually dressed me up in a collared shirt with different designs like lines of swimming turtles and a pair of denim pants. The other Mexican kids wore dark blue sweats, (the kind I would wear as pajamas at night) and white or red t-shirts with bootleg drawings of American cartoons. I didn’t look like them, yet those kids and I both socially shared the same ethnicity.

College View Elementary School was a predominantly white school. In my view there was a clear difference
between which neighborhood each student came from. I wanted to be accepted and fit in with the white students because in my mind that was having class. I had this feeling of inadequacy when I compared myself to them and I didn’t understand it. I was light skinned with freckles and red hair, so it was easy to conceal myself even though inside I knew I was Mexican—but it wasn’t my choice to be Mexican.

My mom would pack my lunch before I went to school and put everything in a plastic shopping bag from the Stater Bros. grocery store chain. The Stater Bros. grocery store had a sixties look to it, inside the color scheme was dark brown, with a light brown tile. The store’s employees wore white collared shirts, brown ties, and brown aprons. It had the best deals and prices for groceries—I saw it as the outdated “cheap” family store. How could I show up to school with a cheap brown plastic bag from this grocery store? I would quickly, when no one was looking, change out the brown Stater Bros. bag for a white Albertson’s grocery bag that my mom probably brought home after picking up last minute grocery’s from the Albertson’s near her work. Albertson’s had white tile, and blue lettering. The store seemed bright, and inviting with wide aisles, and tall walls of white, a very high class market. The food was a little more expensive, and as a child I believed only people who could afford the higher price would shop there, making the store seem more elite for me. The Albertson’s employees didn’t have ties, but their uniform was a casual short sleeve white collared shirt, and a blue apron—less professional than Stater Bros., but more modern. When I got into the car one morning with my lunch, my mom asked, “What happened to the other bag?” and I just made the excuse that there was a hole in the other one.

* * *

Marty Salgado
I always felt lucky when I was invited to birthday parties. I wanted to be invited to the other kids’ houses just so I could feel accepted and wanted. Looking back, if I hadn’t been invited to a person’s birthday party, I would’ve thought that it was because I wasn’t good enough. It was also a big deal to me because I would feel left out if the other kids came back to school from the weekend with inside jokes about their sleepovers. I was constantly comparing my life to the other students and when I saw similarities, I was thrilled. I tried to like the same movies or cartoons that the other kids watched. I was always so quiet, always listening, watching, and too shy to talk about anything unless I had confidence that a joke would be funny, or had valid commentary about whatever was going on in the schoolyard. Whenever I was invited, for a brief moment in time, I would feel a part of a family I wasn’t ashamed of, I would be in a house and pretend that I belonged there.

When I was invited to Matt Fox’s birthday party I remember feeling so lucky! Matt was the guy everybody liked because he was the class clown, and all of the teachers liked his mom because she volunteered to make posters for class events since she knew how to write calligraphy.

I remember feeling jealous because his mom seemed so cool, and all of the kids got along with her. She was outgoing enough and young enough to interact with us by making jokes or asking questions or catering to what kids our age liked. His house was in the same tract as our elementary school. I’d be out on the field at lunch or recess and daydream about living in a house in the surrounding neighborhood. Matt not only had an awesome family, and lived in a house, but it was also right next door to school.

His birthday party was after school and me and the
other kids got to play on the trampoline in his backyard. If you jumped high enough you could see over the fence to our school. I remember seeing his dad come into the house after work. It was like a scene out of a 50’s sitcom show. His dad came in with a briefcase, Matt, his mom and even the dog came over and greeted the man of the house. He was tall, had beige pants and a white striped collared shirt, he looked beat. Later on that evening, I remember going to the bathroom and seeing Mr. Fox sitting in the den with the blinds shut halfway. I could see he still had his brown diamond business socks on while his feet were propped up on the recliner, reading the newspaper in the dimly lit den. I remember thinking, “This is what a family is supposed to look like.”

