

12-1-2009

Capstone Portfolio

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Recommended Citation

Giménez, Rita, "Capstone Portfolio" (2009). *Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects*. Paper 47.

Capstone Portfolio

Fall 2009

Rita Giménez

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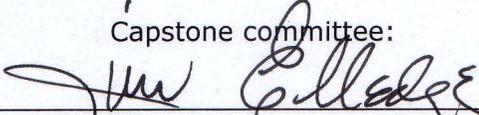
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Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Marguerite Giménez

Has been approved by the committee
For the capstone requirement for the Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English
At the December 2009 graduation

Capstone committee:


Member

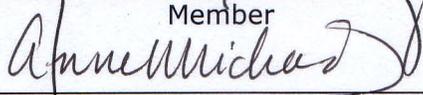

Member

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4-11
Poetry	
• Roots	
“I am from Tifton, Georgia”	12-13
“Murder Over Fruit Loops”	14-15
“Reason to Keep Climbing”	16
“Mama’s Healing Hands”	17-18
“Looking for Something”	19
• Lifestyles	
“Maybe She Was Once a Mother”	20
“Blue-Haired Church Lady”	21
“Civil War Re-enactor’s Thoughts on Life, 2005”	22
“Eavesdropping at the Airport”	23-24
“Forever”	25
“Hopes that Never Happen”	26
“Captain Seagull’s Buffet”	27
“Life is a Party”	28
“Countdown Clocks”	29
• Bilingualism and Immigration	
“A Girl Named _____”	30-31

“Patriot”	32
“Wonder”	33-34
“Waiting for Salvador”	35
“The Future of America”	36
• Travel	
“Tiger Woman”	37
“No Plans for My Life”	38
“The Ugly American Goes to El Yunque”	39
“Looking at Me Looking at Their World”	40-41
“Photographing San Juan”	42-43
• Being Haunted By the Past	
“Killing Time”	44-45
“After the Fire”	46-47
“Visitation”	48-49
“Echoes”	50-52
Fiction	
“The Party”	53-64
“A Kleeland County Emergency”	65-67

Introduction

When I entered Kennesaw State University's Master of Arts in Professional Writing program in 2007, I had taken only two undergraduate courses in creative writing and had very limited experience with creative writing, especially in the area of poetry. I didn't know what to write about or that I had anything interesting to write about at all. My first MAPW course was Dr. Linda Niemann's creative nonfiction class, which was focused on memoir writing. This class showed me how to write about my own experiences and observations in a meaningful way. Through reading peers' writing as well as published work, I learned that good writing often involves finding significance in everyday observations and experiences. For example, the class read David Sedaris' *Naked*, and one of the most memorable and entertaining passages in the book is of the narrator riding on a Greyhound bus and describing the dialogue and situation to readers. I read this passage and realized that everyone has seemingly unexceptional experiences such as this one that are full of potential significance and interest and that I do have material to write about.

Before my MAPW coursework, I also viewed poetry as a genre that is impossible to write or understand. Most of my poetry reading had been done in literature classes on authors like Shakespeare, Blake, and Keats. I appreciated these poems, but thought it would be difficult to write others like them. In Dr. Jim Elledge's poetry class, I read modern poetry by poets such as Susan Swartwout, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Martín Espada and learned that each writer has her own voice, and language changes over time. Present-day writers can write well using modern vocabulary and sentence structure while still admiring older poetry.

I also learned about, read, and practiced writing various poetic forms. I practiced writing sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, and syllabic poems and realized that using these forms can help generate content for writing and make writing poetry enjoyable. Before actually using these forms, I thought they might constrain my poetry, but they actually helped me explore ideas as well as write higher-quality poems. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland write in *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* that poetic forms are “not locks, but keys,” which I also found to be true in my own writing (xiii).

The majority of the poems included in this collection are Italian sonnets or variations of Italian sonnets, though most of them are not directly about “love” in the traditional sense. Sonnets are brief and, as with mine, can be the medium for revealing a variety of truths and sentiments. According to Strand and Boland, the contemporary sonnet appeals to modern poets and readers because “it is short, easily comprehended and its historic structure still opens the way for living debate and subtle argument” (58). I enjoy writing sonnets because although they are short, they can easily contain complex stories, ideas, dialogue, and/or imagery.

I also wrote several sestinas for this collection, a form I was drawn to because it is so challenging. The first sestina I read was Robin Becker’s “Peter Pan in North America,” and I was amazed when I noticed that the end words were repeated in each stanza. A successful sestina tricks readers in this way, and that was my goal as I practiced writing sestinas. The sestina is also appealing to me as well as to other writers and readers because it can adapt to “common speech” and because the six repeated words lead to the development of a clear theme (Strand and Boland 24). People often repeat themselves in

conversation, which makes the sestina an appropriate medium for writing narrative poetry and poetry containing dialogue.

Two poems in this collection are free verse poems, but as John Hollander writes in *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, "Free verse is never totally 'free'" (26). For example, I had to pay attention to stanza breaks, line length, and word choice in the free verse poems just as I did in the others. There are also two syllabic poems and two villanelles in this portfolio. I didn't enjoy writing syllabic poems as much as sonnets or sestinas because the only guideline is the number of syllables in each line; I like the challenge of repeated or rhyming words in certain places. The villanelles were difficult for me to write because the form requires that the poet repeat specific, whole lines throughout the poem in specific places.

My first few poems were sonnets that mostly told stories, but as I tried different genres and progressed as a writer, I learned that although a reader should be able to understand and visualize poems, they don't necessarily have to tell complete stories. In my fiction class, Dr. Greg Johnson encouraged me to branch out and try to write using personae of people very different from me. As a result, I wrote the short story "The Party" and used personae in several poems. Another aspect of fiction I focused on while writing my short stories was creating realistic characters (whether writing in first or third person), because, as Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French write, "your fiction can only be as successful as the characters who move it and move within it . . . [readers] must find them interesting, [readers] must find them believable, and [readers] must care about what happens to them" (81). I tried to create characters with realistic personalities and dialogue.

The workshop setting of each of my MAPW classes also aided in my growth as a writer. Giving and receiving feedback from peers gave me confidence and useful criticism to apply to my writing. Reading my work aloud in front of peers also helped me in the revision process, specifically with identifying errors, unrealistic dialogue, and awkward word choice. Most of the works in this collection have improved significantly since the beginning draft stages as a result of being edited by my fellow MAPW students.

Throughout my MAPW coursework, I began to view myself as a writer and realized that writing requires discipline and practice just like any other task, academic subject, hobby, sport, etc. Contrary to popular belief, “inspiration” and “the muse” are not the key ingredients to creative writing. Successful writing is a result of a writer’s sitting down with a paper and pencil or pen (or computer keyboard), and writing. In *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French state, “We are in love with words except when we have to face them. We are caught in a guilty paradox in which we grumble over our lack of time, and when we have the time, we sharpen pencils, check e-mail, or clip the hedges” (1). The problem with creative writing is not that it is too mysterious or difficult to create or that people have “writer’s block” or nothing to write about. I believe that the main problem faced by most creative writers who are having trouble with their craft is a lack of discipline and/or courage to sit down and actually write.

The following poems and short stories are some of the best pieces of writing that resulted from my MAPW coursework from fall semester 2007 to fall semester 2009. These works demonstrate the training and advice I received about writing, my growth as a writer, and my versatility.

The poems and short stories are grouped together, and the poems are organized based on themes: roots, lifestyles, bilingualism and immigration, travel, and being haunted by the past. The poems “I Am From Tifton, Georgia,” “Murder Over Fruit Loops,” “Reason to Keep Climbing,” “Mama’s Healing Hands,” and “Looking for Something” concern childhood, growing up, and family relationships. “I Am From Tifton, Georgia” is a free verse poem about my hometown. “Murder Over Fruit Loops” is a sestina about a little girl and her brother seeing the neighbor’s cat kill a bluebird and learning that the world is a violent place. “Reason to Keep Climbing” is a sonnet about sibling rivalry and the twisted motivations that people often have for making life choices. “Mama’s Healing Hands” is a sestina about growing up in the South and the complicated relationships between mothers and their children, love and abuse. “Looking for Something” is a sonnet about how children remember and carry with them random conversations, comments, and experiences and forget the rest.

The poems under the category “Lifestyles” are about interesting people, my encounters with them, and their ways of living. “Maybe She Was Once a Mother” is a sonnet about a homeless woman pushing her personal belongings around in a stroller and an onlooker’s surprise and questions upon seeing her. “Blue-Haired Church Lady” is a sonnet written in the persona of a religious woman who is unwilling to grow, change, or live in reality. “Civil War Re-enactor’s Thoughts on Life, 2005” is the first sonnet I wrote using a persona. The narrator is a war veteran and Civil War re-enactor with racist tendencies and anger management issues. “Eavesdropping at the Airport” is a free verse poem that recreates the phone dialogue of people who are obsessed with technology and inappropriately broadcasting their personal business in the public setting of an airport.

“Forever” is a sonnet about regret, excuses, and the temporary nature of life and relationships. “Hopes That Never Happen” is a sonnet about how children are often full of extraordinary dreams that fade until none remain. “Captain Seagull’s Buffet” is a humorous sonnet about obesity in the United States. “Life is a Party” is a sonnet about fear of death and aging and a girl’s love for her grandmother despite the cultural and experiential differences that separate them. “Countdown Clocks” is a syllabic poem about waiting and small events that make our lives interesting, and is the first poem I wrote that went beyond dialogue and/or telling a straightforward story.

The poems about bilingualism and immigration were inspired in part by my experiences working as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. “A Girl Named _____” is a syllabic poem about some of the general problems that Mexican immigrant teenagers face. “Patriot” is a villanelle about the changing demographics in the United States, the tragedy of children being brought here and raised and educated as U.S. citizens, but being treated as foreigners, and the belief that many illegal immigrants have in the American Dream and in the United States in general. “Wonder” is a sestina about a Chinese woman imagining that American women are “free” and women trying to gain power and success through changing their appearances, names, clothes, etc. “Waiting for Salvador” is a sonnet about the faith and ability to be satisfied with small things in life (such as picking mangoes) that children often have. “The Future of America” is a sonnet arguing that multiculturalism and bilingualism will strengthen rather than weaken the United States.

The “travel” poems are based on various travel experiences I have had. My study abroad experience in San Juan, Puerto Rico provided inspiration for “The Ugly American Goes to El Yunque,” “Photographing San Juan,” and a few other poems that are not included

in this section. World travel often results in interesting material to write about and time to write, which is what I found to be true while studying abroad. The other poems in this section are based on travel experiences in China and a photograph from an Amazon vacation photo album. “Tiger Woman” is a villanelle about a phrase that stuck with me after a woman spoke it and tried to translate and explain it to me in China. “No Plans for My Life” is a sonnet about a free-spirited young man whose life is very different from a “normal” life. “Looking at Me Looking at Their World” is a sestina about people from different cultures and how they view each other.

The “being haunted by the past” poems concern painful events that happened in the narrators’ lives and the baggage the narrators carried for the rest of their lives. “Killing Time” is a sestina about a man in prison who is thinking about relationships, time, and making the most of life. “After the Fire” is a sestina about the strength of humans to keep living after random and inexplicable tragedies. “Visitation” is a set of two sonnets about a complicated divorce and the wife’s inability to let go of the husband. “Echoes” is a sestina about various painful events in the narrator’s life and the strength it takes to be human in this world.

“The Party” is a short story that I started writing in Dr. Greg Johnson’s fiction class. My main goals in writing the story were to create a believable persona that is much different from me, to create an unreliable narrator, and to write fiction rather than creative nonfiction. The story is about hypocrisy and how people are self-centered and can make excuses for anything.

I wrote “A Kleeland County Emergency” during a course called “The Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project,” a writing workshop for teachers. The story began as practice for

an exercise called “writing with our ABCs,” in which students have to create a story in which the first sentence begins with the letter A, the second sentence begins with B, etc., with the last sentence ending in Z. The story turned into a flash fiction story in which I practiced imagery and characterization through dialogue and character actions.

MAPW’s workshops and other coursework offerings gave me confidence and motivation to write, as well as valuable feedback and tools necessary to improve my writing. The most significant accomplishments I made during the MAPW program were becoming familiar with and gaining experience with poetry forms, learning to write about personal experiences in a way that others can relate to and appreciate, and writing and revising a significant number of poems and short stories. Several of my best works appear in this collection.

I am from Tifton, Georgia,

the Reading Capital of the World (according to billboards)

and home of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College,

producer of sod and turf experts,

where the Georgia Agrirama is the main tourist attraction

and the scenery consists of lopsided pine trees,

dirt roads, cow pastures, and cotton fields,

a place where you're only White, Black, or Mexican.

I am from First Baptist Church on Love Avenue,

spongy pink rollers on Saturday nights,

Daddy snoring and falling in his sleep (much to my delight),

thumb war and "Be Thou My Vision" on Sunday mornings,

Bible drill and potluck suppers on Sunday nights,

and Christianese: thee and thou, holy and sanctified,

born again and saved, fruits of the Spirit and the Vine.

I am from Andersonville ("Andefusbille" when I was 2),

the Civil War prison camp and prisoner of war museum,

Providence Springs and its monument.

It's a place of re-enactments and field trips,

American flags, ants, and magnolia trees.

It's where my grandpa is buried – WWII vet –
and where Union soldiers' ghosts roam, smoking pipes.

I am from Russ and Beth, Tom and Dorris,
7221 Northgate Drive East, command towers and forts,
“Go to your room” and “You're getting a spanking,”
sweet tea and a creaky porch swing.

I'm from “y'all” and “tickled pink,” “yonder” and “fixin' to,”
a place where “jail” and “gel” are homophones
and the kickball ends up in the pond – every time.

Murder Over Fruit Loops

My brother and I always ate
breakfast together. We'd look
at puzzles on the box or fight
over the toy: hyper-color
Dino in Cocoa Pebbles, small
car in Honeycomb. But Lucky
Charms were best. We'd give our lucky
dad soggy bits after we ate
all the marshmallows – hearts and small
rainbows were my favorites. We'd look
out the window and watch Colors,
our neighbors' cat who liked to fight
with squirrels, raccoons, dogs, cats – he'd fight
with a bull if he felt lucky
that day. Every morning, Colors
entertained us well while we ate
cereal. Every time we'd look,
he was scaling swings, pine trees (small
or large, he didn't care), the Smalls'
barbed-wire fence, birdfeeders. He'd fight
to catch birds.

One day, Tom said, "Look!"

Colors pawed at an unlucky
bluebird while she tweeted and ate
birdseed, a clean catch. Her color-
ful feathers went up, and Colors
swallowed her. I wanted the small
bird to survive. If Garfield ate
lasagna, Colors could. The fights
on cartoons ended up lucky –
the Roadrunner would win; it looked
easy. So I waited. I looked
out the window, wanted Colors
to cough up the not-so-lucky
bird like Sylvester would the small
Tweety bird. "Bad kitty! Don't fight!"
I screamed. "Spit it out!" But he ate
it. Looking at the bluebird's small,
colorful feathers showed me fight-
ing and real luck when I was 8.

Reason to Keep Climbing

You say we're not in a competition;
our lives are different now. We're far away
now, far from the games of Monopoly
we used to play – three days, and no one
would win. It was always “practice” or loan
me \$10,000, landing on free
parking, six hotels, pass an Oreo,
please, I'm the banker, Boardwalk is all mine
now.

It's not a competition, but look
at my life – you didn't think I'd ever
be anybody. I have everything
you don't – degrees, boat, house on the best block.
I threw away the scrap-wood and rubber-
band guitar you made. I'm proving you wrong.

Mama's Healing Hands

The dirt road got sandy every summer,
and the handlebars on my bike would twist,
flipping me on the ground, knees and palms marked
up with purple and blue rock in the clay.
Out of breath, I'd stumble home to Mama,
who would wash and patch up my scrapes and cuts
and send me on my way: "Those li'l ole cuts
ain't nothin'," she'd say. "Go play. It's summer,
for God's sake!" She'd lock us out, but Mama
knew we'd be back.

 We set up a stand – Twist
and orange Tang – a quarter. Pastor Clay,
the neighbor, bought one from my sister, marked
"IOU" on a napkin, adding Mark
10:14 and his signature, which cut
out our plans for selling drinks on that clay
country road on that hot July summer
afternoon. We packed up the sign, twisted
on the thermos lid, and hoped that Mama
would let us in. First, we did what Mama

discouraged – climbed the barbed-wire fence, marking up our skin. “There’s a bull!” I said, twisting my way through the fence.

Mama said, “Y’all cut that out” when we beat on the door. “Summer is for youngins to be out. Play with clay or bikes or make a fort. Just don’t get clay on your clothes. It won’t come out.” Then Mama had to let us in, not due to summer heat, but because of a wasp. “See the mark,” I said. She poured glasses of sweet tea and cut seven lemon slices for us to twist into our drinks. “Now honey, you just twist that there arm over here.” She dabbed the clay off my hand, laid me on the counter, cut open a baking soda box. “Mama’s gone fix you up.” She found a red marker and signed my Pink Panther-ish cast. “Summer revival . . . Twist your hair up. Mama don’t want two clay-covered rag-muffins. Mark, set, go. Y’all cut the play. Time for summer church.”

Looking for Something

On my first morning of kindergarten,
my mother cupped my chin with her plastic
fingernails. She said, "This is the first week
of your future. Go do great things and shine.

You'll find whatever you're looking for." Then
she kissed my cheek and gave me my lunch sack.

I'm looking for my keys, a place to park,
the perfect birthday card, some direction
in life, a religion to believe.

I'm

lying in a rowboat on a blue-skied
summer day, looking for figures in clouds.
Mosquitoes are biting. I hear the hum
of airplanes. I see a snail, a tired
angel, a mountain, and my mother's hands.

Maybe She Was Once a Mother

From behind, I watch an old grandmother
push a stroller along an uneven
sidewalk. Her steps are slow, and I sense pain
in her bones. She smooths her braided gray hair.
I pass and glance back, waiting to see her
baby. Boy or girl, I prepare to grin
and make the little one laugh. The saran
wrap I see next stops me from coming near.

I want to scream, “Hey, you’re suffocating
the baby!” but don’t because when I look,
there is no baby, only clothes, a lint
roller, newspapers, a vase, and shopping
bags. I see bloodshot blue eyes—she looks sick.
First impressions and the truth are different.

Blue-Haired Church Lady

I've been at this church since 1950,
but things were better then. It's gone downhill
throughout the years. So many more people
have joined, the stained-glass windows look dirty,
I don't like the financial committee,
and the young people are out of control.
Boys wear caps in church – so disrespectful –
and girls don't wear pantyhose – with mini –
skirts. They even bring colored kids to church,
let them eat Wednesday dinner for free. But
I'll tell you something. They've got their own black
churches where they can whoop and holler, preach
all day long. Buzzards and doves just don't fit.
I hope First Baptist will get back on track.

Civil War Re-enactor's Thoughts on Life, 2005

Hey, sugar, I'm glad you're back from China.
Must be like Korea. Uncle Sam sent
me on a tour of Asia. Do you want
a brownie? Sally made 'em. Or tuna?
Got bread in the tent. Did you eat kim chi
there? They bury that god damn shit for like
a hundred years. Some spicy shit. Whoo-eee.
You know Taoism? I checked out this book.
Been reading about inner peace and shit.
Helps a lot. Hell, you shoulda seen them blacks
over there. Cowards. Let their friends get killed
every time. Fucking killed. I saw folks shot
to pieces. Now they want me to pay tax
to send more kids to Iraq. Fucking Lord!

Eavesdropping at the Airport

Clomping by in her platform heels,
straight jeans, and oversized, tied up T-shirt,
she said, "This shirt, girl! The airline lost my luggage.
I know. My make-up was in there. They 'xpect
me to wear a T-shirt from a baggie. . ."

Propping his black loafers on a footrest
and spraying bits of his tuna sub on
furniture and other people, he said, "Hiya!
Just got back from Singapore, Malaysia,
and Mexico. God, you sound just awful!
It's your birthday? I'll let you go. Enjoy!"

Adjusting her tight, gray sweatpants around
her round waist, she said, "Who had gallbladder
surgery? I didn't quite hear your message.
Mary Jean? What a shame! We'll take her some food
soon. Did I tell you about the buffet
on the cruise? Oh, and we met Stephen King . . ."

Shaving his face with a silent razor,

he said, “Oh, hi, I’m calling from Hampton
Inn, just wanted to leave a message for
Dr. Jones. Tell him we will not open
until March but to make reservations.
He deserves a break. Oops, my flight’s boarding . . .”

Forever

I was planning on giving you a call,
say hi, catch up, see how you've been doing,
but something always happened. The phone rang
right before I dialed your number, the mail
came, I had to get groceries, pay a bill,
work out. I heard you were sick, was going
to come visit you and Rover, to bring
you cookies. I thought you'd be here awhile,
(forever). I did send you a postcard
from the Florida Keys, but it was too late.
The day I came home, I heard you were gone.
The cancer won this time. It was your third
battle. I sent a bouquet, thought about
how I needed you to stay, to live on.

Hopes that Never Happen

When I was five, I planned on becoming
a ballerina or an astronaut
or the first woman president. I put
on blush and high heels and dreamt of being
grown up.

Later, I hoped someone would bring
a bear and balloons and my parents might
get back together if I would just wait
long enough.

Lately, I've been expecting
for him to come back – to drive seven
hours and surprise me, then apologize
for everything and hand me a bouquet.

A second chance on that conversation
and lotto Mega Million dollar prize -
my goals – Whatever I want, I can be.

Captain Seagull's Buffet

For spring break, snowbirding, and key lime pie,
people travel to Florida to get tans,
see Okefenokee and Indians,
and watch beachside banners fly through the sky:

\$9.99 buffet: All you can eat!

A moldy coin fountain greets customers
at Captain Seagull's, where a 308
pound lady steadies a plate of oysters,
popcorn shrimp, mashed potatoes, mac and cheese,
hush puppies, cheese grits, french fries, and crab cakes
on her walker. In a northern accent,
a woman whispers, "Harold, just shoot me, please,
if I ever get that fat," as she picks
a wedgie and cheesecake – Oreo mint.

Life is a Party

“Una mujer es como una flor,”
you once told me. But I was suspicious
when you said your tío was the real source;
you bragged of his kids – 65 or more.

You say your husband is still your amor,
vida, corazón, remember his voice,
meeting and marrying him in Buenos
Aires (in 2 weeks!), dancing until 4
AM.

Even though you wear red lipstick
and “Rumba” perfume, I can’t imagine
your life being a party. You’re away
from home, wear housedresses, have a hunchback,
open jaw, missing teeth. I’m scared. *Nana,*
what will I live for when I’m 93?

Countdown Clocks

I waited for you to come downstairs this morning, said hi, and watched you drive away.

I expected to see your truck on the way to work on 285 – the Orange County tag, Aragua decal – wondered where you were going. Maybe tomorrow.

We spend our lives waiting for the next thing – for green lights, for the cloud's silver lining, for "the right one," to win the lottery, for the Publix cashier to hurry up, for the pool to warm up, for Christmas, and for five o'clock on Friday afternoon.

"Be careful with peppermints," my father told me when I was seven. "It could kill you if you swallow one the wrong way." When it happened, I waited in the linen closet on a pile of dirty clothes, and ever since that day, I've been waiting to die.

A Girl Named _____

We cross the border 'cause we don't
got no money.

In Mexico, we only could
shine shoes for a
peso and grow up to be the
mesoneras,

prostitutes, or *brujas*. But here,
we got a chance
to work and live better lives than
that—better than
meals of beans and eggs every day.

People tell us
to go back to Mexico, 'cause
we're taking jobs
from Americans who need 'em,
that we're wasting
their taxes. They be calling us
wetbacks, beaners.
We're hard workers. We do what no
one else wants to

do. We clean your houses and pick
watermelons.

We've come for a *vida mejor*.

Patriot

I love the United States of America.

When I was seven, I walked here through the desert.

Here I am searching for a life that is better,
where I can eat meat and pizza, not just sugar,
eggs, and beans. I can shop every day at Wal-Mart.

I love the United States of America
because of my job at Taco Bell, a cashier.

I can transfer money home. I can do my part
here. I am searching for a life that is better,
saving money to buy Nikes, a Mustang car,
an IPOD, a Blackberry Pearl, and the Guess skirt

I love. The United States of America
will fulfill my dream of becoming a doctor
when I finish high school in three years. But to start,
here I am, searching for a life that is better.

I'll make lots of money and have a bright future.

With luck and work, I'll make grandma proud. In my heart

I love the United States of America;
here, I am searching for a life that is better.

Wonder

My English name is Wonder,
for Wonder Woman, of course.

I'm luscious; sparkles follow
me wherever I go – to
sleep, play, fly, hover, battle.

Little girls dream of being
me – supernatural being,
sexy – I wear a Wonder –
bra and Spanx to do battle.

I brush my free floating, coarse
hair with yak combs. I have two –
from a lover who followed
me home and spouse (following
a trip to Tibet).

Being

American is key – to
wear nail polish called “wonder –
#9,” the golf course,
pronounce “ts” “ds” in “battle,”
recall and refight battles,

wear red, white, and blue, follow
star patriots from the course
of history. I want to be
a Westerner named Wonder,
to paint eyeliner and too
much thick mascara onto
my eyes, to go to battle
in style. Freedom- I wonder
what it's like, want to follow
my heart, to travel, to be
free.

My eyes keep me on course –
sharp, black eagle-eyes, of course.
I see through mirages, to
the truth, a person being
brave and ready for battle.
I don't know who to follow,
sit in temples and wonder.

Goddess in course of battle,
determined not to follow,
my new name should be Wonder.

Waiting for Salvador

Teacher, I'm moving back to Salvador
this summer, where my mami is sending
money and my abuelo is building
a somewhere we can play that's not too far
from our mansion. Maybe we move next year
back to Salvador, where I like to hang
upside-down in trees. It won't be too long.
I'll pick mangoes and play tío's guitar
in a few years when my papi's not trapped
in jail anymore. I'll go to the lake
to take a bath with some shampoo and soap.
In Salvador, I'm going to have a bed
and seven pet chickens. We're going back
to Salvador soon, but it's a long trip.

The Future of America

I went to get dessert at Jade Palace,
where a warning sign posted in Chinglish
says, "Take care. Seat may be moving." "Hush!"
yelled Jesus to his brother Carlos.
"I'm older than you! I'm getting the ice-
cream! You're just a little kid. You can't push
the button!" "Move!" They argued in Spanish,
on and on. Carlos said, "See, I'm the boss,"
and swirled an ice-cream mountain in his bowl.
Jesus turned to me and grinned, and his gold
tooth flashed. "Let me translate," he said. "He's just
a little kid. He needs my help, that's all.
I know English from school. My teacher told
me to say, 'Please, m'am, go on. Ladies first.'"

Tiger Woman

I'm fierce and deceptive with magic in my bones.

I creep around waiting to pounce and attack prey.

I'm the ancestor of all, the Xiamen tiger.

I can protect your children from evil spirits
and harm. I can see through you with my yellow eye.

I'm fierce and deceptive. The magic in my bones
can strengthen your body and ease your pain. My thoughts
are I'm strong because I'm always roaming wild, free.

I'm the ancestor of all the Xiamen tigers.

If you threaten my cubs, I'll rip out your guts;

I'm a man-eater whenever I want to be.

I'm fierce and deceptive, with magic. In my bones
I feel the presence of rivals through my instincts.

I feel the need for my space, for territory.

I'm the ancestor of all the Xiamen tigers.

I'm on the brink of extinction, hunted for pelts
and my healing powers, but I'm not a trophy;

I'm fierce and deceptive with magic in my bones.

I'm the ancestor of all, the Xiamen tiger.

No Plans for My Life

Scott and I decided to take a break
from working the Canadian oil rig,
so we got orange jumpsuits for going
to China. It took us over a week
to get there (and \$200) and then we took
a 3-day Yangtze River Cruise – as long
as we could, even though we had to bring
our food and the rooms smelled like yuck –
mildew and fish. I brought Chinese whiskey
and Scott brought coconut cookies to snack
on while Old Man River warned us to snuff
out our careless drinking. “Don’t continue!”
We searched for a houseboat once in the dock
So we could keep on floating through life.

The Ugly American Goes to El Yunque

Barbara's a redhead with a huge hat (plaid)
and a squirt bottle fan around her neck.
She and Jimmy each have a fanny pack
that says Puerto Rico. She asks the guide,
"Do you speak American?" She is loud
on the bus, starts a round – "Miss Mary Mack"
and then "Old Susannah." She says, "Jim, look
at those little brown kids! Hey, I'd be glad
to adopt one. Can we?" She announces
on the trail that the forests need some sky
buckets installed and her bra strap is loose.
She heard there are swarms of huge killer bees
here, is allergic, doesn't want to die
now. I should've known she'd be on my bus.

Looking at Me Looking at Their World

So alike and so different, little girls
watch our river boat cruise through the water
in their backyard, the Amazon. Their dark
eyes stare from the riverbank and we look
back through camera lenses. The girls' futures
are what I wonder about. In the world,
how will they fare? It's a big place, the world,
and difficult for any little girl
to play and grow up in. *In the future,*
will this tiny thatched hut on flood-water
protective stilts be enough? Do I look
beautiful? Tonight, I'm scared of the dark.

Hands cupped under her chin, squinting in the dark
setting in, one girl thinks, *Where in the world*
do they come from? What do they see when they look
at me? She's a reflective little girl,
watching our wake, the mostly still water,
and beyond. She considers the future,
flip flops grounded firmly.

In the future,

the other girl will succeed. The darkness coming makes her laugh. She waves past water, head titled back, saying hi to the world on the boat, gabbing to the other girls, and wiggling barefoot toes. Bubbly, she looks like she's thinking, *"Hey, listen, you guys, look at me. Let's hook on the canoe."* Future plans might include being a tour guide.

Girl

number three peeks out from behind a dark green elephant ear leaf. The outside world scares her. She leans away from the water, knees hugged tightly to chest. Her waterfall of hair shields most of her face, but her "Look" says, *"Here they come again. Why in the world must they take our pictures?"* In the future, she might just stay and marry a tall, dark, handsome village man – traditional girl.

Will the water be here in the future?

Do the options look promising or dark?

Every person's her own world, every girl.

Photographing San Juan

A homeless man hand-feeds bags of corn to pigeons
 that will become sacrifices for the bruja
 with dreadlocks, scars, and sagging tattoos. Viejo
 San Juan is her favorite hangout. She is rico
 in her shells, beads, magazines, and paint can – empty,
 but she guards it with her life, that and her one change
 of clothes – a purple robe.

Should I give her my change?

Is she schizophrenic? people ask. *The pigeon-*
toed dance, is it a ritual? The one empty
 seat is on a park bench beside her, a bruja
 with a shopping cart. They look down. Puerto Rico
 shouldn't be for lunatics; it's for viejos –
 retired ones and tourists eating at Viejo
 Joe's (only they say "Veejoe Joe's"). *Why don't you change*
your life?

An ice-cream vendor shouts, "Hey, que rico –
 Helado!" and shoos away a speckled pigeon
 from the cobblestone beside his cart. The bruja
 is nearby doing yoga/island dance. Empty –
 nesters gawk at her and the pink shorts and empty

enema bottle beside the trashcan. Vieja
is her nickname, due to her missing teeth.

Bruja

T-shirts are for sale – Taino art framed in black. “Change!”
a man says, passing out tracts and scraping pigeon
poop off his shoe sole. “Ven y Ve, Vida Rico,”
the tracts read. Others are selling Puerto Rico
magnets, caps, casitas, and coffee mugs. Empty
Miatas and Hummers line the streets. Pigeons
waddle around in search of food.

A viejo

rattling a Burger King cup and asking for change
greet customers to an artisan shop – Bruja’s
Corner, where there are jeweled tar babies and bruja
art for sale – nipples, magic, trees. Only rico
people can shop here. They all say, “I don’t have change”
to the homeless man. *How is his life so empty?*
they wonder. *Where is his family? A viejo*
shouldn’t be alone and sleeping with the pigeons.

It’s a land of brujas and other lost, empty
souls, Puerto Rico, where rich and poor viejos
search for magic, change, and photographs of pigeons.

Killing Time

I'm looking through the electric fence, the wall
of this prison, watching you and your grandson,
I guess, ice-fishing. You've been out here for hours,
chiseling out your fishing holes, sending ice
chips flying, making your grandson laugh. He's six years
old, maybe, and follows you most of the time,
chasing red flags that pop up, just the wind, time
after time. There are no fish, only a wall
of snowballs, an igloo the boy made. This year,
the ice is about a foot deep, and the sun
hasn't melted it. The boy kicks hunks of ice,
using them as soccer balls. In seven hours,
you only caught one fish, but they were seven hours
of fun – eating sunflower seeds, wasting time,
snapping pictures, pulling him across the ice
in a sled.

I wonder if you see this wall
and think about what it's like – life without sun,
life without freedom. I've been here 13 years,
minute by minute, meal by meal, year by year.
Some of us have recreation for an hour

every day, where we can shoot hoops, see the sun,
and run laps. The time creeps by. There is no time
here. I spend all my time staring out this wall
observing families like you play on the ice
in the winter, teens in love, kids eating ice-
cream , kayakers exploring, sixty-five-year-
olds swimming laps in the summertime. These walls
confine me; I think about my past for hours
every day, wishing I could go back in time
and do things differently, wishing my own son
and daughters knew me, accepted me. My son
was three when I got locked up for selling ice,
acid, blow. I am a good person. In time
I would've stopped. It was only a few years
and I got busted. My wife responded our
marriage was over. All I've got is this wall.
Know that your grandson will grow up and the years
will melt by like ice. Remember every hour
at Turtle Lake. Time: don't be held back by walls.

After the Fire

Not everything was destroyed in the fire,
but it all permanently smelled like smoke –
cookbooks, robe, Tupperware, iron, purse, picture
frames, carpet, hairbrush, broom, and wallpaper.
I couldn't breathe; I'll always remember
the clothesline, soap, Febreze, and screaming, "Why?"
It could've happened to anyone. Why
me? Was it the coffee pot or a fire
started by arson? I don't remember
what my son said that morning. I smelled smoke,
marijuana, read the day's newspaper,
and went to work. They're kids; I can't picture
them doing that. The fire wrecked my pictures –
wedding, baby, beach, him doing the Y –
M – C – A on Halloween. The paper
is discolored, streaked, and warped from the fire.
They're bubbled and speckled from heat and smoke.
I won't have them to help me remember
all those times. The first thing I remember
checking is jewelry. The locket pictures
melted, the wooden box burned, but smoke

spots showed where it had been. I don't know why,
but most of the metal and jewels were fire-
proof, just a little dusty. The paper
showed scenes – fifty cents I had to pay per
copy. I came home and I remember
sirens and the neighbors watching the fire.
A news photographer took a picture
of my head in my hands and quoted, “Why,”
as my comment. My neighbor, Rhonda, smoked
a pack of Camels as she watched the smoke
and fire fade. She brought by a few paper
sacks of clothes – an extra-large faded Y-
Club T-shirt, stirrup pants I remember
From the 80s, a hoodie with pictures
of collies patched on, and a red robe (fire).

In every crevice, smoke, I remember;
it's always here, the paper, the pictures.
There's no explaining why when there's a fire.

Visitation

Nineteen and twenty-three, we married young,
both still in school, nursing and pharmacy.
The most piggish man in the galaxy,
he had me making French toast and ironing
his underwear every single morning.
A son came soon to our Tallahassee
house. One became two, plus one more “oopsy”
baby with his friend. I took off my ring
thirteen years later, gathered my three sons,
and left him and that old house with the paint
peeling and pots collecting water. Kind
for once, he handed me a wad of tens,
said, “Please, Love,” and this wasn’t what he meant.
But I’m the one who left him in the end.

At his visitation, I met his new
wife and twelve-year-old stepdaughter. My grown-
up sons stood by the little girl. Alone,
I didn’t know what I should say or do.
I fanned my face, said, “I’m praying for you,”
and pushed past flowers and the line. A drone

of voices filled that narrow room. A groan
escaped as I touched his closed casket. True,
I hate her, but I had to offer kind
words. It's not easy. The image will haunt
her – river rapids, him drowning, no pulse –
like his memory haunts me. *Did his mind
often wander to me?* I didn't want
him for myself, or for anyone else.

Echoes

Someone breaks in to steal the silver. You
try to scream but just watch him take away
your mother's antiques, her prized things in life.

You don't want to tell; you'd rather forget
about the ski mask, your silence. Never
again will you leave the front door open.

You're in the shower trying to open
your new shampoo with soapy hands when you
feel your wedding ring slipping. He'll never
forgive you. Close the drain. Quick. Find a way
to save the ring. You can't ever forget
that clanking noise, the sound of your old life.

I bought a duckling, the love of my life,
when I was nine. Ed fell through an open
cinderblock – tenth floor. I'll never forget
that moment: stairs, his organs. Sometimes you
don't want to look, just want to look away,
but can't. I'll never buy a pet. Never.

I dreamt we met again, that we never
parted ways. We were at the church's Life
Center chatting in a crowd. In a way,
it was nice, but you lost balance, opened
your arms, and fell over the stair rail. You
screamed, and I woke up, trying to forget.

My house burned when I was six. I forget
the cause – a maintenance man? I never
played with matches. It wasn't me. But you
can't erase the smoke. It gets in your life
even if you wash your clothes and open
windows. Smoke and sirens don't go away.

I remember considering a way
to tell your parents that I froze – forgot
how to save you, was afraid of open
water. I let you drown, but I never
meant to. I was young, didn't know that life
is fragile. Every day, I still hear you.

I hear echoes far away. I'll never
forget these things that I carry through life,

but my heart is open for loving you.

The Party

I swear it wasn't my fault. It all happened because of that babysitter, Soledad. I wasn't even supposed to be watching the baby—she was. That's why Winston and I hired her in the first place. Well, mostly for decorating and cleaning, but I also asked her to watch Madison because the party was so big (seventy-six guests were invited), and I had so much to do (I'm a true Southern hostess and wanted everything to be perfect), and Madison's regular sitter cancelled on me the night before the party. She said she had strep throat — likely story. I called a few other sitters, but no one was available, so in the end I decided that the person I hired to clean and decorate would have to watch Madison, too. A nice guy who Winston works with at the country club had recommended Soledad, his maid, and we hired her.

She's a maid, not a babysitter, but surely she has her own children and knows something about taking care of children. And it was a birthday party for a two year old. I didn't *tell* her she had to watch the baby, but she should have known that she would be cleaning *and* taking care of the baby. We were paying her eight dollars an hour and all she had to do was hang up the decorations, clean up the food and trash, and help me out with things like watching the baby. She'd be getting good money for people like her, and the job would be easy.

When she arrived at the doorstep the morning of the party, I didn't like her, but there was nothing I could do about it. She was a chubby, middle-aged Mexican wearing fake orange fingernails, faded jeans, a red T-shirt, and black Reeboks. I wondered if she dresses

like that to clean Winston's coworker's house. I couldn't believe she was wearing that to my child's birthday party, but I didn't say anything. I needed someone to help, and it was too late to try to find someone else.

"Hi, you must be Soledad. I'm Marla," I said, shaking her hand. "I'm running a little late and I need to go get a French manicure and buy a new outfit for the party. Do you mind getting Madison out of the crib and giving her a bath? I put her dress on the dresser in her room, but don't put it on her yet so it won't get dirty before the party. She can wear whatever for now. If you can't find anything else, even her pajamas are fine until later."

"Oh. I thought I'd just be cleaning and helping with the food, but . . ." Madison started screaming to let us know she'd woken up.

"Oops, I'd better get going. If Madison sees me I'll never get out of here."

"Okay. Maybe you should show me where everything is, like her bath stuff and everything?" she asked.

"Her room is upstairs, and the bathroom is next to it. Don't worry. You should be able to find everything. If she's hungry, the kitchen's right over there. You have my cell number if there's an emergency, right?"

"I still have it."

"Okay, see you in a few hours."

Everything was perfect on the afternoon of the party. I'd straightened my hair and gotten blonde highlights the week before, my French manicure looked amazing, and I was wearing a purple crisscross tank top and a new pair of jeans from the Gap—size two since I lost so much weight after having Madison. People ask me how I did it, as if it was something big, but it was easy, really. I just took Madison for walks in the baby jogger stroller for an

hour everyday and didn't eat lunch or snacks. I don't see why so many women get so fat after they have kids. Probably just eating too much junk – bread and rice and biscuits, Cheetos and cheesecake, hamburgers and ice-cream, sweet tea and Coke. No self-control.

Like Soledad. While I was out, I had to buy her a new shirt for the party. It was pink with sequined patterns around the neckline, size large, but I thought it would still look nicer than the T-shirt she had on. I got it from the bargain rack at Express. It was only five dollars, but she'd never know. I like to help people because I have a big heart. I go to church every Sunday. Soledad probably doesn't make much money cleaning people's houses, so it makes me feel good to help poor people like her. If I'd known what size she wore, I would have bought her a new pair of shoes to match the outfit, because those Reeboks were just atrocious. I don't like to talk about people and I don't think gossiping is right, but Soledad would have been a prime candidate for "What Not to Wear," and I wanted to help her, bless her heart. She looked surprised and happy when I gave her the shirt.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Why don't you put it on for the party?"

"Oh, well I'm going to be cleaning, so I thought I'd wear this."

"But I bought you a new shirt because it looks so much nicer for a party."

"Okay."

"Great. I'm glad you want to wear it. It matches the theme of the party. See, it's almost the color of the tablecloths."

Anyway, just before the party, everything was great. It was August 3rd, and usually it's boiling hot at that time of year in Georgia, but there was a light breeze (not enough to

knock anything down). Just in case, I tied ribbons around the tablecloths to make sure they stayed in place. I wanted to buy fabric tablecloths instead of those flimsy plastic ones because they look so tacky, but decided on the cheap ones in case kids spilled food on them. I found some hot pink ones that looked acceptable. No one complained about them all afternoon, so I guess they were okay. The tents, tables and chairs, dance floor tiles, and moonwalk arrived the day before as expected, and Soledad decorated everything while I picked up the cake and burgers.

The theme for the party was Dora the Explorer, so there were pop-up Dora tree houses hanging from the sides of the tents, Dora balloons, Dora streamers, and even a thirty-six inch Dora piñata that I found at Party City—only \$39.99, and she had a backpack and everything. Soledad had hung her up on a tall board that Winston got from Lowe's. I ordered the cake from Publix, and it had miniature tropical flowers and palm trees and figurines of Dora and Boots the Monkey on it. It was enough to serve one hundred guests, so heavy that I had to help Soledad carry it outside. Of course, I don't eat things like cake because all that starch and sugar makes people fat, but it looked beautiful and I wanted to get a nice cake to be in the pictures so Madison would remember her second birthday party and what a good mother I am. She loves Dora.

Winston came home from work an hour before the party with two kegs of beer and started grilling. He was going to just keep his work clothes on, but I asked him to change into some Gap jeans and a purple polo shirt so he would match me.

Guests started arriving a little bit before four, and all of them were impressed with the decorations and the moonwalk. And it wasn't just any moonwalk; it was a pink and purple Dream Castle moonwalk. It had columns next to the door just like the porch of my

house. I wish I would have had a moonwalk at my second birthday party, and I even wanted to get in and jump around a little, but I didn't want to get dirty or for the guests to think I behave like a child or anything like that. The guests liked the kegs, too, and the first one was gone a couple hours after the party started. Our parties are always the best in town, so lots of people came. Some of our friends brought people we didn't know, but we were happy about it. That's one of the reasons we bought a house in such a nice neighborhood with such a big backyard, so we could have nice outdoor parties. I don't really like for too many people to come inside, though, because, inevitably, someone forgets to take off their shoes and scratches the hardwood floor or gets dirt all over the carpet. