The Great American Essay

Edited by David Bruce

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My Mother's Death

By David Bruce

Josephine Bruce, my mother, died at 7:40 p.m. Saturday, June 14, 2003 at Hickory Creek Nursing Center in The Plains.

She could have died a few weeks earlier at Doctors Hospital in Nelsonville, but I made the decision to have her connected to a machine that would breathe for her. In doing this, I went against her wishes that she had very clearly expressed to me previously.

As it happened, this was most likely the right thing to do. She was connected to the breathing machine for less than 12 hours and was then able to breathe on her own until she died Saturday. It was possible that she would have had to stay connected to the breathing machine for the rest of her life.

She forgave me for my decision.

In the additional weeks that remained to her, the most important thing we did together was to write letters to all of her children. The basic message of each letter was the same: I love you and I know that you love me.

When she died, all of her children were with her.

She knew she was dying. When I saw her that morning, I knew that she was very ill and I told her that this might be the day she died. When her doctor arrived, he let her know that she would most likely not survive.

This is exactly the way it should be. If I were dying, I would want to know.

She was not afraid of death. She knew that it was time, and I think that she welcomed it. Like the old song says, as a Christian, she was wearing her traveling shoes. However, like most of us, she was probably afraid that dying might be painful.

Her dying was not painful. Doctors are humane, and pain management is now an advanced art. Morphine took away the pain.

Her dying was fairly quick. Her doctor told me that she would probably die within 12 to 24 hours. From the time he told me that to the time she died took seven and a half hours.

The seven and a half hours were a misery, but to wait 12 to 24 hours for her to die would have been an extended stay in Hell.

When she died, one of her sons was holding her right hand and one of her daughters was holding her left hand. Her other children were gathered around her.

Her death was quiet. The time between each breath grew longer and longer and soon there was no next breath.

One minute she was alive and breathing. The next minute—with no change in her expression—she was dead.

While she was dying, we played her favorite gospel and country music on her stereo. She died as her favorite singer, John Denver, was singing about going home again.

People who live in nursing homes tend to have few opportunities to do good deeds that involve money, but one thing she did was to send flowers to the Hickory Creek Nursing Center kitchen to thank the kitchen workers because she liked the food.

People who live in nursing homes tend to have few possessions. Her most valuable possessions were her music CDs, which—as she requested—her children divided among themselves.

An additional possession, which is valuable in educating future doctors, was her body. Months before she died, she donated her body to the Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine. That night, very quickly after she died, her body was taken away to the college.

That was her final good deed. Her gift will allow a future doctor to be taught how to help people.

People treated her well, both in life and in death.

As a very ill patient, she spent time in O'Bleness Hospital in Athens and in Doctors Hospital in Nelsonville. At each hospital, she received excellent care.

Of course, she spent much time at Hickory Creek Nursing Center in The Plains. No one who works there is paid

even half what his or her work is worth. In this society, a bad actor in a bad TV series can make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year while the people doing very much more valuable work in nursing homes make very much less money.

Because of my mother, I see the value of such government programs as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. I see how valuable they are in helping provide care for old people. If anything, more money should be poured into these programs and more money should be poured into the government programs that help children. (Healthy adults such as myself should work and pay the taxes that support these programs.)

Of special note is a good deed performed by the Reverend Denver Dodrill. Not being a church-going man—I went to church when my mother went before she began living in nursing homes—I hadn't seen him in two or three years. However, I called him and he came to pray with my mother and read to her Psalm 23, which includes, "Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me …."

As my mother lay dying, and after, Hickory Creek Nursing Center treated her children well. They provided a private room for her, one big enough for all seven of her children and a few other relatives to sit in. The kitchen workers provided coffee, tea, water, and food. Some of the Hickory

Creek employees hugged me and said I was a good son. After she died, we were given all the time we wanted to say goodbye. We also made use of the chapel.

Many people helped my mother and took care of her and comforted her children. She was much loved—and not just by her children.

War

By Mallory Cervantes

"What do you think you are doing?" yelled my father, as the breath coming out of his mouth blew our hair straight back like we were in a speeding convertible. My father's face was beet red and I think I recall smoke pouring out of his ears. The four of us—Missy, my older sister; David, my older brother; Anna, my cousin; and I—stared at my dad with our eyes bulging out of our sockets. This is how it ended. Our game, which we liked to call "War," had come crashing to a halt the second we were caught in the act. How were we to explain our actions? Or could we?

Missy, David, and I were nearly inseparable. We played only with each other when we were at my dad's house. We invented games more often than one could imagine and played them for great lengths of time. By great lengths of time, I do not mean hours—I mean days or weeks. We loved our made-up games.

I cannot quite remember how the game "War" started, but I am certain that it began in an effort to cure our boredom, as most of our games did. Missy was about ten years old when we invented the game, which made David six years old and me five. "War" was self-explanatory. We would demolish each other's rooms—and occasionally other rooms—while the other was away. However, there was so much more to it.

The last time we played, which was about two years after we invented the game, is the occasion I remember most vividly. "Let's play War!" Missy exclaimed. David's and my eyes lit up. How much fun!

"What's 'War'?" asked Anna, our cousin who is four months older than me.

"A game," we all replied. "You get to send messages to each other, then switch rooms when the time is right and mess up each other's rooms. Then we switch back and see what the other team did to our room."

Anna looked just as excited as we hoped she would be. The game was on.

We scurried upstairs and grabbed our supplies: a Tonka truck, paper, pencils, books, and any other things we thought we might need. After we gathered our supplies, we picked our respective teams and rooms; David, Anna, and I were teamed up together because we were much younger than Missy, who was four years older than David and almost six years older than Anna and me. Apparently, her age gave her an advantage over us because she had more experience in ways to ruin someone else's room. This left Missy a one-person team, but she didn't mind because if it were just the three of us, it would have been that way also.

David, Anna, and I chose David's room to set up camp, while Missy chose the bathroom. Normally, Missy would

choose her bedroom, but she decided to choose the bathroom because of all the extra supplies (i.e. shaving cream, water, things in the cabinets, etc.).

When the doors shut to our designated area, it began. David, Anna, and I wrote down a message, loaded it into the Tonka truck, and sent it across the hall. The truck crashed into the door, which informed Missy inside that there was a message awaiting her.

Of course, we would receive the truck back after a few minutes. The poor little truck went back and forth, from door to door carrying what we thought were terrorizing messages, such as "Are you ready for what we are going to do to your room?" and "We are going to tear your room apart!" Every once in a while, I would send excerpts from a Disney book, based solely on the fact that it made my sister so incredibly angry. It was fun to make her mad.

David, Anna, and I devised our plan. David suggested our first move once we were in the enemy's door. "Let's put Vaseline on the toilet seat and door handle. Then we can put Saran Wrap on the toilet, so if she tries to pee it will spill all over the floor."

Anna and I nodded in agreement, but since we didn't have any Saran Wrap, someone had to be the gopher and retrieve it from the kitchen. We had to be careful because anyone caught by Missy in the hallway would be taken captive.

Being the youngest, I was voted the gopher. We cracked the door open and peered into the empty hallway. The truck had just been sent over to Missy's territory and was inside the bathroom. I bolted down the hallway to the stairs. Whew! I made it! I grabbed the Saran Wrap from the kitchen and crept back up the stairs. I sneakily looked around the corner of the wall; there was no one in sight. I ran like a prisoner escaped from jail to the safety of our room. I had made it.

We had received the Tonka truck back with a message telling us to "beware of the things to come." Our plans were almost finished; we just needed a few more ideas of what to do to the bathroom once we exchanged rooms.

"What if we put toothpaste on the mirror and stuck toilet paper to it?" asked Anna. What a great idea! It would create such a mess and would be so funny looking! David and I loved it.

Then I decided that we would cover the bathtub, and everything else for that matter, in shaving cream. That was it. We finished our plan and were ready to put it into effect.

Bang! The Tonka truck hit our door with a message saying that Missy was going downstairs and not to invade her turf. This was it; we had the chance to get her when she didn't see it coming.

"Do not go in the bathroom, guys," she warned us. Obviously, we did anyway. When you tell little children not to do

something, especially in a game, you know they will do it anyway. That is just what she intended. Sly as a fox, that Missy.

Missy went downstairs and stood around the bottom of the steps, listening for our door to open and the pitter-patter of our feet to head down the hallway. We entered the bathroom and found a piece of paper detailing her plans folded up on the countertop. Aha! We had caught her! David, Anna, and I thought that Missy would not be able to carry out these plans because we had her territory and she was clueless–or so we thought.

Click. The door was shut. David, Anna, and I began to put our plan to action. David put Saran Wrap on the toilet so perfectly that there was not a single wrinkle in the material. He grabbed the Vaseline from the cabinet in the bathroom and covered the toilet seat, handle, and door handle in the gooey mess.

I shook up the shaving cream so hard that I thought it would burst open in my hands. I shot it out all over the bathtub and covered the shower walls. The shower and tub looked like it had snowed all over.

Anna and I dabbed toothpaste on the giant mirror above the sinks and ripped little shreds of toilet paper and stuck it to each blob. David stood guard at the door to make sure that Missy did not come barging in and ruin our surprise.

Little did we know that while we were terrorizing her base, she had snuck back upstairs to do a little terrorizing of her own. Rats! We had fallen into her trap, just like she wanted.

In our territory, Missy covered the hanging wall-mirror in shaving cream, put shaving cream on the walls, messed up the beds, threw the toys all over the room, threw homemade paper confetti all over the room, and eventually put a plastic cup full of water on the top of the door. The water was a brilliant idea and we did not think twice when we spied on her and saw her carry that plastic cup into our area. Missy planned on us flinging the door open and having the water fall on top of us.

Back in the bathroom, Anna and I were putting the finishing touches on the mirror when we heard a knock on the door. David answered it, but cracked it just a little in fear of Missy standing on the opposite side. It was my dad! He pushed the door open and saw what a disaster we had created in the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" he screamed. We just stared in disbelief. How could we describe our antics to our hot-tempered father?

"Where is your sister?" he yelled directly at David and me. There were no words. Even if I had tried to open my mouth, nothing would have come out. We both pointed our little fingers directly across the hall.

Of course, my sister had heard my dad yell and was more frightened when he came in the room. The plastic cup dropped from the door and spilled ice-cold water all over my dad's head. I think he might have sizzled. As strange and unreal as it seems, the water only fueled the fire—since when does water *fuel* a fire?

Anna did not get yelled at because she was his niece, but the three of us got an earful. He continued to yell at us as he examined both rooms and the demolition we caused. For once, I did not break down into tears because I thought it was funny. This was one of the very few times I thought my dad yelling was funny. My dad—when yelling—was a scary man.