* * *

On an early evening years later, the summer after I graduated college, now twenty-two, I was driving with my parents to the Huntington Beach Central Park. I realized the life I had envisioned in elementary school was different in the way that I was able to look past my superficial view on society. Instead of comparing my parents and family to Matt Fox’s, I began to investigate who my parents were. As I drove along to the park my natural sense of direction began pulling me to turn right at the upcoming light towards the shortest way to the park, but my father said turn left.

I soon realized that by taking my father’s directions he was leading the family towards the Pacific Coast Highway. A scenic route for the evening. As we approached the beach front highway the familiar salty sea air of my childhood entered my senses causing me to brake late, almost hitting the car in front of me. As we peered to our right hand side of the highway we saw the half a mile stretch of the Hyatt Regency
Resort, newly built to attract travelers looking to have a piece of the Huntington Beach that had been a part of my whole life.

After driving past that stretch of luxurious expanse there was a large plot of land that stood empty, lifeless, and covered in dirt. What was so interesting about that plot of land is that it held more memories of my childhood than anyone would ever know. It was this plot of land that forced me to remember that while I was a kid worrying about the family I didn’t have, I never acknowledged my own family. I started to think about my own parents. Were they happy with who they were? If they were, why wasn’t I?

* * *

As I stared at the vast expanse of dirt I looked at it with open eyes, but I didn’t see it as empty. I saw not what was there, but what had been there. A building built as a restaurant called The Grinder where my parents first met and worked at. A couple of yards to the left of the restaurant, was a dinky one story motel that resembled the Bates Motel, except less grungy. Surrounding the parking lot of the restaurant and motel was a black asphalt that weeds grew through. I remember always wanting to explore that parking lot, wondering who stayed at that motel, and what the rooms looked like inside, but the main attraction of that lot was, The Grinder.

In my memory I walked into The Grinder bustling full of hungry patrons, waiting for their coffee cups to be filled. Little did they know that at the end of their meals their tips would pay for the gas in the car drove me to school. The backpacks that I would need, and anything else our family needed.
I would walk in through the front door of the restaurant and be immediately hit with scents of coffee, pancakes and grease pan meats. The coffee seemed more caffeinated in order to wake its five a.m. patrons. It was the smell that my mother’s clothes would smell like when she got home. The walls of the restaurant were white and the beams that held up the ceiling were green. To the right of the entrance was the hostess station that held the menus with items such as the buffalo burger, tostada fresca, or their breakfast skillet, and always, a small wicker basket full of orange, yellow, and green lollipops. I remember asking my mom to bring one home for me, and one time when I was at home and on the phone with her, I asked her to send it through the telephone wire—that’s how good they were. To the left of the front door was the claw machine, filled with prized stuffed animals that always seemed to work for other people except for me. I would always be upset when one of the older patrons would see me struggle, so they gave the machine a try and won a prize for me. As grateful as I was, I wanted the victory to be my own.

* * *

Thinking about The Grinder restaurant allows me to inspect who my parents were. They were not only my parents working for me, they were working for themselves too. My mom worked all day while my dad slept and then picked my sister and I up from school. At night my father would work at the restaurant Coco’s, bussing tables. My sister and I would wait there until my mom got off of work to come pick us up. Sometimes if my parents carpooled, my sister, my mother and I would wait for him to finish bussing his tables sometimes until eleven or twelve at night out in the parking lot. In order to kill time we would spend most of the night sitting in
the Huntington Beach Public Library doing homework and eating a dinner of blueberry bagels or sandwiches cut into diamond halves and packaged in plastic containers for the vending machine. My mother and father worked hard, and they devised the best system they could that would work for our school schedule.

* * *

When I’m driving with them or if I am the passenger I sometimes lift my hand and touch their faces the way a mother or father reaches behind their seat on long trips to touch their kids legs while they are driving to make sure they are still there. I look at the wrinkles alongside my father’s eyes, and the lines on my mother’s face when she smiles or laughs. Those were made through tears, and tips, and running from table to table. Their work didn’t reflect any insecurities that I held as a child.

