Fall 1999

The Forum: Fall 1999

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BOSP Chairperson: Doug Rohde
Phone 777-1325
From my father I got the tendency to repeat myself. From my mother, the tendency to tell long-winded stories. One uncle on my father's side handed down bad skin, and another, fear of the armed forces. I have my grandmother's Roman nose, and deep-set, Old World eyes. My father passed on a dislike of having pictures taken, and my mother tossed in a need for attention (but not too much). Together they gave me a distrust of marriage. I got my father's sense of humor and tendency to repeat myself when telling long-winded stories, my mother's extreme attention to detail, and bad grammar, concerning commas. My grandfather's death taught me my father could cry. I got his clean profile, until my uncle ruined it with his bad skin. My mother gave me the tendency to second third guess myself. I got my grandfather's temper and introversion, a bad combination except in the army. I received my mother's love for "tear-jerkers" and my father's love for "stupid humor." My mother gave me the impression I was attractive, but I have my father's need to be (always) behind the camera. I overspend like my mother, but want to save like my father. My mother passed down her fear of driving, and my father, like his father, the draw to be behind the wheel.
Chris Stoner

I Remember You Mythic

Orange juice and cereal, you
reading your newspaper
in your boxer shorts
and that same tank top
like any other morning
and sinking into the ordinary.
Complacent
The softened hues of an existence
colored by time,
familiarity.

How many centuries
since we ran
through the dusty, stoic streets of Athens?
Delphi gave me no knowledge
that this would be the fate
of our passions.

I remember you Mythic
Before breakfasts and bank statements,
coupons, appliances, urban banality.

You were Jason
in glittering armor
your mind fevered by your quest.
I was Medea
clothed in robes as red as blood
lending my lust and my witchery to your cause.

Our passions were frenzied,
bound together with thick wire and blood.
And our fingernails, like talons
ripping at each other's throats
only to kiss the marked flesh.
Wounding and healing, fiercely,  
Fiercely  
I remember you Mythic,  
and Jason's betrayal  
with the fair virgin daughter of a Grecian king  
is far outmatched by your wickedness.

You entreated the Fates,  
accepting a loss of passion  
in exchange  
for a calming of chaos.  
My Chaos  
My Legend

I have no child to sacrifice.  
Apollo has left me,  
abandoned in suburbia.  
Medea is left powerless,  
stripped, bare.  
Jason, victorious  
though his quest is forsaken.

the epics  
are being rewritten
Cherie Lerner

As Life Imitates Art

Four downtrodden, adventurous adolescents throw off the constraints of corporate America and risk losing their lives and missing dinner to save their homes, their friendships, and their future as Goonies. Valiant, eh?

But how many of us have time to be valiant? I’d like to draw your attention to the real lessons hidden in the lives and adventures of Mikey, Mouth, Data, and Chunk. Who could forget the wisdom of Mama Fratelli—“Kids suck”? Or the Goonies credo: “Goonies never say die”?

Everyone has a Fratelli in their lives. It may not be a gun-slinging, opera-singing Italian hauling a corpse, but everyone will face adversity. But slick shoes, pincers of power, bully blinders, a quick trip to the bathroom, and befriending an ogre can only help in the day-to-day trials of life.

I, myself, have had a moment in my life when a clip of The Goonies saved me from embarrassment and emotional turmoil. I promised myself, and Corey Feldman, that I would never share our secret with the world, but since he is nearly thirty and hasn’t returned any of my calls since 1985, he can just suck it up and admit to our tawdry affair. But anyway, this is about something else.

I had driven to the coast. Astoria was beautiful that time of year and my skin had stopped that blotchy-peeling phase. It was 1995, I was seventeen, which means that this entire story is only partially legal depending on who you accuse.

Corey had agreed to meet me after my arduous letter-writing campaign which had exhausted my allowance and deformed my right hand. Each day I had written:

Dearest Corey, my lover,

I believe we are soulmates. Don’t you? I’ve seen all of your movies at least twenty times, and I know you’d really like me because I am better than all the girls you kiss on celluloid. My ring size is seven. I’d like at least a carat. Meet me in Astoria.

P.S. Wear black.

Love,

The Future Mrs. Corey Feldman
He responded with an autographed photo, a short letter thanking me for being a fan, and, eventually, a restraining order.

After I started sending naked pictures of myself slathered in peanut butter, he agreed to meet me in Astoria. But I think that there may have been some problems in his life at the time. I think someone was following him. He insisted that he be escorted by police during our meeting. I agreed immediately. I want my Corey to be safe. She must really be a psycho to follow him around.

So that is how we met, Corey and I. I ran up to that sweet hunk of man meat, threw my arms around him, wrestled him to the ground, kissed him fiercely, and began frisking him for my engagement ring. That stalker girl must have stolen it because I couldn’t find it anywhere on his body.