My father left the room with the warning that we "better clean everything up good enough so that nobody could tell what we did." We always did this anyway, so it was not much of a punishment.

The four of us cleaned the rooms, after inspecting our own territory and what the enemy had done to it, of course. We had never laughed so hard together while cleaning and thinking about how "fired up" my dad had been about the situation.

Little did he know we had played this game on a regular basis for a few years, but we will keep that little secret to ourselves.

Breaking Down

By Rob Downey

Growing up, I had many best friends. Friends whom I could hang out with, and talk with, and have fun with. But none of my friends ever matched the friendship that Mickie and I had.

I met Mickie when he moved into my school in eighth grade. Mickie and I had everything in common. We both liked to play video games, basketball, and golf. If one of us did it, so did the other one. From the first time we hung out, everyone could tell that we would be inseparable. All the guys at our school knew not to mess with one of us because they knew that if they messed with one of us, they were messing with both of us. We had each other's backs from day one and didn't let anything happen to each other. If I heard someone had been talking shit to Mickie, I would be in his face the next time I saw him. And if Mickie heard that anyone had been talking shit to me, then they had better watch out because he was a crazy motherfucker. I thought that it would always be this way. I didn't think that anything could change what we had. That was until things began to fall apart for him.

In eighth grade Mickie and I both made the basketball team and that's where our friendship began. Our coach didn't really like either one of us, so we were always sitting on the

end of the bench ragging on Coach Gerard and all his "favorite players." We would sit down at the end of the bench and say things like, "Wonder what crawled up Gerard's ass and died tonight," or "Wonder where Adam (Gerard's favorite player) took Gerard out last night?" We had a ball ragging on everybody because we knew that we could take anybody on that floor if it came down to it.

After basketball season, Mickie and I had no other obligations so we began to hang out in our spare time after school, too. We would play video games or basketball, or go golfing. We did all the fun stuff good friends do in their spare time. My parents never really approved of us hanging out all the time because they knew of many of the things we did like drinking and smoking.

The summer before our freshman year in high school, all we did was drink and get smoked out. We had a great time. My parents always told us we shouldn't smoke marijuana because it is a "gateway drug" and it would lead to the abuse of other drugs. But we never listened to them because we had made a pact that neither one of us would ever use any other drugs. We had seen what some of the other drugs our friends were using was doing to them, and we didn't want to end up like them fiending for some cocaine at 2 o'clock in the morning or spinning out of control on methamphetamines (crystal meth).

Entering high school was a huge change for Mickie and me because unlike in middle school Mickie and I didn't have many classes together. Mickie was definitely not the most book-smart person and he really had no desire to do well in school, but I figured his street smarts would take him a long way in life. If you said to Mickie, "Hey, Giz, what's the square root of 121," or "Who invented the light bulb," you would probably hear in response, "Who gives a shit," followed by him laughing hysterically. But suppose you said, "Hey, Giz, I need a hundred bucks. Got any ideas," then he would sit you down and give you a crash course on how to hustle a few bucks and in 5 minutes you would have 20 different options on how to get that money. That is what I figured would take him a long way in life.

That next summer is when all things began to change for us. My parents made me get a job and I began working all the time. With me being at work all the time, Mickie and I really didn't have as much time to hang out and he began hanging out with a different group of people, and so did I. Instead of playing video games and getting high, like Mickie and I would do, my new friends and I would go to the mall or go golfing. When I started hanging out with these people, I began to realize that there are other ways to have fun than getting high or getting drunk. Unfortunately, Mickie's new friends not only sat around all day and got high, but they got higher and

higher by messing with other drugs like cocaine and crack and crystal meth. And that's when our pact came to an abrupt halt.

When school started, Mickie and I began hanging out again. Things had changed over the summer, though. I had come to the realization that I needed to begin trying harder in school and start looking at colleges, and Mickie had decided that he didn't need school anymore.

I can recall about halfway through the school year Mickie coming up to me in the hallway and saying, "Man, fuck this shit! I'm outta here! I don't need this shit!"

After calming him down so I could figure out what he was flipping out about, he told me how the principal had just called him down to his office and told him that he wouldn't have enough credits to graduate on time. He then went on to tell me that he had just signed his papers to drop out of school. Hearing this from him devastated me. I knew that he was pissed off and frustrated that he wouldn't be able to graduate on time, but I never thought he would take it to this level.

When Mickie went home and told his dad what he had done, his dad was so pissed he kicked him out of the house immediately, and this might have even been a bigger mistake than him dropping out of school. After his dad kicked him out, he moved into a house with a guy he had just met, a guy

who was known around town as being a druggie and a multiple drug user.

Time went by and I continued to do my thing at school and work and began talking to Mickie less and less to the point that I couldn't even get ahold of him and he would never call me. I came to find out that he had begun getting even further into a lot of the harder drugs like cocaine and crystal meth and crack.

After about a year or so went by and I had not seen or talked to Mickie, I ended up running into him in a local pizza shop, where he had begun working as a dishwasher. We didn't have that much time to talk because he was working and his boss didn't like his employees standing around chatting, but I definitely noticed that a few things about him had changed. I could see the black bags under his eyes, probably from lack of sleep and staying up all night on cocaine. I also noticed that he had lost a considerable amount of weight which could be attributed to many of the drugs he was using.

All this began to bother me even more because if a person walking down the street saw Mickie, all they would see would be a high school dropout or a druggie. But I knew this description was way off. I knew Mickie was much more than that, and he had the potential to be much more than that. So I guess all along my parents may have been right. Maybe marijuana is a "gateway drug" for some people and all it does

is lead to the use of other drugs. Maybe the marijuana did lead to his lack of motivation and lack of desire to do well in school. Maybe the marijuana did lead to his breaking down ....

The Court Jester: My Father

By Molly Gedeon

When I think of my family, I immediately think of laughter. The Gedeons are known for a lot of things, some good and some even better. However, the most common impression we leave with people is one of outlandish pranks and practical jokes. I am the way I am because of my family; my sense of humor and outlook on life is in large part due to my father. My father, a 51-year-old magistrate, is the funniest man I know. Most people can't figure him out and hardly anyone appreciates his humor more than I do. The best way I can describe my childhood and young adult life is to explain my father and his role in my upbringing.

Richard Gedeon, or "Dicky-Poo," as I tend to call him, is much more than a practical joker. Dick's a man with a warped and twisted sense of humor; and I mean that in the best possible way. From the minute I came out of my mother's womb, my father began joking with me. My name, Molly, is not my birth name. My parents couldn't decide on a name: Monica or Molly. Personally, I think they just didn't care all that much seeing that I was the third and last child. They had more important things to worry about than a silly little thing like the name of their unborn baby. From the information that I have gathered, my mother wanted to name me Monica and my father wanted to name me Molly. After

about two seconds of intense discussion (I'm sure my sister was screaming for their attention), my parents simply gave up. My father thought they had made a choice; however, it was not the choice my mother thought they had agreed on. The result of all this was eighteen years of my life with two first names. My birth certificate says Monica; however, my father has called me Molly since the second he saw me. This caused many problems in grade school all the way through high school. My teachers didn't know what to call me and my friends always joked about it. On my 18th birthday I filed for a legal name change. Sure enough, the magistrate my case went before was none other than the Honorable Mr. Dicky-Poo Gedeon himself. Although he had every opportunity to play the most horrible joke imaginable—changing my name to something completely absurd—he followed my wishes. On May 4th 2004 I legally became Molly and the joke finally ended, or so I thought. My father now calls me Monica.

Taking advantage of every awkward situation in my life was my father's forte. From joking around at teacher-parent conferences to "interviewing" every boy I've ever brought home, my father lives for any opportunity to laugh or make others laugh. I have never laughed as hard as I did when my father volunteered to become my swim team's mascot. I was eight years old and probably one of the five worst swimmers on the team. The fact that I wasn't the greatest swimmer

never stopped my parents from sitting on the bleachers at every meet screaming their lungs out. I can still hear my father to this day, "Let's go, GEDEON—just don't sink to the bottom of the pool again." There was, however, one meet my parents and entire extended family didn't cheer at all. Instead, they had brown paper bags over their heads with small holes cut out for eyes with signs reading, "We're Not with Gedeon." This of course would make me look up and laugh uncontrollably and then miss the beep off the blocks. However, sitting on the sidelines wasn't cutting it—my dad was getting bored. Thus the idea of "Lake Shore Man," Lake Shore Swim Club's first and last team mascot. He tells me today that the idea came to him in the shower: "the place where all great ideas are born."

With my mom as his accomplice, they sewed, stitched, stapled, and glued the most unflattering superhero costume imaginable. Please picture my father, 6 foot 4 inches and 180 pounds, in bright blue tights, a skintight shirt, a red cape, fins, and a florescent yellow spandex swim cap. "Lake Shore Man" was the hit of all the swim meets. He could be found behind the blocks, on the sidelines, and in the bleachers cheering for every swimmer there. Although I hung my head when he first unveiled himself, *all* of himself, in front of my fellow teammates, I eventually grew proud of my dad. No other parent would dare dress up like a raging lunatic in spandex just to

make the long day of sitting on hard bleachers a little more amusing.

"Lake Shore Man" was not the only character my father created to get a laugh from the crowd. Every year for the past 56 years my entire extended family has gone on a weeklong family reunion at Allegany State Park in New York State. Started in 1949 by my father's parents, Robert and Margery Gedeon, the tradition has carried on ever since. This vacation is my father's time to shine—nothing is off limits here! From pretending to "accidentally" drop my cousin's newborn child into the fire pit (it was only a baby doll he had dressed in the child's exact clothes) to outlandish practical jokes around the campfire, my father is known for pulling the most unexpected and unpredictable jokes during this one week.

The summer of 2003 my father came up with the idea of a game show night while at Allegany. Along with our sleeping bags, food, clothes, and flashlights, my father had secretly packed three full game show host outfits, an entire game show set, and coordinating team attire. One rainy evening everyone was told to gather in the mess hall for a surprise visitor. Once in the mess hall, you were thrown into a cheesy version of *Jeopardy*. With loud music blaring from an old boom box, "Dick Trebek" appeared behind red velvet curtains in the most outlandish outfit imaginable. Dressed in purple pants that were four sizes too small and went up to his

ankles and a hideous floral button-down shirt, he introduced his sidekick, "Vanna," my mother. In an 80's blue bedazzled dress with shoulder pads and pink patent leather pumps, "Vanna" smiled, waved, and turned over the cards in such a way that looked like she must have practiced in front of a mirror for hours. That night the mess hall was shaking with laughter. Every person there was bent over with stomach pains from laughing and wiping the tears out of their eyes. With questions that centered around embarrassing family members that ranged from old boyfriends to how many times my aunt has been married—5, everyone there was involved in the questions.