* * *

When I think of the phrase “Living the American dream” I think of equality and even materialistic views on life as a citizen in the United States. I believe the American dream is what my family and I are after, or at least trying to achieve, but it is something that has never been easy. Perhaps it is something that happens when you gain courage, being focused on what you want, and losing yourself on the way not because you want to, but because we have no other choice.

For most people, we get to a point in this journey of life where we we begin to see our lives through different eyes, our past becomes something else, and our future an
unknown thought beyond our recollection. Who we are becomes a staple question in our life. When you’re young, you don’t know as much as you think you do. Somewhere down along the line we do have to think about our place in society. We ask ourselves questions like, “Who am I?” and “Why do I feel the way I feel?” and for me, being Mexican always comes to the forefront. These questions forced me to investigate my family, and to look at them. I always go away wondering who I am, and why I felt ashamed for being different. I look at my parents now and I see the anchor that was needed for my life, a sense of reflection.

Life’s hard, hard, and it’s hard. Being Mexican doesn’t have to mean Slater Slums, it can mean other things, and I do believe that some people get so stuck on the fact that where they come from defines who they are, but it doesn’t have to, and people who come from different backgrounds and communities like the Slater Slums or even the beautiful tree lined neighborhood where Matt Fox lived should know that.

Being Mexican I thought was terrible. It wasn’t until thinking back to my childhood that I realized that my parents hard work not only in their jobs, but with taking care of a family has more to do with surviving than it does being Mexican. The altered version of the reality that I had once known or conjured up for myself left me insecure, inadequate, and always questioning my place in society. I may be Mexican, but I am more than just a label.
Father and son made their way up and through the tree lined winding highway heading north toward Mt. Shasta, gaining elevation and crisp wilderness air with every mile. It was the day before Thanksgiving and the rest of the family had arrived days earlier to the mountain cabin, enjoying a break from their busy lives. Father and son had commitments that made it impossible for them to take more than a couple days off that week.

“Dad, could you turn that shit down?” said Jack of the squawking AM talk radio station that crackled through the car’s front speakers.

Richard reached for the dial and dimmed the sound. “You might learn something if you give these guys a listen,” he said with a smirk.

“Oh Jesus..,” mumbled Jack, barley lifting his head from the book he was now mostly reading to quell any conversation of the stories he had heard far too many times before from his father.

The radio station was losing reception and sound going in and out of the winding turns. Richard turned the volume up slightly glancing at Jack to see a reaction. Jack did not look at his father, but turned to the window to find distraction in the passing pines, cedars, and firs whose greens were becoming more dense as they drove. He watched patches of clouds in blue skies when tree tops and hillsides granted views. An occasional deer lie distorted and bent, hunched off the road side from a vehicular collision. Jack kept his eyes
out for deer in the trees that still held a breath of life, but saw only blue jays and magpies sweeping across the road and between branches.

“Do you want to grab a quick bite? I think we’re gonna miss your mother’s lunch.”

“Sure, sounds good,” Jack replied fighting the urge to mention that the food mom prepared would be ready for them regardless of their arrival. “There’s that little town up a couple exits from here. Not sure if anything’s open the day before Thanksgiving though.”

They pulled off the highway into the small nameless town with only a gas station, a five and dime, and a diner. Not the type of diner you would see on a bustling city street corner, but a diner built for the few who populated the surrounding hillsides, and the occasional passersby that happened to see reason to stop on this stark stretch of wooded highway. The adjacent five and dime store displayed a “Closed” sign and the diner appeared empty of business. There were no cars in the dirt lot, but the blue curtains over several windows were pulled back and a light shown from somewhere inside.

“This place looks unique,” said Richard.

“Come on Dad, it’s a diner;” he replied as they unbuckled, reached for wallets and phones, and opened car doors. Stretching from the hours in the car they approached and entered through a squeaking paint chipped wood door.

A waitress peered from the kitchen and told them to sit anywhere. An older guy with dark hair and tanned features came out from a rear patio door wearing a cook’s apron, still exhaling his cigarette smoke as he entered. He moved in a rushed fashion behind the wood bar and threw a dish towel from his back pocket on the counter top, wiping it down and paying no mind to the two customers who were seating
themselves. He wore simple blue beanie and a portion of a faded tattoo stretched below the white short sleeve of his right arm. He continued in quick and rushed movements with his cleaning actions of the bar top and area. It was as if he was expecting a bustling crowd at any minute.

The waitress said something from the back kitchen and he raced to the rear, still paying no mind to the only two patrons in the place; which was weird for Jack to think because now he was overhearing a conversation between cook and waitress that made it sound like the old guy owned the place too. Maybe he didn’t need the business. Or maybe he was having a sour day, missing out on a family gathering as well.

The waitress came over with menus. “We make really good burgers and it will just take a minute to fire up the grill if your interested,” she said with a smile.

Richard was busy pushing buttons on his new phone, checking messages and sending off texts to the waiting family at the cabin. Jack looked to his father and then to the waitress shaking his head.

“Two burgers medium would be great,” he said smiling back at her and at the scene of his father in complete unawareness to the waitress standing next to their table. The old guy could be heard clambering and banging about in the kitchen making it more obvious to anyone that he was not having a “best” day.

“Would you guys like something to drink?” she asked with a bigger grin on her face to the commotion coming from the back.

“I’ll have one of those bottles of porter,” said Jack pointing to a chalk board beer list.

Jack and waitress looked toward Richard and then Jack sprung up again, “And my dad will have a Budweiser, or
anything light and American.” He was now wearing a large grin as his father continued to fuss over his new phone.

Jack scanned the interior and stood up to get a closer look at some paintings hanging around the place. They were all done in watercolors and of sunflowers, obviously painted by the same artist. Each was strung with a small price tag in the twenty dollar range. A typical price for a small town artist, thought Jack.

After exhausting his examination of the local décor, Jack sat back down at the small table with their beers now in place. His father finally brought his eyes up from his phone. “This thing is pretty nifty,” he said holding up his new treasure.

“It’s a phone dad. Hey why don’t you have a drink of beer.”

“Oh,” said Richard, now back to the realization of their lunch affair in this diner. He picked up his glass and both tilted beers to “cheers” their lunch excursion and drive to the family get-together.

“We aren’t far from Dunsmuir now,” said Richard cheerfully. “I remember taking you up there for a soccer game when you were in high school.”

“Oh yeah, it was a tournament, I remember that,” he replied in a more youthful voice and sense of interest than before; this being a story that had not played out in endless rotation from his father’s usual repertoire. “My team lost as usual, but that was a cool weekend. I remember spraining my ankle real bad in our last game too. I came out of the game for a bit and iced my foot. And then I remember putting my cleat back on to try and get back in the game but nearly collapsing because of the pain.”

“I had to practically carry you back to the car. You slept the whole ride home.”
“Yeah, I remember that too.”

Richard lifted his beer and they once again toasted. The grumpy old cook came around from the back with their burgers and slid them down on their table without nearly a word. Maybe it was a grunt. The father and son ate without words, but acknowledged their pleasure with the burgers with small grunts of their own.

The waitress came by and asked if they would like anything else. “Just the check,” said Richard now visibly alert to their place and surroundings.

She returned with their bill saying, “Sorry for my father’s rudeness.”

“Oh no worries,” said Jack with an understanding smile.

Richard paid their bill and they were off as quickly as they arrived. With only an hour or so more to get to the cabin, the father and son went back to their routine. Richard listening intently to his talk radio, Jack trying to concentrate on reading, but watching the trees roll by more than anything. In an hour they would be at a home full of brothers, sons, nieces, nephews, grandkids, moms, dads, grandmas, and grandpas.

They passed the sign for the city limits of Dunsmuir without a word. But a moment later Jack sprang up, “Hey Dad, there’s the field where I had that soccer game.”