I know Corey is shy, so he shoved me off of him. Could you imagine the scandal in *Teen Beat* if we would have been seen? I didn’t want to deal with all the publicity of being a celebrity significant other, so I did not insist on other public displays of affection. But Corey began to run into the swarm of police. I was about to lose the love of my life so I yelled, “Corey, Corey, don’t leave me!” I don’t think he heard me. Luckily I remembered what Chunk had done to make Corey open the gate into his life and the Walsh’s front yard. I lifted up my shirt, exposing my pale belly and began jiggling furiously and making that jiggling-gurgling noise that was so well known in the 80s. Corey stopped and turned to me. I saw him mouth the words “truffle shuffle” and his face began to soften. At that moment I knew we had made our cosmic connection. Then I was tackled by six or seven armed officers at which point I blacked out. But then I knew that he loved me. He was just too shy to say it. With closure made, I’ve decided to move on.

And now that I’ve been out of “the ward” for a while, I want Corey to know that I am over him and have found a new love. Corey Haim, I’d just like you to know, I love your blue eyes, and I also have my license to drive.
Karissa Haugeberg

Leading Ladies: Lady Macbeth and Hillary Clinton

The American public's reaction to Hillary Clinton has been volatile. Her active role in getting her husband into power and keeping him there struck a chord with Americans who had come to expect passive, motherly first ladies like Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan. However, the political partnership woven into the marriage of Bill and Hillary Clinton is not a modern invention. The marriage of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as portrayed in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* serves as an example of the mixture of virtues and faults that accompany a marriage founded on unfaltering ambition. As feminist criticism has liberated Shakespeare's women and shown "that characters [like] ... Lady Macbeth [et al.] are hardly the saints, monsters, or whores their critics have often perceived them to be," perhaps we can gain a better understanding of the complexity of Hillary Clinton, and come to know that, like male figureheads and fictional male characters, both Hillary and Lady Macbeth "are complex and flawed, ... capable of passion and pain, growth and decay" (Lenz 4-5).

Lady Macbeth and Hillary Clinton are both victims and instruments of evil and ambition. Their complicated tales reveal the price they paid for getting their husbands into power. In her article "The True Believer," Brenda Maddox advises that the surest way for modern married women to gain leadership was to "think of Lady Macbeth. Unsex yourself ... Remember that image is all" (Maddox 74). Both Lady Macbeth and Hillary Clinton have been interpreted as having had the desire to be stripped of their gender, believing it restrained them from succeeding as individuals. Lady Macbeth's quest for power led her to embark "on a journey into a limboland of asexuality" (Ranald 95). After urging her husband to kill the king, Lady Macbeth was provided with the opportunity for murder when she learned of Duncan's approach to Iverness. She prayed, "Come, you spirits ... unsex me here,/And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full/of direst cruelty!" (1.5.40-43). Lady Macbeth continued by asking that her breast milk be turned to gall. Critics have interpreted Lady Macbeth's gender-defying desires to be that of "a non-nurturing mother" (Gohlke 160). The emphasis on femininity and maternal qualities in women continue to shape our valuing of women. In her attempt to convey herself as a compe-
tent, strong woman, Hillary Clinton has been criticized by some as having
done so at the cost of traditional femininity. Like Lady Macbeth, "... warm maternal qualities are not always evident to those who know
[Hillary] well" (O’Beirne 71). The controversial anti-feminist Camille
Paglia perceives Hillary Clinton as a woman whose psyche struggles with
her identity as a woman:

... the brilliance of Hillary’s calculating, analytic mind, ... at its
most legalistic has a haughty, daunting impersonality. It is ... the
genderlessness of a precocious first-born child who modeled herself
on her crustily independent father and who fought a long, quiet war of stubborn resistance against a hypercritical, puritanical
mother. Hillary had to learn to be a woman; it did not come easily
or naturally (Paglia 24).

At the beginning of Macbeth and the beginning of Bill Clinton’s presi-
dency, both Lady Macbeth and Hillary Clinton appeared strong, perhaps
even stronger than their husbands. Lady Macbeth goaded her (who she
perceived to be lackluster) husband into killing Duncan by implying that
Macbeth’s refusal to murder would be a reflection on his lack of desire to
be a man: “When you durst do it, then you were a man” (1.7.49). “Her
ruthless intensity ... brought the throne into reach, and Macbeth [was]
crowned soon thereafter” (Boyce 356). Although Hillary Clinton was not
so blunt as to point out the stepping stone for Bill to acquire the presidency,
she did assume the role of being a fundamental component to Bill’s iden-
tity. When Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, he unabashedly
“presented Hillary as not only his partner in marriage but also as a major
intellectual resource ... He liked to remind audiences that ... when they
voted for him they were getting ‘two for the price of one.’ Clinton made
clear that his wife would be a key player in making policy, not beds, at the
White House” (Germond 365). Both wives played a part in their husbands’
transitions into power. The central difference between their roles is the
perception their audiences had of their roles. While Hillary was begrudg-
ingly tolerated by the public as she was the focus of telephoto lenses, Lady
Macbeth needed the anonymity granted women of Shakespeare’s Elizabe-
than England and the literal lifetime of Gruoch Macbeth (1005-1054) in
order to influence her husband while remaining acceptable to the public
(Boyce 355-356).