When I tell stories of my childhood and my father, people usually look at me funny. Some people think he's out of his mind and others think he is just cruel. My father is an amazing man. With a mind like no one else, my father has the unique ability to make any dull situation the most amusing time of your life. Although I have been the butt of countless jokes, I can still look back at my childhood and laugh. My father has given me the ability to laugh at myself, a quality that helps me get through each day. Like my father always says, "If you can't laugh at yourself, you're missing out on some of the funniest moments in life."

Adventures with Baby Grandma

By Christa Hamm

Ever since I can remember, my grandma took care of my baby sister, Melissa, and me every day until we were old enough to attend pre-school. I quickly gave her the nickname "baby grandma," because she was always taking care of me and my baby sister. My grandma was quite unusual, not how you would expect a typical grandmother to behave. She always carried a can of tobacco around like it was her best friend, because she smoked a corn pipe instead of cigarettes. The pipe was made out of a corncob and was the color yellow; she would stuff it with tobacco and then light a match and start puffing away. She had a boyfriend at the time because she and my grandfather divorced many years ago. The boyfriend didn't live with her but they were dating; we didn't get to see much of him. My grandma enjoyed dying her hair often, so there was a tint of purple in her hair at all times. The purple that glowed in her hair came from the chemical reactions with different hair dyes.

My grandmother owned a large property that had two identical houses on it; one was in the front and the other was a few acres behind. She liked to move from one house to the other to change it up a bit. I remember my mother and aunt and uncle coming to help her move all the furniture out of one house and into the other. They would move her bed,

couch, chairs, coffee table and kitchen utensils. Finally, she decided it was time to build a new house way back in the woods for herself and have people rent out the other two identical houses. She began building this new house but found out that she couldn't afford to have it completed, so the builders stopped working on it. It was literally half of a house; all that was built was a two-door garage and a bedroom upstairs. To get to the bedroom upstairs, she had to buy a stepladder on wheels. My grandma lived in a garage for a few years. Her oven, microwave, refrigerator, television, couches, kitchen table, washer, dryer, and dishwasher were all spread out inside her garage. My sister and I loved playing inside the garage with my grandma. It was a space where we could use our imagination to play.

I have several memories of my grandma taking care of us that I enjoy thinking about. I was always embarrassed to be driving with my grandma, because she had an old manual white Ford Fiesta and she would roll down the window to make a crack for the smoke from her pipe to escape from the car. If we were at a stoplight for too long, the car would stall, and she would have to restart it. The car would go back and forth until finally the ignition started up again. "Come on, you old piece of crap, don't die on me now," my grandma would scream while stalled at a stoplight. One day when driving to the market with my grandma, Melissa had an accident and

leaked in her underwear. My sister had a bladder problem when she was younger; she had a hard time holding her pee. "Give me that underwear, Melissa, and I'll get them dry for you before we get to the store," my grandmother said, and she took my sister's underwear and hung them outside of the car from the antenna. There they were for everyone to see hanging from the antenna of the Ford Fiesta. Melissa was screaming with anger, "I want my underwear back, baby grandma. They are going to fly off the antenna!"

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My grandma didn't like to listen to my mother's rules for when she would watch over us. Melissa and I could convince my grandma to let us do whatever we wanted. We both liked to have pacifiers at all times, and our mom was trying to train us not to use them anymore. Once my mom found out that my grandma was giving them to us behind her back, it got ugly. My grandma decided the best way for my sister and me to stop using the pacifiers would be to gather all of them together and cut them into pieces in front of us. She put the cut-up pieces into a frying pan and lit them on fire in front of us. "Now you can no longer use pacifiers when I'm babysitting you," my grandma said, showing us the pacifiers on fire. My sister and I started crying, but eventually we learned that we could suck our thumbs to get the same effect as a pacifier.

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During the hot summers when my grandma took care of us, Melissa and I enjoyed going for ice cream. Any time we were with baby grandma we had to earn our ice cream. She would tell us, "Let's go into the woods and I will show you girls where you can find some beer cans and pop cans that are worth 10 cents." We each had to collect 10 cans to get a scoop of ice cream. In Michigan each beer or pop can was worth 5 cents more than in other states. We would walk to the ice cream store that was also a general store and give all the cans that we collected to the cashier in exchange for some ice cream. I was always embarrassed bringing in 10 beer cans to the store; I thought everyone would think that we were poor.

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While playing in the garage one day, Melissa and I decided that we would make a potion drink for our grandma to have. We used everything that we could find to put in this drink and mixed it together so you wouldn't see what ingredients we used. I remember putting hot sauce, coffee grounds, salt, pepper, ketchup, Sprite, honey and egg whites into this potion drink. My grandma never paid close attention to us, so she didn't know what we were up to. Finally after stirring the drink 25 strokes to get the ketchup and egg to liquefy we gave it to my grandma. "It's a potion drink, baby grandma. You have to try it because we took so much time making it," we

told her. She took one sip of it and her face turned red and she immediately started coughing, then said, "It's a little bitter, so maybe we should feed it to the dog."

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The best trick that we pulled on our grandma was when we were taking a bath in her house. I was always good at convincing my sister to do whatever great idea came to me. While playing in the bathtub with my grandma's colorful glass mini liquor bottles, I thought that we should powder the bathroom with baby powder. After having enough fun in the bathtub, we got out and went to the bath closet to find three family-sized baby powder containers that my grandma had bought from Odd Lots. I told my sister to pour the baby powder all over the bathroom floor. We had a blast doing this. We danced around the powder that we were shaking all over the floor. After 15 minutes of fun, all the three baby powder containers were empty. The bathroom was small enough to leave one inch of baby powder on the ground. We just loved the smell and pure white look the powder left on the floor. We ran to our grandma, "Look at what we did to the bathroom!" She was not happy; it took her a week to clean all the powder off the floor. It didn't help that we were soaking wet while pouring the powder onto the floor; it left a batter-like substance on the ground.

These are the memories and adventures that I had with my grandma and younger sister. I would say that my sister and I were brats when it came to behaving. Out of all the grandkids that my grandma has ever babysat for, my sister and I were the biggest troublemakers. I'm sure my grandma can tell more stories about what we did to her as young children than I can remember. My sister and I enjoyed every day that we spent with her as young children, because we knew it would be an adventurous day.

Starving for Cash

By Louis Infante

It began just like all stupid bets that I have seen begin: five guys sitting around the television, all of whom have probably drank one too many beers. Someone brought up the subject of fasting; I'm not sure if it was someone saying they couldn't go a day without eating or that someone was complaining because they had not eaten. What happened next is a classic example of why you should never make bold statements when surrounded by your friends, especially if you're not in the most sober of states. I made the guarantee that I would have no trouble not eating for a week. Immediately after the fateful words crossed my lips, I knew that my fate was sealed because I was called out instantly.

At this point there was no turning back, but before the bet started the terms had to be negotiated and they were the type of terms you could expect from your best friends. The debate over what fluids I could drink and how I would be monitored throughout the day went on for about an hour before we reached agreement and by then I knew that winning this bet was not going to be easy. The five guys involved decided that if I won the bet they would each pay me $50 and if I lost I would give each of them $25 and believe me they thought that there was no chance that I would win this bet. The rules that were agreed upon were ridiculous: I was al-

lowed only water and a ration of twenty ounces of juice per day and had to be in the presence of one of the people involved in the bet at all times except when I was in class and had to be zip-tied to an electrical fitting next to my bed at nighttime. Of course there were other guidelines that were just ridiculous, such as the rule invented by my friend Mike that stipulated I was allowed to eat as much chewing tobacco and toothpaste as I wanted—this was hilarious to just about everyone but me. The only good thing I got out of the whole deal was that before the bet started at midnight I was to receive a rib and chicken dinner from Damon's, which I devoured hoping it would sustain me for a few days. I was sorely mistaken.

After I went to bed on day one, I was zip-tied to my bed and was assured I would be let go before I had to be at class to give a presentation. When I woke in the morning, I expected someone to come get me out but as the time passed I realized that if I wanted to get to class I would have to chew through the zip-ties which I was not at all happy about. Not eating that morning wasn't a big deal since I'm not a big breakfast eater, but by the time lunch rolled around, I was so hungry I began to seriously doubt whether I would be able to do it for two days let alone seven. At dinner time on the first day the heckling really began as my friends started waving food in front of me and telling me that I might as well quit

now and save myself the misery. I managed to convince myself to try and keep going even though I was by now convinced that my chances were pretty slim. It got worse that night as I was forced to sit in the same room with the people betting against me and shove away about every type of snack food imaginable that they were trying to tempt me to eat all the while listening to the song "Hunger Strike." Day number one had ended with me convinced that I was hopeless and thinking about how stupid I was for making the bet.

I woke up on day two a hungry man but a man determined to prove everyone wrong. As I walked out of the door in the morning, I saw that my competition was not letting up either from the looks of the pieces of paper hanging everywhere in our house with a picture of me and the words "Don't Feed Lou!" printed on them. I thought the worst was over, but soon afterward I saw that they had posted the pictures on the telephone polls uptown—my friends had sunk to new lows. I struggled through class feeling tired and weak, but it started to seem like I was no longer feeling the intense hunger I felt during day one. The heathens continued to harass me during dinner, but I was starting to learn to ignore them and even began suggesting to them that they better find a way to get 50 bucks ready.

Days three through five were a real test and it was during these days of my self-imposed torture that I decided no mat-

ter what, I was not going to lose this bet. It was during these days that the bet became more than trying to win the money—it became a quest to prove to everyone and myself that I could do anything that I set my mind to. These two days also saw an escalation in torture given to me by my opposition as they forced me to walk uptown with them and stand by the restaurants and smell the food. This was extremely brutal not only because I had to smell delicious food, but I was getting weaker and didn't really enjoy walking around all night. By the end of these two days, I was starting to get a bit moody and I was smoking far too many cigarettes. It was obvious to everyone that the lack of food was taking a toll on me. But with day five in the books, I was feeling fairly confident and I could tell that my buddies were getting kind of nervous.

Day six followed the usual routine with a steady supply of heckling but now it was coming from two directions since some people actually started believing that I could finish. I will admit that at this time I was feeling pretty terrible, my vision would occasionally get blurry, and when my opponents gave me an "official" weigh-in, I was shocked to see that I had lost over 20 pounds in only six days which I am sure cannot be healthy. Another thing about this day that surprised me but also gave me some motivation was that friends of mine told me they heard people had bets going on in the

dining halls whether I would make it or not and people whom my roommates know began showing up to deliver some needed words of encouragement. I was honestly shocked at the number of people who knew about this silly little bet. You could tell by the end of day six that my buddies who were so sure only a couple days before that I had no chance of success were now realizing that I was going to finish and more likely than not they were going to have to pay up.

Day seven was the best day ever; I knew I would accomplish my quest. My friends no longer even tried to get me to cave in—they just resigned themselves to the fact that they were going to lose. The effects of starving myself had begun to set in even worse that day. It seemed that everything I tried to read pretty much blurred together and I looked pretty unhealthy, but at that point I didn't even care—I was just so excited that I actually did it. At about eleven at night, I began to prepare myself a feast to eat right after the clock struck twelve. I didn't even care if I would be able to eat it all. I was just excited to try and devour the heap of spaghetti I had put on my plate. When the clock struck midnight, I ate like a champion and talked smack to the losers the entire time.

This story is ridiculous in all aspects. I still cannot believe I actually agreed to do it, but I believe it had an underlying lesson. After I completed this quest, I have yet to be told by

my friends that I can't do something and I feel a greater confidence in myself than before I did it. It sounds strange, but this stupid bet actually helped me gain a better understanding of what I am able to do and see that if I put my mind to something I will succeed.

The Legendary Michael Jordan

By Jon Kondrich

Almost everyone across the globe can recognize the small symbol of a man holding his arm up with a basketball in his hand, the other arm down at his side, and his legs spread out. For the few who do not know what that symbol is and who it stands for, it is the Air Jordan symbol created for Michael Jordan. If you have ever watched or listened to any kind of sporting event, then chances are you have heard the name Michael Jordan. He is the greatest basketball player of all time because of the years playing with the Chicago Bulls.

Michael Jordan grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina where he began his basketball career in high school. After high school, he went on to play for the University of North Carolina, one of the top basketball colleges in the nation. At North Carolina he was named College Player of the Year for both his sophomore and junior years. In 1984, he was drafted into the Chicago Bulls, where he would begin his legacy. He was named Rookie of the Year in his first season with the Bulls. The next season he was injured with a broken foot, resulting in critics speculating about whether he was going to be injury prone his whole career. Jordan proved the critics wrong; for the next seven seasons, he held the NBA's scoring title by averaging 32 points per game. In addition, throughout his career, he was named the NBA's Most Valuable Player

five times (1988, 1991, 1992, 1996, and 1998). Jordan was not only a superior offensive player; he was also named Defensive Player of the Year in 1988. From 1990-1993 he led the Bulls to three straight NBA championships. In 1994 Jordan stopped playing basketball due to the death of his father, and took up professional baseball. When he returned to the game of basketball in 1995, he led the Bulls to the best regular season record in NBA history at 72-10. Also, from 1995-1998 he led the Bulls to another three straight NBA championships.

After the 1998 season, Jordan retired from basketball leaving behind an unbeatable and unbelievable legacy. His career stats at the time were 29,277 points (2nd all time), 2,306 steals (2nd all time), and an incredible 10 scoring titles. Michael Jordan's career statistics alone speak to why he is the greatest player to ever play the game of basketball. He dominated the NBA over his career from 1984-1998. He won six out of eight NBA titles. Jordan crushed the competition, specifically Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. Soon after Michael Jordan joined the league, fans were not even thinking of Magic or Larry Bird; everyone wanted to watch Jordan. He affected the sports world to such an extent that great athletes from around the world playing in their respective games were called the Michael Jordans of their sport. No other NBA player has had as much praise as Jordan. It is easy to call him the greatest to ever play because of his ability on the court

and his outstanding character off the court. Off the court he donated to many organizations. For example, he worked with United Negro College Fund, Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Special Olympics, and America's Promise.

Michael Jordan has his critics. People have argued that Magic Johnson passed the ball better than Jordan; or that Larry Bird had a better three-point shot. There have been other outstanding basketball players like Wilt Chamberlain who had an amazing scoring career, and it could be argued that Chamberlain was as great a scorer as Jordan. Bill Russell was a better rebounder and shot blocker than Michael Jordan. But unquestionably, the overall best basketball player who won the most MVP awards as well as the Best Defensive honor and led his team to three straight NBA championships (twice) is Michael Jordan.

He is easily the best basketball player to ever play the game. All of the other great basketball players had competition. Chamberlain played against Russell; Oscar Robertson competed against Jerry West; and Magic went up against Bird. Yet Jordan destroyed all of his competition—he was so much more superior than his peers. Each of the other basketball greats had only one or two areas in which he excelled. With Russell it was rebounding and blocking, Magic did not have nearly as good of a shot as Jordan did and he had more help

from the number-one NBA scorer on his team, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Bird could shoot the three-point shot better, but he could not score from all over the court nearly as well as Jordan. Not to mention Michael Jordan touched so many people off the court as well by donating to so many organizations. Jordan made the game look effortless and fun. His statistics are evidence that the Jordan of the Chicago years is the greatest player of all time.

The question to ask is will there ever be another like him? It would be ridiculous to say no, but it cannot be denied that he is the first of his kind to ever play the game of basketball as well as he did. He has set the bar for every other basketball player. Michael Jordan will never be forgotten. His achievements will live on forever.

When Chris Met Emily

By Emily Kresiak

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "I did not stalk you!"

"That's fine. You loved me from the start, though. I know what I know, and you know," I paused, then joked, "nothing!"

At that moment, as my boyfriend chased me into the living room, picked me up and tossed me onto the couch, I thought back to my days as a freshman, not knowing, or even caring, who Chris was. And now here he is, tickling me until I almost pee my pants. This isn't your typical love story. It isn't filled with those movie moments (well, maybe a few, but nothing with pianos and Tom Jones in the background, I swear) and it doesn't have a normal boy-meets-girl beginning, because I really met him two years after we were first introduced.

I never really had trouble finding someone to be with of the opposite sex. I didn't date the bad boys or the jocks; I tried to attract men who were quiet and nice. The less drama, the less serious the whole situation had to be. It was my first year of college; I was not expected to marry and buy that white-picket-fence house quite yet. Chris was apparently in the same situation. He dated a lot of people, too, and while most of his relationships were fairly long-term or serious,

some were not. Freshman year of college we both crossed ways, not only in the streets but also amongst mutual friends. Still, we never quite knew each other, just of each other. He was my friend's roommate, some guy who played guitar, was obsessed with movies, and had funky in-your-eyes hair—that and, oh yeah, he had an enormous crush on me. But I never thought much of guys who laid back and watched—chasing wasn't my job.

I had been dating a boy who lived nearly four hours away for the majority of my first year. He was sweet, but a bit of a pretty boy if you ask me, and definitely looked at his reflection while passing mirrors more than I did. He even carried a pocket-sized mirror in his "man purse." Regardless, it was long distance, and it was nice when he visited once a month. I enjoyed the nonchalant feeling of the whole situation, but not of course his high maintenance—there were too many gifts to him of expensive hair gel and designer jeans.

Chris, on the other hand, had his hands full, very full, with a girl here at school. His roommate Kevin, also my friend, had informed me of their relationship, and the nightmares it was causing him day and night. Apparently she was in a sorority, was tall, fairly thin, with shockingly blonde hair, and a voice that could make Fran Drescher turn her head and stare. She was controlling, judgmental, and nasty. The girl sounded crazy, period. I mean, from what I had seen of

Chris, he seemed like a good guy with his head on straight, but why on earth was he with this, and I quote his roommate, "bitch on wheels."

The few times Chris and I spoke, we really had nothing to say to each other. When we would be forced to talk, it was only because his roommate had left the room, and the awkward silence was too much to bear. We asked about each other's classes, exchanged music tastes a few times, and we even once went on an excursion together for a friend's birthday. Chit-chat here and there went in one ear and out the other. Typically, we never really had an opportunity to speak one on one because either Kevin was in the room already holding my attention, or Chris's crazy girlfriend was there doing crunches on the floor and rolling around like a fish which had jumped out of its tank.

Since we shared mutual friends, we would occasionally be invited to the same parties during the end of freshman year, beginning of sophomore year. This caused for much drama between him and the fish. "Oh no, she can't be going—we were invited, hunny! I don't want to go if she is going to be there," she would whine endlessly to him about me. I found it amusing—it never much bothered me. On numerous occasions my friends and I would leave parties because the two of them would show up together. They were sort of like Jekyll and Hyde.

I recall a few times being left alone smoking outside on the porch or on the stoop of one of these parties. Chris would come out and join me. I found it strange when we spoke to one another, and the way that he looked at me, or rather, the way he looked at the ground. It was months before I knew he had beautiful brown eyes; I never once saw them. He would sit and chat and shake a little—a nervous habit, I imagined. His cigarette drags were quick and short, as if enjoying this little moment we were having together, but waiting to hurry back inside to catch his breath. It was cute, I must admit.

As nonchalant and fabulously convenient as I thought my long-distance relationship was, it wasn't. It ended badly, and so did my next two relationships. Everything began so quickly and wonderfully, and ended so soon and horribly. I was always fine on my own, but it was nice to have that company, either here with me or at least over the phone.

At the same time as I was mourning over my newly single life and the boxes of memories I had no use for, Chris was ripping out his hair over his supposedly soon-to-be wife, but she wouldn't be if he could help it. He had already ended things with her four or five times, but it just wasn't getting through that blonde shield. There was yelling and arguing around the clock. He would leave; she would chase. He would meet someone new; she would introduce herself, too.

He would lock the door; she would climb through the window. He may have gotten rid of all of her stuff, but there was no getting rid of her.

This was all thrown at me one night during a get-together. Kevin and I had decided to watch *Sideways*, drink wine, and pretend to have sophistication far beyond any advanced wine lover—a typical night, I would say. Chris tagged along reluctantly. He knew his company was originally needed because he could purchase the wine, as we could not. Halfway through the film, we stepped outside for a cigarette and then, all at once, there it came—word after word of hatred toward this female shot from his mouth. I had never heard him speak so much. I don't think I had ever seen this much emotion ever. He shook his arms about, got it all out, and gave a sigh of relief, and a small but obvious smile. I could tell that he had to leave, even if it was halfway through the movie, but at some point, I knew he'd be back.

Fall quarter of my junior year, everyone returned to school with crazy summer stories, lots of money from their seasonal jobs, and much excitement because finally, we were out of the dorms. Kevin and I decided to room with a girlfriend of mine. We were all very anxious to get settled in and throw a get-together for all of our friends, a sort of welcome-back party. For the first time ever, I had returned to school a single lady. The entire summer I told myself that being alone

was what I needed because men were the scum of the earth, and women were better off without them. Better off without them until you meet someone new, that is.

To my surprise, Chris was one of the people who showed up to our party that night, though he was not the same person. He looked completely different, with a much sharper, defined style. He was sophisticated in his mannerisms and edgy with his remarks. We had hours of discussions on my front porch until the early hours of the morning. Not only did we finish each other's sentences, but also we were blurting out each other's thoughts. We talked about everything that night, from bad relationships to good music, favorite foods to worst books. The weird thing was, we did not have one disagreement. The good thing was, I found out his eyes were brown.

Despite our obvious flirting, we held back, again. I'm not sure why, but we both made it very clear to one another that we were done with relationships for a long time. Both men and women were scum, apparently. Starting up a new relationship was a bad idea. Somehow I knew when he left, as the sun began to rise, we would do the exact same thing the next night, and perhaps the following weekend.

Sure enough, Chris and I were together every single night after that party. We learned more and more about each other and could not believe this hadn't happened sooner. The

awkwardness was still there, but I loved it. We would get up from the couch, and I would trip and fall. He would pour me a glass of water, and then spill it all over my lap. I even recall walking down the street once and nearly falling over when I mentioned his name.

Eventually we both got over the awkwardness. Many times a break in our conversation would send my stomach into knots. For two people who were so alike, it took forever for us to not be nervous around one another. I think the defining moment for us was about two weeks after the party. We were sitting out on my porch, as usual, and a woman walked by carrying bags full of groceries. She appeared to be in her mid-forties, most likely a resident of the town, not a professor or student. As she walked by, she waddled back and forth and hummed some old, cheesy television theme song. Chris and I smiled and waited for her to pass before continuing our conversation. She approached our porch and the moment she walked past us she let out one of the loudest farts I had ever heard in my life. I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard with someone else and acted so childishly. It took about ten minutes of pure silence after that in order to catch our breath.

A few months into our relationship, I decided to tell Chris that I loved him. Some people had said those words to me and vice versa, and he had reluctantly said them to other

girls, but never had we really meant it. I wanted it to be special, maybe even a little cheesy like a love scene in a movie. Perhaps I even wanted that piano and Tom Jones. I decided to write a poem and read it to him New Year's Eve. Romantic, cute, and creative, I thought.

Of course, with such bliss there was sure to be a downfall at some time. Little arguments here and there never seemed to threaten our relationship, though. Since we were so alike, we knew how each other worked immediately. This was good and bad. We knew that since we were both so god-damned stubborn, nothing was going to end a fight until one of us grabbed the other and did one of those Hollywood kisses. We both like to be right, so knowing that both of us were going to be wrong was horrifying to accept at first, until you realize loving someone matters more than being right.

Once the awkwardness had been tackled, something else had to plague us. That, of course, turned out to be that everything good would somehow go wrong. It had started small at first, with little things, like restaurants we wanted to go to were closed, or things we had bought each other got lost in the mail. These little things didn't seem to come close to what happened on New Year's Eve. The night started out a little rocky. Chris was late to pick me up, and two of the parties we planned to attend were cancelled. I could not find a perfect outfit, and was somewhat flustered and frustrated. My

roommate's boyfriend had broken up with her. One of my ex-boyfriends approached me in front of Chris and made a scene. The list goes on. What tops it all is that by the end of the night, we were both crying, back on my porch. I thought, though, what better time than now to read this poem. Who cares if things aren't perfect—nothing thus far had been. No matter how well we got along, there was always something, but we just didn't seem to mind because we were always happy with one another.

After I read the poem, I looked up at him with wet, puffy eyes.

"Well, I guess there is just one more thing to do," I began to choke up, "Chris, I love you. And I'm sorry about tonight, and everything went wrong and I wish it had been perfect but here we are crying, and ... and ...."

He grabbed my face: "I love you, too. This was perfect. I'd like it no other way."

Martha Sightings

By Molly Lambka

My grandmother died on August 8, 2004, and thinking about it now, I should have known that she couldn't stay away. Martha was one of the more opinionated women whom anyone could ever meet, and rightfully so, I suppose. She was the youngest of six in an extremely strict Catholic family. She had many opinions (she did have two parents and five brothers and sisters to help her form all those opinions) and she wasn't afraid to voice them. She had something to say about every possible subject: relationships, what was an appropriate sacrifice during the Lent season, paint colors (that's another story in itself). You name it, and she would tell what she thought of it; however, for as aggravating as she sometimes got, I loved her, and one day she was gone. But it seems like she just couldn't stay away.

About three weeks after the funeral when everything had finally calmed down, my mother asked me an interesting question. I was just getting home from work, and she asked me, "Do you believe in ghosts?" I didn't get a "Hi, honey, how was your day?" or an "It's good to see you." "Do you believe in ghosts?" was the only thing she said. I wasn't sure how to respond to that. When do 47-year-old women ask you that sort of question? At the time I didn't believe in ghosts, so I told her, "No." She continued by telling me a story she

had heard from her sister Tina, the night before. She started by saying, "Uncle Bill thinks he saw Martha last night—well, more like he felt her. He said that he was asleep in bed and felt someone wiggle his big toe. Martha was famous for waking people from naps by wiggling their big toe. He woke up, looked around, but didn't see anything. Tina was still asleep, and the weirdest thing was, the dogs were growling at the foot of the bed like they saw something. We think Martha is haunting Tina and Bill."

I left the room thinking my mother had lost it. I found it very hard to believe that my grandmother was haunting my aunt and uncle; however, my views changed very soon. The beginning of September came and so did the start of my sophomore year of college. I remember that day very well. It was Tuesday, and by some miracle, my first class didn't start until 1 p.m. that day. I slept in while my roommate had to get up for her morning classes. Her alarm went off and I heard her get up and get ready for class. I was almost asleep when I felt her lean over and kiss me on the cheek and then leave the room. When I asked her about this at lunch that afternoon, she looked at me like I had two heads: "I didn't kiss you. Are you sure you didn't fall out of bed last night and hit your head?" The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced it was a dream. Then I remembered the past 12 years of first days of school. Martha always called me the morning

school started to wish me luck on a new year. I immediately grabbed my phone to call my mom. I heard the phone click and without waiting for her to say "Hello," I said, "I think I had a Martha sighting this morning." I told her the story, and the two of us decided that that was the only "logical" explanation.

From that day forward, we have kept track of the "Martha sightings." There have been 20 or so in the year and a half since her death, but the most recent ones have come in a big clump. Eight months ago, Martha's house finally sold and a middle-aged couple moved in. At the time we didn't know, but we later found out that this couple was not married. Being the devout Catholic that she was, Martha was not a big fan of unmarried couples cohabitating, to put it lightly. For this reason, we think Martha decided to leave us alone and concentrate on this couple.

I loved my grandmother's house, in particular, the two oak trees in the front yard. They were great to climb and to jump out of—when Martha wasn't looking, of course. One of the most remarkable things about these trees was, in the 40-plus years that Martha lived there, they never once got struck by lightning. The new owners were not so lucky. Within a month, there were two lightning strikes and they were forced to cut down the trees. We all figured this was a warning from Martha that this couple should have heeded, for this was only

the start of Martha's handiwork. In the next five months, three other separate incidents occurred that we found out about. It seems that the man took the brunt of Martha's efforts. One day during October, he was standing on a chair, trying to remove a light fixture that Martha had put in the year before. The poor man suffered a seizure and was in the hospital for a week. One month later he fell down a small staircase and broke his elbow. Most recently, the woman was backing out of the driveway and ended up in the field on the other side of the road. Having backed out of that driveway myself on numerous occasions problem free, I think she had some help.

Maybe it's silly to think that my grandmother is haunting us and the couple in her house. Maybe it's silly to even consider the possibility; however, as we patiently await the next "Martha Sighting," I pray for the safety of that couple who now live "in sin" in her house.

The Birth of a Streaker

By Brian Lynch

I'd had enough. I was left with no other alternatives. I had to resort to my last method of attack. There was only one answer: Nudity.

You see, one summer when I was six years old, I had a twenty-something-year-old babysitter named Carrie, and needless to say, we did not get along. We mixed like oil and water. I had a knack of being a little bit of a nuisance, a class clown if you will. I blame it on my older siblings, Kevin and Kelly, 10 and eight respectively at the time. They said jump, and I asked, "How high?"

Carrie did not respond well to such a child. And it seemed as if I could do no right. I shared the room upstairs with my brother, and I would venture to say that in the summer of 1991 I reached the bottom of the steps maybe 30% of the days. The other 70%, before I even hit the landing of my steps, I said something or did something that caused Carrie to send me up to my room for the rest of the day with no television. I clearly remember a day in June when I awoke to Kevin inches away from my face.

"Wanna play the 'penis game'?" he asked.

"How do you play?" I responded.

"It's simple, I will start off by saying 'penis' as quietly as possible, and you say it a little louder. After that, we keep say-

ing it, louder and louder, until someone says it loud enough to annoy Kelly, downstairs."

Sounded like a challenge to me. I knew there was no way he could take me on this one. I was the king of annoyance.

"OK, I will start," he said. "*Penis*." It was nearly inaudible. I did not know what 'inaudible' meant at the time, but even my six-year-old self could assure you it was quiet. I responded just as I should, and he did the same, each getting a little louder. After about a minute of this, I knew it was time to seal the deal.

"PENIS!"

"BRIAN, IS THAT YOU?" It was Carrie. Rats, I didn't even make it out of bed.

"Yeah, it is him. I don't know why he said it," Kevin said.

"Well, don't even *think* about coming down from there. I am gonna set the timer for 45 minutes!" That blasted timer. She set that thing so often that I just figured that time was counted backwards until I was about 11. Not to mention that it seemed to move like a sun dial.

"I hate you, Kevin," I said. That didn't matter to him. He had his fun, and now he had the downstairs TV to himself for at least 45 minutes. But I had the last laugh, for the night before I had stolen the remote and put it under my pillow to make sure I would have control of the TV in the morning. He would be stuck watching *Arthur* with Kelly.

That was just one of the many, many, many occurrences in which I was punished. Sometimes it was a minor offense, like forgetting to clean up my mess after lunch. Admittedly, there were other times when I deserved it, like the morning I woke up early to put a trip wire around my sister's bed. I spent three hours in my room for that one. But it was worth it when I heard my sister hit the floor and start crying. Maybe I was an awful kid.

But that brings me to that fated day: the day when I could no longer stand to be in my room, alone, with nothing to do. In the words of Otter from *Animal House*, it was time to "drop the big one."

The August morning began like any other. I woke up, changed out of my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajamas, and walked downstairs. There, on the kitchen table, was oatmeal and a bagel.

"Carrie, oatmeal sucks."

"Brian, go to your room! I am setting the timer for … one hour."

An hour for one lousy cuss word? George Carlin didn't even mention it as one of the "seven."

I stormed up my stairs, threw my shoes at my Ken Griffey Jr. poster, and crawled into bed. I contemplated trying to climb out of my second-floor window again. I thought better of it after I remembered that when Carrie caught me in mid-

act last time, I had gotten the timer for two days. But I had to do *something*. The time had come. There were only two weeks left in my summer, and I would not let her dictate how I would spend them. It was time for a revolution. I tried to think of the best way to get back at her. Something that would bother her so much, she would be apprehensive to ever ground me again. What would it be? What would it be?

It hit me like a right-hand slap across the back of my head like my brother always used to do to me. I GOT IT! I tore off my clothes, ready to celebrate downstairs in my birthday suit. No one liked the sight of a naked six-year-old boy.

"AHHHHHHH!" I bellowed as I ran downstairs, naked to the world. Our neighbors must have thought I was attacking Normandy's beach. "AAAAHHHH!"

"Brian, knock it off, don't make me …."

But I could not be stopped, I hit the living room running, and as I turned the corner to our dining room, there stood Beelzebub herself. The look on her face was priceless: the perfect mixture of shock, anger and humiliation. I don't know if you remember me saying it, but no one wants to see a naked six-year-old boy.

"Holy crap! Run, Brian, run," I heard Kevin cheer. It was nice to have his support.

I wiggled by the table and passed Carrie's frozen body. Next was the TV room. Kelly was not so encouraged.

"EEEWWWW!" I didn't care; I was a fugitive on the run, and loving every minute of it. Carrie chased me all the way.

As I ran past my kitchen and to the basement, even my dog, Buddy, was on my side. He started running with me and barking at the full moon as it passed. Luckily, he did not jump and bite anything. That would have been the end to both my streaking and my future love life.

"BRIAN, I swear, if you don't come here and put some clothes on *right now*, you will be in so much trouble…." I didn't hear her, nor did I care. Not only was this the best thing I could have ever done to get back at her, but it was completely liberating.

I hid in our storage room, about to make my grand finale. There was an exit to our front yard from that room, and it was only fitting to get some fresh air. I busted through the door and the sunlight felt warm on my naked body. I headed to the backyard where we own an acre of land. I could be naked in public for days without her catching me. I turned around to see how far behind me she was; no one there. I knew I was too fast for her, I turned my head back around and BAM!

It was suddenly dark. And I was SUDDENLY CAPTURED. It was Carrie and she had a towel over my head and body. The young woman had outwitted me, cut through the house, and caught me as I headed to the back.

"Just wait until your mother hears about this! I am carrying you straight to your room!" Lucky for her, I was too tired from the streaking to fight back. She was equally exhausted and also mortified. I had won. That is all that mattered as she carried me to my room, where I was sure to spend the rest of my days.

She put me on my bed, forced on some whitey-tighties and asked my brother to make sure I didn't move or he was grounded too. I didn't care at all. My master plan was completely successful, and completely worth it. That was the last summer of Carrie.

As I started to relax, I reminisced on what I had just done. I was absolutely content. I looked up to see Kevin staring at me.

"Brian," he said, "that was the coolest thing I have ever seen."

"Thank you, Kevin. It really was. It really was."

Fall Down the Waterfall

By Lindsay Petroff

To understand this story, you have to understand what kind of man my father is. He is a multi-talented genius; well, he doesn't have his Ph.D. and he doesn't know the cure for cancer, but he's a genius in my eyes. Also, my dad is the father of three girls, all relatively close in age, and he's married to a demanding, but innocuous woman. So needless to say, he has been stressed for the most part of his adult life. It's amazing he still has hair, although it is grey.

When we were a young family, we lived in a very bad part of town on a street that was ironically named "Rosenberry" and we were not very fortunate. Our house was falling apart and it was constantly getting robbed. The robbers stole random items like our grill from the porch and our Barbie dolls, but that's not my point. Eventually, we came upon a stroke of good luck, and we were able to move into a new house in which I did most of my growing up. I still remember pulling up to the house and dropping my jaw in amazement at how big our backyard was. At our old house, our backyard was blacktopped over with a small tool shed that my sisters and I claimed as our clubhouse. I'm sure you can imagine all the scraped knees and bloody elbows that resulted from playing on a blacktopped backyard. My mom even exclaimed, "Look, girls, grass!" when we arrived at our new house.

Even though we loved our new house and our awesome backyard, one thing we missed about our old house on Rosenberry Street was the clubhouse. My sisters and I started right away on our dad for a new clubhouse. We didn't care how big or small, but we needed somewhere to call our own and escape from the supervision of adults. My dad is an excellent carpenter; it is his passion, so we knew it wouldn't be hard to persuade him to build something. Since up to this point in our lives we were fairly poor, we didn't expect much, but our parents were now able to give us more.

My dad is definitely a go-getter and he usually wakes up with or before the sun. The bedroom I inhabited in our new house faced the backyard, and I will never forget the sound I heard on this particular spring morning. I awoke to the familiar sound of my dad's hammer. The sun was just coming up and was peeking through my blue curtain creating a bluish haze. I awoke with a start with the first smack of his hammer, and I knew that something was going on in the backyard. I raced to my window, yanked open the curtain and I saw my dad in the backyard nailing pieces of lumber together. I wiggled my window open and hollered out to him.

"Dad! Are you doing what I think you are doing?"

"Maybe!" he shouted back. Then he turned and winked at me.

"I'll be right down!"

"No, go back to bed. If you get up this early, you won't have enough energy to play!"

I knew he was right and slinked back into bed, but I couldn't sleep. It was like Christmas morning when you wake up at 4 a.m. and your parents make you go back to sleep. I lay there staring at twinkling decorative stars on my ceiling as the sun rose and getting more and more excited with every "whack!" from the hammer and "buzz" from the saw. I'm sure I eventually fell back to sleep, but when I woke, I threw on my play clothes and I barreled down the stairs. My dad was still outside, working quickly. It was more amazing than I could have ever dreamed. So far he had erected a clubhouse high off the ground, but it was more than that—it had a ladder and a slide, too. I could see the sweat glistening off his back, so I poured him a tall glass of ice water and took it out to him. (Of course, by the time it got there it was half empty since I ran to him.) My dad worked hard all through the morning; once he starts something, he finishes because he hates to leave things half done. I planted myself in the grass right in front of all the action and eagerly watched. My sisters learned of the play gym our dad was working on and joined me.

As the morning turned to afternoon, my dad finally finished our play gym. It was glorious, magnificent. He wouldn't let us play on it until he tested it out so my sisters jumped and

screamed on the sidelines while he climbed the ladder, jumped around, tumbled down the slide, and dangled from the monkey bars. It was equipped with the clubhouse, ladder, slide, and monkey bars already mentioned, but it also had two swings and rings. After it passed my dad's tests, we were unleashed and we played for hours and hours. It was better than Christmas, Easter, and the Fourth of July combined. We were so excited we even slept in it that night.

We created many games, but our favorite was "Fall Down the Waterfall." The idea of this game was to try your hardest not to tumble down the slide and plummet into the manmade mud pit at the bottom. It sounds easy, but there was a catch: one person would lie on the slide and hold on for dear life while the others would dump buckets of water down the slide. This made it nearly impossible to hold on. Our parents were not very big fans of this game, but eventually they decided to make us wear the same clothes when we played it so that way we would be ruining only one outfit. So every Saturday morning, we would get up, put on our "Fall Down the Waterfall" clothes, drag the hose out to make mud, and get dirty.

Years later, my dad decided to re-model the play gym. He built a balcony off the clubhouse that went over top the monkey bars (don't worry, they were still useable), he added a net to climb up, and put in a tire swing. It was even better

than before, but like everything else in life, it came to an end. My sisters and I grew up. I was the last one to use it, since I was the youngest. From time to time I still went out and swung, or lay on the balcony looking at the stars, but it wasn't used as often as before. It was almost sad seeing it stand there year after year looking so lonely and deserted. My parents felt the same way about it. One morning, years later in early spring, I awoke to the similar noises as before. I peered out my window and saw my dad disassembling the play gym. I put on my robe and shuffled outside in my slippers. He told me that he was giving it away to a family he knew who had little kids and couldn't afford to buy a play set. I was sad to see it go because it was a part of so many of my childhood memories, but it felt so good knowing that someone else was going to be able to enjoy it like we did, especially since they were poor like we had been.

Every now and then, when I look out to the backyard, I get a pang of sadness at the empty spot where it used to be, but I'm glad someone else has the chance to make wonderful memories with it as well.

Jurasicution

By Brian Richards

Christmas is a magical time for children. My family did not have very much money, so the majority of the toys we had we got for Christmas. I can remember the hot chocolate, shining tree, and pile of presents that always awaited me when I woke up on Christmas morning. For a few moments, once a year, all of the problems of the world had suddenly vanished and the possibilities of this life had no limits.

My parents would go all out at Christmas. I would later learn that Christmas came at the price of thousands of dollars of credit-card debt, but that did not occur to me at the time. My mother loved to see her children in a momentary state of bliss. My father loved to see us get everything we wanted and feel at peace. They both liked to be reminded of the Christmases of their youth. It was time of joy for all and nothing could diminish that feeling, nothing, except for my parents' twisted sense of humor.

It was a family tradition that the night before Christmas my sister and I could open up one present from under the tree. She unwrapped an Ace of Bace CD she had been hinting about since October. I unwrapped a Barney the Dinosaur stuffed animal.

I hated Barney the Dinosaur with a passion normally reserved for Hitler. Imagine my disappointment when the

twinkle in my eye turned to a glare of anger pointed at the hearts of my parents. I was not devastated. I was enraged.

My parents laughed, feeling ever so clever. I stormed off to bed, pounding my feet with every step I took. My big sister was soon to follow. She comforted me by saying, "It's only one present. I'm sure Santa brought you all of the ones you wanted."

"Oh yeah," I replied heatedly. "Well, I don't know what I did that was so bad that he would bring me this!"

"I think that was one of the ones from mom and dad. I'm sure Santa knows exactly what you want."

I lifted the doll slowly to eye level, my hand clamped tightly around its throat. Without a word, I turned and headed for my room. My stomping had subsided, but my pouting was in full swing. Then my anger dissipated and I soon began to sleep.

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I awoke the next morning full of excitement. The disappointment from the night before had been overpowered by the excitement of presents yet to be unwrapped. I rushed over to my sister's bed and shook her awake. I could see as soon as she opened her eyes that she remembered what day it was and that I was shaking her too hard.

My parents were already by the tree ready to greet us as we came charging down the stairs. It was customary that we

all sit and talk for a few minutes and drink hot chocolate. The hot chocolate was quickly gulped down. We started begging them to let us open our gifts until they finally said that we could.

I knew something was amiss. My parents' normal gleeful Christmas smiles had a devilish grin behind them. I had forgotten the present of the night before, but I still suspected foul play.

We passed out presents and began to tear into them like animals. The wrapping paper came flying off in all directions. I recognized the box under the wrapping paper. It was another Barney.

Instantly, my memories flooded back and a tidal wave of anger washed over me. How could they get me one, much less TWO Barneys! Then, I noticed something. The box had already been opened. Curiosity began to override anger, and I decided to take a closer look. I turned it around and peered though the plastic window at the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle neatly packed in newspaper. I paused for a moment unsure of what to do next. It is a strange thing to be irate and ecstatic at the same time.

Many more packages were unwrapped and all of mine were boxed in the remnants of someone else's Barney collection. Where did they find all of these boxes? There were doz-

ens of Barney boxes in all shapes and sizes. I got the joke, but I did not appreciate the clever ruse.

My dad sensed that I was still upset by the original Barney doll. He said, "I know you don't like Barney, so I'll show you what we can do."

I followed him down the stairs to his workbench. He grabbed a large hammer and then reached underneath the bench and pulled out the biggest nail I had ever seen. It was a railroad spike; where he got it I will never know.

"Come on," he said. "I have plans for your Barney."

We went up to my bedroom. He picked up the discarded Barney from the floor and pressed it against the wall above my bed.

"Right about here?" he asked.

"OK," I responded, more than a little confused.

He then drove the railroad spike into the center of the dinosaur's head.

"There," he said as though he was putting a Band-Aid on a cut, "isn't that better?"

"Yeah, I like it there," I replied unsurely. I was somewhat happy, but mostly confused. Now, I had an artistic display of my hatred for that awful thing.

***

The dinosaur stayed there for years, above my bed, as if all kids had a stuffed animal nailed to the wall. It's strange

how things can grow on you. You just get used to them and accept them, and then after enough time has passed you come to enjoy then. By the end, the Barney doll was among my most prized possessions.

It stayed there until one warm spring day. I returned from playing with my friend Danny to find only a now rusty spike in my wall minus one Jurassic monstrosity. Where could it have gone? Who would have taken it? MY SISTER!

I stormed into my sister's room to find it lying in a pile of its own padding. David, Danny's older bother and my sister's best friend, had taken Barney down for a game of some kind. Why, I will never know, and I was far too angry at the time to care.

I simply grasped it without a word and returned to my room. I tried to return it to its rightful place, but all that did was cover my bed in little balls of cotton.

Then, eureka! I remembered I still had a pack of bottle rockets and half a box of M-88 firecrackers. I would give Barney the capital punishment that I had given so many of my lesser action figures before.

Danny and I were skilled at blowing things up. We had perfected our technique of packing ten explosive heads of bottle rockets into one M-88 and making a line for detonation of lifting powder to trigger the explosion in the style of the

old Looney Toons cartoons. Who said cartoons can't be educational?

The explosions did little more than singe the outside and create the horrific smell of burning plastic. Had we finally found something that could not be blown up? No, I would not believe it!

"Well, what do we do now?" Danny asked.

"I don't know, but this isn't working," I replied.

"We could try putting one in his stomach."

"No, I don't think that would work."

"Well, we could try shooting him up in the air and letting him fall to his death."

"No, we need to think of something else."

We went inside to plan out a new means of doom for the accursed doll. We each got a Mountain Dew and sat down to think. David and my sister soon came down, still afraid of what I might do.

"Sorry about Barney," David said almost whispering.

"It's OK," I replied. "It was about time he was finally put to rest."

"So you're not mad?

"No, not really. I was a little mad at first, but it's ok."

"Cool."

We all sat down around the dinner table, pops in hand. I told them of what we had tried and that we needed to come

up with something else. David was always good at coming up with creative solutions to creative problems, but this one had him stumped. We thought about throwing him in the pond, trying more explosives, but when David suggested burning him with sparklers, a flash of inspiration sparked my second evil plan.

When you live in the boonies of Southeastern Ohio, you don't have the luxury of curbside trash collection. My father's solution was to have a compost heap for organics, a trashcan for recyclables, and a burning barrel for trash. It was in the burning barrel that we would give Barney his Homeric funeral.

It was my chore to take out the trash and burn it from about age 7 and beyond. I was skilled at getting it to catch.

The four of us walked out to the trash barrel. Danny took the trash and I took the doll. I could just barely see far enough over the rim barrel enough to see the top of the trash.

No one said a word. I lit the trash and took a step backwards. We all had sad looks on our faces. What had once been a common distaste for a TV show was now the end of an era. I almost didn't want to do it—it was like a piece of myself was about to go up in flames.

"Rest in peace," I said as I placed my hand over the flames and let go of the doll.

We stood silently and watched as the purple dinosaur was engulfed in green flames. That is, until my deranged pyroma-

niac of a friend, Danny, began dancing around the fire and screaming, "Burn, Barney, burn!"

The rest of us laughed as we stood there watching, until every last piece of fabric and plastic had disintegrated.

There are times in life when everything ends up the exact opposite of the way you thought it would. What should have been the most hated present of that Christmas became the best and most memorable, thanks to some clever thinking on my father's part, a railroad spike, and enough time.

A Childhood, Maybe Two

By Eva Simeone

Let me tell you a little about my upbringing. I grew up with a mom, a dad, a brother and 12 best friends. Two of my best friends lived next door; the other 10 lived down the street in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We all lived on Rihn Strasse, the place of my childhood memories. The summers were the best part about Rihn Strasse.

I woke up at 7 a.m. every morning, eager to meet all of my friends to play kickball or soccer outside with them.

My mom would say, "Eva, wait until 9 a.m. No one is awake yet."

I would sigh and sit behind our glass front door, hoping that someone would magically appear and rescue me from my boredom.

My mom would yell to me from upstairs, "Eva, come upstairs to put your outfit on."

Finally, I would sulk up the steps, saddened by my mom's keeping me hostage. However, I always knew that after mom picked out my outfit, I was one step closer to being ready to go outside and play. My mom eventually told me that I was free to go when the clock struck exactly 9 a.m.

Alex, my brother, would sprint out the door before me trying to beat me to the neighbor's house. I desperately tried to keep up with him, but he was faster and one year older.

We both eventually made it to our neighbor's house, which was 20 feet away. There, in their huge side yard, we found everyone congregating, deciding which game to play. Some stragglers walked up the street and I could see them from a distance, but for the most part everyone knew the meeting spot and everyone knew the time.

We played sports outside all morning and ate lunch at each other's houses. After lunch, we went swimming in my next-door neighbor's pool, climbed up the swinging rope behind my other neighbor's house, or played basketball in my driveway. At 5 p.m. everyday, we were all called in for dinner.

My mom would yell, "Allllllllllllllex, Evvvvvvvaaa, it's time for dinnnnnnnnner." My brother and I waited a few minutes until she yelled again. After all, if she made us wait to go outside in the morning then we should make her wait for dinner, right?

We went inside usually after the second or third calling. Whatever it was on the table, I ate it within five minutes because I desperately wanted to go back outside to play. This habit usually resulted in stomach cramps after eating so fast. However, no matter how quickly I ate, my mom forced me to "let my food settle." So, despite my efforts to hurry through dinner to try to get back outside sooner, I never won.

My brother and I were usually let go around 7 p.m. We met the neighbors again in our usual spot. Every summer

night we played Release. There were two teams: a hiding team and a finding team. The hiding team got 20 seconds to find spots within about 500 yards. The finding team tried to find the hiders. If the finding team spotted a hider, they had to tag them and bring them back to our spot. The best part about Release is that if your whole team has been caught, but you're still free, you have the opportunity to release everyone from the spot. All you have to do is run up to the spot and scream "Release!" without being tagged by your opponent. The game could go for hours. However, as I'm sure you can imagine, we were all called in at about 10 p.m. when it was time for bed.

Everyday pretty much followed this same theme. Up early to play. Eat a few meals. Have a game at night. And then go to bed. Everything was simple. I liked to play games outside, and that's pretty much about it.

Things have changed; I'm older and like to do other things now. In addition, we moved. I also got a sister. She is eight. Mia doesn't have the same childhood experiences as me, so let me tell you a little bit about her.

Mia Hawbaker, technically my half sister, grew up with a big brother, a big sister, a mom, and a dad. She desperately wants to play outside with friends like I did every morning. However, no one waits outside for Mia at 9 a.m. like they did for me. Sometimes she will find a friend to play with, but they

end up staying inside, even on beautiful, hot summer days. But the more I watch Mia play with her friends, the more I begin to see why things are so different for her now.

First of all, Mia doesn't play the same traditional games that I used to do. I realized this one morning when I was babysitting her.

While I was checking my e-mail, she walked up to me and said, "Eva, can I get on the computer now?"

I looked at her for a second and thought to myself: *What could my 8-year-old sister possibly have to do on the computer that could be so important*? So, as you can imagine, I assumed that she couldn't possibly have anything more important to do than me. I said no. She frowned and sighed, looking at me like I was a bad sister.

Being the softhearted and loving sister that I am, I let her get on the computer 10 minutes later. She plopped onto the chair and I stood curiously behind her, waiting to see her next move. Mia opened up Internet Explorer, typed in www.google.com and then searched "Lindsay Lohan music videos." My jaw dropped as I watched her peruse the list of related links while she picked out the one she found most suitable. As she clicked the link, she smiled with excitement, softly singing the words to the song that we were both about to listen to and watch.

Lindsay Lohan is soooooooooo hot!" Mia said. My jaw dropped even wider as I laughed.

Later that day her one and only friend, Madison, came over. They both went on the computer this time. Instead of watching music videos, they went to a site that has a Barbie makeover. They dressed Barbie, put makeup on her, gave her a manicure and re-did her room. After the makeover, they sent Barbie off on a hot date. I found this amusing because I don't even go on hot dates, but my little sister somehow managed to set up a date for the virtual Barbie she named after herself, "Mia."

Madison eventually went home after they exhausted themselves from staring at the computer screen. Mia and I sat at the kitchen table, waiting for my mom to get home from work. Soon enough, Mia got bored with me and walked upstairs to find something to play with in her room. Ten minutes later, I faintly heard a familiar song trailing from the steps.

Then, I heard my sister sing, "I'm not … that … innocenttt."

I burst out with laughter again, wondering if I really just heard the words I thought I did. I called for her to come out of her room so I could ask.

"Mia, what are you doing up there?" I said.

"Nothinggggggg," she replied.

"Oh really? What were you singing?"

"I'm just singin' with my Brittney Spears doll," she innocently professed.

"Oh, OK," I said. "As long as you're having fun, I guess."

I walked away, giggling to myself again.

I thought back to my childhood, and how I used to have dirt on my face as I sprinted through wet grass and sprinklers as a kid. Now, Mia sits in front of Windexed computer screens with polished fingernails. I used to go to Dick's to look for mountain bikes. Mia goes to Libby Lui for makeovers. If she's really lucky, she sneaks into my room when I'm not around and steals some of my makeup. I've even seen her try to wear my clothes before. I guess you could say Mia and I are pretty similar. The major difference: I'm 20 going on 21. Mia's eight going on 18.

Why I Hate Canada:
The Near-Massacre at the Zoo

By Tommy Stumpp

"Tommy, do you want to go to the zoo today?" I heard my mother ask. "We can see the monkeys," she said in a honeyed voice. My mother knew I loved monkeys. I was only four years old, but I could already name most of the monkeys at the Columbus Zoo. They had spider monkeys, gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, baboons, and they were all fascinating. I used to wish I could go in the cages with them and swing on their ropes and eat their food and play with them, but my parents always said no. But this is not a story about monkeys.

It was springtime in 1989. Audrey, my little sister, was just under one year old. She always got more attention than me, probably because babies are much more fun than four-year-olds. This particular day started out like any other day. We loaded the car, my dad made everyone go to the bathroom before we went, and we left home. Of course about ten minutes after we left, I said, "Dad, I have to pee." This was somewhat of a ritual.

When we finally arrived at the Columbus Zoo, my parents' nerves were wearing thin. This will happen with a four-year-old. We went to the front gate, and the nice lady at the

turnstile to get into the zoo said, "Welcome to the Columbus Zoo. Enjoy your day." Little did she know what horrors the zoo would hold for us. The zoo seems like a nice place to most people, but I have always, since I was very young, had bad feelings about the place. On this particular spring day in 1989, these feelings became reality.

At the Columbus Zoo, most of the animals are in cages. The rhinoceroses are in cages. The lions are in cages. The tigers are in cages. So are the elephants. I understood this at age four. What I never seemed to understand is how the geese evaded this imprisonment. Every time I have ever been to the zoo, flocks of Canadian Geese have been wandering around aimlessly, eating trash and pooping everywhere. I guess it is cheaper to let them roam, but this doesn't compute for a four-year-old boy.

My fascination with the monkeys was temporarily forgotten when we walked into the zoo. At the Columbus Zoo, a large pond is near the front gate. This pond is mainly for decoration, but it is also home to the majority of the Canadian geese that occupy the zoo. I had seen geese before, but usually they were flying in a "V" formation in the sky. Once I asked my father why one side of the "V" was longer than the other side, and he said, "Well, there are more geese in that line."

This was the first time I can consciously recall seeing geese on the ground, and up close. They were majestic, with little white rings around their dark necks, and they all had funny little wings with white at the ends. I hadn't ever seen such a funny-looking bird before; it had such an enormous body with a long skinny neck and a tiny little head, and miniscule feet and legs. It was a comical sight to me, so I wanted to get a better look. I told my mother, "I want to see the gooses." My mom declined to answer my polite request. My sister was, once again, occupying all of our mother's attention with her crying. I pulled on the sleeve of my dad's windbreaker. "Dad, I want to see the gooses." My dad, in his usual fashion, said something to the effect of, "Uhhh, ask your mother." This was all the approval I needed.

I walked over to the side of the pond. The geese were on the other side of a rope that was probably meant to stop curious young boys like yours truly from getting too close to the pond. I walked up to the rope, and peered over at these marvelous creatures. I must have stood transfixed for quite a while, because my parents actually noticed that I was missing. When they came over to get me, presumably to go and see the monkeys, they noticed my little eyes fixed on the geese. My dad, in his infinite wisdom, said to my mother, "Robin, I think they have corn somewhere that you can feed the geese with. Should we get some?" My mother bent down and said

to me, "Tommy, do you want to feed the geese?" I nodded excitedly, eager for my chance to finally get to feed an animal at the zoo. My dad left to find a corn dispenser. My mother went back to paying my sister all of her attention, and I was left to try and lure a goose over so that I could feed it. My dad came back with a handful of corn, and said, "All right, Tom, don't throw it at them. Be nice." With these words, he lifted me over the rope, and into the land of the geese. Little did I know, but I was being lifted into a world of pure terror. What happened next is still burned into my brain, never to be forgotten.

The geese were in a loose circle, with the biggest ones on the outside. There were some medium-sized geese wandering around looking for food or some new place to poop, so I decided to give them some corn. I was delighted when I tossed the kernels and the birds swooped over to eat them. Then I noticed some mini geese at the center of the circle. They didn't look like the big geese. They were all gray, and their feathers were more like fuzz. Also, I could barely see them, because the big geese were all crowded around them. I wanted a closer look.

So there I was, on a mission to feed the geese, marching right up to the biggest and baddest of the geese at the zoo. The goose that I presume now to be the mother of the young goslings immediately spotted me. I was hard to miss in my

bright red ball cap and my purple sweatshirt. As I walked over toward her new babies, I began to hear a strange sound. It sounded like a balloon was losing its air, but it was coming from the biggest of the geese. Also, the babies were all being shepherded away by another goose. I stretched out my arm to toss some corn to the geese, as a kind of peace offering. Apparently, Canada has different customs than I was raised with. This massive Canadian goose began hissing, squawking, and beating its wings. This scared the living daylights out of me, so I made a beeline back toward my parents. Unfortunately, the same rope that kept me away from the geese was now in my way again.

I ran up to the rope, slipped, and fell backwards. As I rolled toward the pond, the baby geese, the furious mother goose, and my certain demise, I let out a desperate cry for help. My dad looked over and saw an enormous Canadian goose pecking me to death—and he started laughing. I guess he thought it was a comical image, the blur of my purple sweatshirt mixed with the whirlwind of goose feathers. My father scared the goose away, scooped me back to the safe side of the rope, and my mother had no idea what had happened. To this very day, chills run up and down my spine whenever I see Canadian geese. And when people ask me if I want to go to the zoo, I politely answer, "I'll go to the zoo as soon as they get some cages for those damn geese."

The War Prayer

By Mark Twain

It was a time of great and exalting excitement. The country was up in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism; the drums were beating, the bands playing, the toy pistols popping, the bunched firecrackers hissing and spluttering; on every hand and far down the receding and fading spread of roofs and balconies a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in the sun; daily the young volunteers marched down the wide avenue gay and fine in their new uniforms, the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion as they swung by; nightly the packed mass meetings listened, panting, to patriot oratory which stirred the deepest deeps of their hearts, and which they interrupted at briefest intervals with cyclones of applause, the tears running down their cheeks the while; in the churches the pastors preached devotion to flag and country, and invoked the God of Battles beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpourings of fervid eloquence which moved every listener. It was indeed a glad and gracious time, and the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

Sunday morning came—next day the battalions would leave for the front; the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their young faces alight with martial dreams—visions of the stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge, the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the fierce pursuit, the surrender! Then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory! With the volunteers sat their dear ones, proud, happy, and envied by the neighbors and friends who had no sons and brothers to send forth to the field of honor, there to win for the flag, or, failing, die the noblest of noble deaths. The service proceeded; a war chapter from the Old Testament was read; the first prayer was said; it was followed by an organ burst that shook the building, and with one impulse the house rose, with glowing eyes and beating hearts, and poured out that tremendous invocation God the all-terrible! Thou who ordainest! Thunder thy clarion and lightning thy sword!

Then came the "long" prayer. None could remember the like of it for passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language. The burden of its supplication was, that an ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all would watch over our noble young soldiers, and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their patriotic work; bless them, shield them in the day of battle and the hour of peril, bear them in His mighty hand,

make them strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset; help them to crush the foe, grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory—

An aged stranger entered and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, his eyes fixed upon the minister, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, his head bare, his white hair descending in a frothy cataract to his shoulders, his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness. With all eyes following him and wondering, he made his silent way; without pausing, he ascended to the preacher's side and stood there waiting. With shut lids the preacher, unconscious of his presence, continued with his moving prayer, and at last finished it with the words, uttered in fervent appeal, "Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector of our land and flag!"

The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside—which the startled minister did—and took his place. During some moments he surveyed the spellbound audience with solemn eyes, in which burned an uncanny light; then in a deep voice he said:

"I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God!" The words smote the house with a shock; if the stranger perceived it he gave no attention. "He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd, and will grant it if such shall be your desire after I, His messenger, shall have

explained to you its import—that is to say, its full import. For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of—except he pause and think.

"God's servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of Him Who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this—keep it in mind. If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor's crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it.

"You have heard your servant's prayer—the uttered part of it. I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it—that part which the pastor—and also you in your hearts—fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard these words: 'Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!' That is sufficient. The whole of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory—must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God fell also the unspo-

ken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

"O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them—in spirit—we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen."

(Pause.)

"Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits!"

It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.

About the Editor

It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly a cry rang out, and on a hot summer night in 1954, Josephine, wife of Carl Bruce, gave birth to a boy—me. Unfortunately, this young married couple allowed Reuben Saturday, Josephine's brother, to name their first-born. Reuben, aka "The Joker," decided that Bruce was a nice name, so he decided to name me Bruce Bruce. I have gone by my middle name—David—ever since.

Being named Bruce David Bruce hasn't been all bad. Bank tellers remember me very quickly, so I don't often have to show an ID. It can be fun in charades, also. When I was a counselor as a teenager at Camp Echoing Hills in Warsaw, Ohio, a fellow counselor gave the signs for "sounds like" and "two words," then she pointed to a bruise on her leg twice. Bruise Bruise? Oh yeah, Bruce Bruce is the answer!

Uncle Reuben, by the way, is the guy who gave me a haircut when I was in kindergarten. He cut my hair short and shaved a small bald spot on the back of my head. My mother wouldn't let me go to school until the bald spot grew out again.

Of all my brothers and sisters (six in all), I am the only transplant to Athens, Ohio. I was born in Newark, Ohio, and have lived all around Southeastern Ohio. However, I moved to Athens to go to Ohio University and have never left.

At OU, I never could make up my mind whether to major in English or Philosophy, so I got a bachelor's degree with a double major in both areas in 1980, then I added a master's degree in English in 1984 and a master's degree in Philosophy in 1985. Currently, and for a long time to come, I publish a weekly humorous column titled "Wise Up!" for *The Athens NEWS* and I am an English instructor at OU.

To see my "Wise Up!" column, go to www.athensnews.com—then perform a search for "David Bruce."

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