As Others in their desires and behavior, both women experience loneli-
ness. In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth had no female confidants. “In
[Shakespeare’s] ... tragedies, where the patriarchal world is more oppres-
sive, women are sometimes able to do more, but they talk less to each
other ... this important means of self-expression for women is almost in-
variably imperfectly realized, perverted or blocked” (McKewin 127). For Lady Macbeth, isolation may have been the most painful consequence for her lust for power. The success of her husband resulted in the intensification of her isolation. This isolation was due in great part to her husband’s calculated behavior. “After Macbeth becomes King, he, the man, so fully commands Lady Macbeth that he allows her no share in his new business” (Klein 246). In her quest to put her husband into the throne, Lady Macbeth lost her sense of purpose. That she was no longer needed as a strategist, and then no longer as a housekeeper, is evidenced in Act III, scene i, where Macbeth, rather than Lady Macbeth, planned the feast. Macbeth continued cutting off his wife by planning Banquo’s murder without informing her. His decision to discard Banquo outside the castle walls sent a clear message to Lady Macbeth: not only was she stripped of her role as companion, but also that of helpmate. “Finally, in the great banquet scene, she loses her faltering role as hostess. Because Macbeth is there beyond her reach and her comprehension, she is powerless” (Klein 24).

Hillary Clinton’s transition into the White House was met with similar closeting. Upon arriving to Washington, D.C., she unveiled a massive health insurance plan that led many to compare her to Lady Macbeth. “Her great cause—health-care reform—founded in part because it was ill-conceived, but also because it was regarded as a palace conspiracy” (Thomas 28). After the failure of her plan, “the White House... labored to play down her influence, describing a conversion from policymaker to speech-maker, helpmate to goodwill ambassador, a seemingly docile role for an accomplished lawyer with more than two decades of experience in public life and no shortage of opinions” (Bennet A14).

Like Lady Macbeth, Hillary, too, seems to be without female confidants. Unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, however, Hillary’s isolation is voluntary rather than a matter of circumstance. After the president publicly admitted to having had an affair with Monica Lewinsky, the public got its first glimpse of Hillary’s power to distance herself from her friends. “Most of the first lady’s views on the scandal [were] kept to herself. Some of her staff members [were] troubled that she [wouldn’t] even tell them how she [felt]. ‘The bunker mentality... set in in a big way,’ a friend [said]” (Walsh 24). Hillary’s self-imposed tight-lip reaction to the Lewinsky affair was reflective of one of her favorite sayings, borrowed from Alcoholics Anonymous: “Fake it till you make it” (Thomas 20).

The intimate relationships between the women and their husbands have also been called into question by observers. In Lady Macbeth and her husband’s first shared scene of the play, Lady Macbeth read a letter from her husband that referred to Lady Macbeth as his “dearest partner of greatness” (1.5.12). Lady Macbeth hinted of her physical relationship with her husband when she said, “Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent
flower" (1.5.66). "The intimacy between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, combined with the use of perverse sexuality as a symbol of moral disorder has lent to a theatrical tradition... that presents their relationship as highly charged sexually, and she as a bold flaunter of her sexual charms" (Boyce 357). During the course of the play, however, dialogue concerning the Macbeths' physical relationship is replaced by an almost exclusive focus on their political ambition. "... [I]t is clear that their relationship—however construed—wITHERS in the atmosphere of mistrust and emotional disturbance that is unleashed with Duncan’s murder" (Boyce 357).

Bill and Hillary Clinton’s physical relationship has come under similar fire. When the American public began asking how intact their relationship was after Bill admitted to having an affair, one of Hillary’s aide’s tried to reassure the American public that they were still passionately affectionate towards one another. She said, “They don’t kiss. They devour each other” (Cooper 40). Some believed that the picture painted by the aide wasn’t entirely accurate. They claimed the romantic image of the couple fed to the public from the White House had “... less to do with the power of love than the love of power” (Riddell 12). Whether or not the Macbeths or the Clintons actually had intense physical relationships is minor in comparison to on-lookers’ perceptions of their relationships. If audiences believe their relationships are particularly steamy or icy, then the notion that “the normal marital relationship is distorted—one way or another—by the force of the evil to which they commit themselves” is given validity (Boyce 391).

The fathers of Lady Macbeth and Hillary Clinton, although not present in the play or on the contemporary political stage, both had lasting and often over-looked power over their daughters’ behavior. Lady Macbeth said that she would have killed Duncan, “Had he not resembled/My father as he slept” (2.2.12-13). Her devotion to her father complicated her, rendering her something other than a character of pure villainy. Similarly, many believe that Hillary Clinton’s relationship with her father has affected her adulthood behavior. Hillary once said of her parents, “They were strict about my respecting authority, and not just parental authority. My father’s favorite saying was ‘You get in trouble at school, you get in trouble at home’” (Clinton 3). The motivation to succeed, combined with a hard-handed, somewhat frightening adherence to authority instilled in Hillary as a child provided the framework for her future ambitions to succeed.

Another similarity between the two women is their reliance on the supernatural. When she learned of Duncan’s impending visit to Iverness, Lady Macbeth prayed, “Come, you spirits/that tend on moral thoughts...” (1.5.41-42). Her intent was “to obscure her deeds from Heaven’s sight. This invocation of supernatural horrors is chilling, and reminds us of the witches, already established as a source of evil” (Boyce
After Macbeth told her he had murdered Duncan, Lady Macbeth said, “I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry” (2.2.15). Both the sound of “an owl’s hoot and the sound of crickets, . . . [are] traditional omens of death” (Boyce 390).

During Bill Clinton’s first term in office, the press was abuzz with news that Hillary Clinton was relying upon supernatural powers. During the spring of 1995, shortly after the failure of her health care plan in Congress, she called upon New Age psychic philosopher Dr. Jean Houston to guide her through several reflective meditation sessions. During these sessions, “Houston persuaded Hillary to enact conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi” (Thomas 21). In a 1996 newspaper column, Hillary listed the women she had reached out to, “including authors Doris Kearns Goodwin, Mary Pipher and Deborah Tannen” (Kosova 23). Although the myth of the superwoman was dispelled by their channeling of spirits, they are faced with the criticism of relying on evil to carry out their ambitious missions by turning to nontraditional sources of power. Supernatural powers, too, complicate them.

Hillary Clinton and Lady Macbeth’s personal struggles with good versus evil and personal identity versus marital partnership have been overshadowed by the ferocity of their ambition. Both women lost sight of the value the public places on tradition. However, when the impetus behind the motivation that separated them from traditional first wives, the factors that molded their drives, and the humanity behind the women are explored, a more detailed and accurate understanding of the women is formed. Their stories not only enrich our perceptions of “women behind the men,” but also those of women in general. One-dimensionality exists neither in fiction nor in reality.
Finally, I’m done with work, I think as I stretch outside the bar, feeling a slight spring breeze that reminds me of how damn hot the kitchen can get. But a job is a job and paychecks are nice, I remind myself as I move across the sand parking lot to the old clunker my Dad let me drive this summer. Just something he bought at an auction. It only cost $300, which is why it makes all those wonderful noises. It doesn’t have a working fan belt so I can’t drive around for long before it overheats, but I really only need it to get to work. With a quick glance under the car and in the back seat, I hop in and slam the door. I know I just live in North Dakota, but one of these days there will be a drunk weirdo waiting for me just because nobody dreams it would happen here. Translation: it will happen, and it will happen to me. I lock the doors and absent-mindedly push in the lighter as I put my seat belt on and grab a cigarette.

Suddenly I remember my night is not over yet. “Shit! That’s right. I have to go pick up Mike,” I mutter out loud as this realization hits me. Mike went out to Dad’s to help him pack and I was the lucky volunteer to have to go pick him up, since I was already out by Dad’s place, or at least closer than the rest of the family. I start the car and continue to mutter obscenities as I head out in the direction of the ranch. I drag heavily on my cigarette as I scan the lake and notice our old house. We all lived there, before the divorce. I look over to our neighbor’s yard and at a tall pine.

“Rae, go downstairs and help the kids.”
“Just go. Shawn and I will handle it.”
I run downstairs and scan the basement. I don’t see anyone. Then I hear Lilly.
Entering the bedroom, I find Mike and Lilly in the corner holding each other and crying.
“Oh, Rae,” Lilly sobs and reaches for me.
I kneel down and put my arms around them both. Somehow I end up sitting on the floor with two kids on my lap and four arms tightly holding on to me.
“Shh, Shh,” I whisper while rocking back and forth. “It’s okay. No
big deal, just a little loud, that's all. It'll be over soon."

"I hate Dad; he always does this," Mike whispers.

"Now shush. We'll just forget about that." I hear Vanessa yelling at Dad upstairs to knock it off. Mom yells something and Vanessa yells again.

"God dammit, go outside then. You're scaring the kids."

I rock Mike and Lilly and start to sing. "Hush, little baby, don't you cry. Rae is going to buy you a rocking chair. If that rocking chair don't rock Rae is going to buy you a diamond ring. If that diamond . . . ." Meanwhile it has become amazingly quiet upstairs. I hear Dad's boots coming down the staircase. He enters the bedroom.

"I'm sorry, guys. Your mother just thinks I'm a fool. I know how she thinks. She doesn't love me. I do everything around her . . . ."

"No, no," my mind screams. I turn and run up the stairs. On my way out the door I grab Shawn's coat and run. I keep running through the snow crying out loud, "No, no!" I only make it a quarter of a mile to my neighbor's yard. There I get stuck because I've broken through the hard top layer of the snow bank. I sit in the snow looking at the moon. Everything shines while tears fall.

As I turn onto the highway, my mind spouts sarcastically, "Great. Now I won't get home till 1:30 a.m. and everyone will probably have gone home by then. So much for my Saturday night. I don't see why Dad can't pack his own shit."

"You know, he is your father," my conscience pipes up, "and after he moves to Nebraska you won't see him very often."

"Good," I return firmly until the usual guilt washes over my skin-deep tough act. "I know. I know he is my father and I love him because he is my father, but I don't have to like him," I mumble defensively as I flick my Marb out the window. It makes quite a show as it hits the highway sending embers every direction, just as my feelings for my father are usually scattered and in disarray. In the rearview mirror the ashes resemble fireworks that people usually "ooohh" and "aahh" for, but all I can do right now is sigh.

The road to the house is gravel. It winds around the hills rather dangerously to a rundown house in a pathetically overgrown and littered yard. I never understood why Dad moved in here. I tell myself he did it to help out the old couple who used to live here, partially because they were very nice, and partially because it is easier than telling myself that my father is incredibly cheap. I park next to the front door, not bothering to pull in by the garage and hurry up the stairs and through the front porch.

"Mike," I bellow, "are you ready to go?" I survey the kitchen. Crap everywhere. The night before he leaves town, and everything is still a
mess. So this is where I get all that procrastination from. As I walk into
the living room I hear Mike’s lazy reply, “Rae, that you?”
“No shit. Who else would be out here?”
“No one, I guess,” Mike returns as a smirk spreads across his face.
“Everyone else is too smart.”
“Yeah, yeah, comedian boy, let’s go. I want to see if I can catch Nathan
before he goes home.”
“Aren’t you going to say good-bye to Dad?” Mike asks, surprised.
“He’s out back loading up some machinery last minute.”
“I don’t have time and I’m not in the mood so let’s just go,” I copout
quickly as I head back towards the kitchen and escape.
“He leaves tomorrow, Rae!”
“I know,” I call over my shoulder as I head out the doorway. “I don’t
want to see him. I’m tired, I smell like french fries, and I want to see Na­
than, so let’s go.”

Mike and I hop in the car and I try to get out of the yard before we’re
spotted because, quite frankly, I don’t enjoy Dad’s company. We’ve never
been close, and when he acts like Mr. Perfect Dad, it makes me nauseous.
Unfortunately, just when I think I’m in the clear, Dad comes running over
to the car. I fight the urge to take off, and Mike opens his door so Dad can
talk to us.

“Hey there, kid, what are you doing?”
“Oh, I thought you were busy so we were going to take off. It was a
long night at work and I’m tired.”
“So what are your plans for summer? Work, work, and more work?”
“Pretty much. I need money for college this fall.”
“Any scholarships?”
“A few, but they’re small.”
“Yeah, it has been a tough year for me too, what with the way your
mother bleeds me dry.”
“Dad, that’s enough! I don’t want to hear it.”
“Sorry, she just upsets me. Things didn’t have to be this way. She did
it.”
“Dad, the divorce is over and it doesn’t involve me, so drop it.”

Catching a nervous look on Mike’s face, I smile to reassure him and
decide to let it drop. I let Dad continue to live in his own world of illusions
and disillusions. Apparently, Dad also notices Mike’s uneasiness and
switches topics quickly.

“You, ahh, still seeing that Nathan?”
“Yes. I was hoping to see him tonight, but I don’t know if I’ll catch him
or not.”

“I better let you go. I’ll tell everyone in Nebraska hello from you.
When do you think you’ll be able to come down for a visit?”
"I don't know, it depends on work and Nathan and such. I'll try to get down, though." I hear myself saying this and hoping I sound believable even though both of us know I won't go down there and he won't come up here.

"Okay. I'll see you around. Have a good summer."

"Yeah, you too."

As Dad stands up he gives a dopey smile and moves so Mike can shut the door. Mike leans out the open window and promises to be back in the morning.

"Mom said she'll bring me out so I can help you finish, okay?"

Dad nods and I wave while I put the car in drive and head out the driveway. Mike tries to fill the uncomfortable silence with chatter about his day's excursions as I mull over the last conversation I had with Dad. Realistically I know I won't see him till Thanksgiving, the next holiday when the "kids" go.

Tears begin to roll down my cheeks when I realize just how bad of a relationship I have with my father. My mind keeps echoing his last words. "Have a good summer." A good summer! He's moving to another state and the last thing he says is "have a good summer!" No "I love you." No "I'll miss you" or "give your old man a hug." Hmm, a hug. How long has it been since I hugged my father? A sharp chill runs through me and sends my heart into my throat as I realize I can't remember the last time that any of those happened.

"Rae, what's wrong? Are you upset that dad is going so far away?"

"I'm sorry, Mike," I sniffle. "Um, yeah," I mumble as I try to force a meek grin and lie to my brother. "That's it," I squeak, feeling even worse as my mind screams, "Oh, my God, I'm not even nineteen and I have no relationship with my dad."

Mike turns and looks at me. I've forgotten that he's thirteen now and incredibly perceptive for his age. A side effect from a messy marriage, worse divorce, and a manipulative father.

"It's okay, Rae. I know things will be better for Mom if he goes away and maybe you and Dad can try to get along."

My whole composure crashes and my face crumbles. Mike pulls out a smoke, pops in the lighter and hands me the Marb.

I swallow hard, "Can you believe that? 'Have a nice summer.'"

We drive on. I drop my Marb out the window as we turn onto the highway and I see the initial burst of light as the embers scatter, then only specks, and as I drive onward only an image remains of what there was... once.
Not too long ago, I saw a special feature on Dateline or 60 Minutes about department store clerks. It focused on how, if you aren’t careful, they will overcharge you for something or not give you the right amount of change back. The message was simple—all cashiers are crooks.

I personally take offense at this and there is a reason. I used to be one of those so-called crooked people, and it was a very traumatizing experience.

Allow me to explain. For most of my senior year in high school, I worked at the local Kmart department store. I started out as a cashier, and, after about four months, I was transferred to the garden shop. This meant that I would be working outdoors in the middle of summer—almost a dream come true.

There was a downside to the job, though, and that was a certain breed of customer that did not understand the meaning of kindness. Don’t get me wrong, there were many more people who were nice as can be, but that never seemed to make up for the one customer who could ruin your entire day.

Now there are many different types of customers like this and to pass the time as I worked, I divided them up into many different categories.

One particular characterization was a troll (one of the worst kinds, in my opinion). This does not mean that the person physically resembled a troll, but it described their personality.

One troll attack that remains vivid in my memory involved a pair of shoes. Apparently the pair had been set on a sales rack (perhaps by an absent-minded forager, a customer I will speak of in a moment) and the troll decided she wanted them. As I rung the shoes up, she noticed that my register had not given her the sale price, and she immediately threw a fit.

“Aren’t those shoes supposed to be on sale?” the troll asked (as if I had memorized the price of every item in the store). “They were on the sales rack!”

I saw no sales tag on the shoe so I had to call the shoe department to have them check on the price for me. I told her that I would be doing this, and this set her off again, “Well, I’m not lying. What kind of a person do you think I am!”

“This is just routine, ma’am,” I replied to her wailing, “I have to make
“Sure.”

“So you think I am lying.” I could imagine a wart forming on her nose. Her troll-like personality was becoming recognizable.

I did not reply for fear of submitting myself to another attack of harsh words. Instead I picked up the phone to call back to the shoe department.

Meanwhile, a large line was starting to form in my aisle. I was, after all, the only cashier up front, and no one seemed to be coming to my rescue.

I finally decided that I would go and ask the lady at the customer service counter for advice. This would also get me away from the troll—at least for a short amount of time.

Customer Service offered no solace, however. The lady in charge said I should just tell the troll (she did not actually call the customer a troll, mind you) that there was nothing we could do. The shoes were full price.

“So!” was the troll’s reply (meanwhile, her back was becoming hunched), “You can put a sales sign up and then disregard it completely? That is false advertising!”

“I am sorry, ma’am, there is nothing I can do.”

“Oh, I see. Well, in that case, you can take everything back. I will not support crooks like you!” And with that, the troll huffed out of the store.

I cleared the cash register of her numerous unpurchased items. Then I was ready for the next customer. It was a young couple. They said empathetically, “Don’t worry, I am pretty sure that none of these items are on sale.”

As I said before, this incident with the troll still remains vivid in my memory and, although she had no right to take her anger out on me, I wonder if the misplaced shoe was the result of another worker or perhaps an absent-minded forager (of which I earlier spoke). The absent-minded foragers are customers who like to pick an item up in one area of the store and deposit it in another area. It is not known why they do this, but it is very easy to spot them. They usually walk around in wide-eyed amazement at everything they pass by. They aren’t really sure why they came into the store, but they find something and carry it around until they find something else to take its place.

Customers like this are an increasing problem and I think that steps should be taken to keep their numbers from growing. Perhaps a twelve-step program like “Absent-minded Foragers Anonymous” could be set up or a task force could be formed to seek out and reform them (wishful thinking on my part, I guess).

However bad the foragers might be, there is another group that is just as bad (if not worse). This group is known as the bargainers. They are not as mean and brutal as the troll, but they can irritate you. It seems that bargainers do not like to pay the set store price, but instead prefer to haggle with store managers to see if they will lower it.
I didn’t even see a bargainer when I worked the checkout lines. It was when I started working in the garden shop that I ran into a lot of them. I don’t know what it is, but bargainers seem to be drawn to riding lawn tractors and half-dead geraniums. Yes, I do agree that geraniums should be cheaper when it looks like they aren’t going to make it, but lawn mowers don’t wilt. They don’t look like they need to be watered. Lawn tractors are basically priced to sell, not to bargain for.

I can normally keep these customers in line and tell them that the posted price is the lowest that we will go. There are a few, however, that seem bent on getting that lawn mower cheaper than everyone else can. “Why don’t you call the manager back here?” they will ask. So I go to the phone and announce over the public address system that I need the manager to come to the garden shop. The only problem with this is that bargainers always seem to know when the manager is on a lunch break and then they decide to pounce on you. They’re a shifty bunch.

When the manager finally comes, they start to sweet talk him or her. “Whaddya say I give you five hundred dollars for that model something something out there?” or the more desperate, “Well, Wal-Mart has that same model and it’s a hundred twenty dollars cheaper.” Then why don’t you go to Wal-Mart and buy it there (if they actually have the same model and have it on sale, that is)?

The one good thing about bargainers is that they usually deal with the store manager (when the manager finally arrives). This gets them away from me (a definite plus).

Yet another group that irritated me (I am beginning to wonder if I liked my job as much as I thought) was the nitpickers. This is one customer I do not need to deal with on a bad day. They always say you should be doing this or doing that. “You should water these flowers, they are drying up.” Never mind the fact that they were watered about an hour ago. (Why don’t you get a job here. Then you can water them.)

Well, yes. Maybe I should water them, but if I do, another customer (kind of like you) will come along, want to buy some flowers, see that the little plastic containers and the soil inside are soaking wet, and complain that I am overwatering the flowers (and in the process, they will get my checkout counter wet and muddy, in turn, upsetting a customer who decides to pay for their clothes in the garden shop). Perhaps you would like to run me over as I go to the parking lot to load forty-pound bags of topsoil into your trunk?

Of course, I could never say that to the customer’s face. That would cause me to not have a job much longer.

A subdivision (or at least a distant cousin) of the nitpickers would have to be the vultures. These are the people who keep a constant eye on you, waiting for you to mess up so they can catch you and make you look fool-
ish. Most of the time you can spot them. They usually are beady-eyed and look like they are up to no good. They hardly ever show up unless you have a long line of customers and then, when you see them, your blood runs cold.

I remember having two old vultures in my line. One said to the other, “Make sure you keep a close eye on him. Count your change when you get it back. I saw something about cashiers on 60 Minutes or Dateline and it says that he will more than likely cheat you. They are all crooks.” Then she said to me, “Make sure you double bag this stuff. I don’t want the bottom falling out on the way to my car.” Then she kept a close eye on me to make sure I did what she had asked. I smiled at her as I was double bagging, but she kept frowning at me. I was happy to see her leave.

Well, I believe I have come to the end of my list and I feel that I have said what needed to be said. There’s just one last thing I have to say to any trolls, bargainers, nitpickers, and/or vultures who might be reading this. Remember, it isn’t that hard to de-magnetize that strip on the back of your credit card or to accidentally ring up a product twice. You might not even notice it, but I have methods of retaliation, so beware. Revenge is a dish best served overpriced.
"Is this interesting conversation?" he said.
"What?" she said.
"This. What I wrote, is it interesting?"
"By what standards? Mine or yours?"
"I don’t know. Any standards. Literary standards. Literature magazine standards."
"Well, by my standards, it’s all right. By your standards I would have to say that it’s pretty good, but by literature, or literary magazine standards, I would have to say that it’s pretty shitty."
"What? Are you serious?"
"Yeah, it’s not all that good."
"How can you say that!? You don’t know what you are talking about. Like you know anyway."
"Then why did you ask me? Christ, you’re testy."
"You’re the only one here, that’s why I asked you. Do you see anyone else here? ‘Cause I don’t! You’re here, so I asked you. What’s the difference what you think anyway?"
"What the hell does that have to do with anything? You asked me, and I gave you my . . . ."
"Leave it. It doesn’t matter anyway. You don’t matter."
"I don’t matter, that’s great. Listen. You asked me about standards. I told you based on my standards, based on your standards, and based on their standards, by what I know of them. That’s the difference."
"What difference?"
"You just asked . . . Damn it, why do you do that? You talk and don’t listen to yourself. How do you even remember anything you have ever said?"
"What’s the matter with you? You’re always in such a bitchy mood. Calm the fuck down. It doesn’t matter anyway."
"Why not?"
"Because your moods always change so damn fast, and . . . ."
"That’s not what I am talking about! Would you listen to me!? Christ."
"Don’t say that. I’ve told you not to say that."
"Why do you think I would care that what I say means to you? Christ."
"God Dammit, don’t say that! I’ve told you."
"You don’t need to try and tell me what to say. I’ll say whatever the hell I want to say. And I’ll say this, ‘GO TO HELL!’"

"Why do you have to be like that?"
"Because you have to be like that."
"Then why do we have to be like that?"
"This."
"What?"
"This. Why do we have to be like this? We are still being, so you should use the present tense. Why do you have to be like THIS?"
"So sorry. Grammar Queen."
"Maybe that’s why you never reach your standards—no wait, your standards are pretty low. Because you never think about your grammar. Your shitty grammar. Christ, you don’t even know the difference between it’s and its, and your and you’re."
"You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Do you? You’re wrong about ‘this.’ Admit it, you just love to struggle. Struggle and argue. That’s what you do. Struggle and argue. And bitch, too."
"You give me things to bitch about, and I bitch. It’s as easy as that."
"I think you look to find things to bitch about. That’s the difference."
"What difference!? What is this difference that keeps coming up? What difference!?"
"The difference between you and me."
"What the fuck are you talking about?"
"Why do you have to swear?"
"Don’t change the fucking subject. Christ. Tell me what the hell the difference, whatever the hell it is, between you and me is. And what the hell does it have to do with anything at all. Tell me that."
"I’m the writer and you are not."
"And?"
"That’s the difference."
"What difference!? What does that mean!? You have no point at all! Christ! What the hell do you mean!?"
"I’m a writer and you are not. My opinion matters and yours does not. Their opinion matters and yours does not. The difference between you and me is mine matters. Yours does not."
"You asked me. I gave it to you. You would not have asked if it didn’t matter. Right!?"
"...
"Answer me! Right? Right? Am I right? Tell me?"
"What’s the difference anyway?"
"Would you stop saying that damn word! Christ! Tell me it matters, tell me it does!"
"..."
"I know it’s in there. I know it is. Tell me I’m right. Tell me what I want to hear. Do it!"
"..."
"You won’t do it. You’re just sitting there tells me I am right. I know I am. I know it."
"..."
"What the hell."
"..."
"..."
"Exactly. What the hell. What the hell happened to us?"
My reading of Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” brought to my attention a point of view I had never considered. Her theories are insightful and thought-provoking, but left me questioning her arguments.

Rich asserts throughout the essay that women are forced into heterosexual relationships. She questions whether the search for love and tenderness in both sexes does not originally lead toward women, and why would a woman redirect that search? My anthropological mind immediately questioned her meaning. Of course, if all women sought only other women, and found men sexually unappealing, then we wouldn’t be here discussing this essay. I recently read an article on the biochemistry of the brain as it relates to sexual reproduction and I think it can be applied here. This article sought to explain the mechanism that evolved to ensure sexual reproduction, hence the survival of the human species. The author theorizes that, in order for humans to reproduce, there must be some incentive to engage in intercourse. This mechanism is in the form of emotional attachment (to ensure that the male will stay around to help feed and protect the offspring) and physical attraction (to allow the male and female to have reproductive intercourse in the first place). This makes sense if you recognize its evolutionary importance.

I understand Rich’s point that women would more readily find love and tenderness in other women—and we do. But that doesn’t mean we can’t see men as suitable sex partners.

Rich lists and explains eight characteristics of male power over women. In one of them she claims that men control women’s “produce” through male control of abortion, contraception, sterilization, and childbirth. In what ways is it male-controlled? My gynecologist is a woman, as is my sister’s, and as was and is my mother’s. Perhaps Rich would argue that it is male scientists and marketers who control what we have available, but that’s not a valid argument either. In fact, doesn’t it often fall on the woman, and not the man, to provide the contraceptive? I, for one, feel better knowing that I am in control when I choose to have sex. As far as abortion goes, though most lawmakers are male, it is not illegal to have an abor-
tion everywhere. In societies that engage in ritual female sterilization, it is not always the men that participate. Women, especially mothers, have been known to encourage such practices.

Rich also asserts that men control women and force them into (and keep them in) heterosexual marriages by forcing them to bear children and remain at home to breastfeed and raise them. She forgets that many studies have shown that breastfeeding is best for the health of the baby. This isn’t any male researcher telling me this, it’s Nature who gave us this wonderful mechanism to nourish our offspring from our own bodies, establishing a bond between mother and child than no man could ever break.

While I agreed with Rich’s main ideas—that it is assumed that women are innately sexually oriented only toward men, and that it is also assumed that the lesbian is simply acting out of her bitterness toward men—I don’t trust her theory that anyone is forced into anything, whether it is heterosexuality or lesbian existence. I have experienced intimate relationships with other women that were non-sexual. I have also found love, tenderness, and understanding in men, as well as sexual satisfaction. While it’s true that I could never have with a man what I could with a woman—the total understanding of what it is to be a woman—I am undeniably sexually oriented toward men. In a perfect world, I suppose, we could have both: women could find emotional satisfaction with other women and use men only for reproduction—but I think one can easily see that this is not the way to go. For one, we would still need that mechanism that allows us to want to have sex with the opposite sex, and second, we would have to look at the morality of using men as cattle. So, we can choose to view men as oppressors—some of them are, after all—or we can accept our evolutionary fate, which we cannot change, by recognizing that we are who we are for a reason, whether we exist as heterosexual or as lesbian.
The Social Finish Line

The date is August 20, 1999. Streams of luggage-burdened cars are flowing into Grand Forks where they will be finding a new home at the University of North Dakota. The luggage itself is also burdened, because it has the duty of representing its owner’s past life, a life that the new students have forfeited for a chance of education and a successful future. Ironically, education is not foremost on these incoming freshmen minds. Fear grips each of these new students. Fear that their roommate will have the worst body odor known to mankind. Fear that they will get lost their first days of classes and be doomed to wander aimlessly while being taunted by the upperclassmen. Fear that they will be considered strange if they don’t have a group of friends and a girlfriend by the end of the day. As though it is a race against each other, the new students create new personalities to help them become first across the social finish line.

I, too, am guilty of creating another personality to help me fit in better. I have created an entertainer, a comedian that always has a punch line to add. He is always ready for a laugh and will never pass up a party for a book. I have created both my social savior and my educational monster. My burden, which I am forced to carry everywhere on this campus, is the performance required to maintain this other personality. Now, walking across campus is a tiring procedure. All the friends I have made over the last week stop to talk. But they do not stop to talk casually; they pause only so that they can be entertained, so that they may enjoy the latest joke or incident which occurred in my life or the lives around me. And the personality that started out as a means to an end toward popularity has suddenly, itself, become the result. I shoulder the weight of my friends’ expectant smiles as they stand waiting for the next performance. I carry the burden of a demanding social life. And I discard the responsibilities of maintaining the academic standards that I have always considered myself to be above.

I have a choice before me as thousands of others have already done. Should I choose to live socially for the moment, or educationally for the future? And if a compromise can be made, where should the line be drawn? When the work gets so far behind that I have to ostracize myself for days just to catch up? Or when I have an assignment due at eight tomorrow morning and a party is being held tonight? Should I convince my-
self that I will recover from the effects in time to do the homework and make it to class? Optimistically I will adapt, being able to judge and manage the other personality. And hopefully my rambling will in some way help another recognize and control theirs. Either way, I pray that as graduates we do not regret having to carry home the new luggage we dearly sacrificed for over the years.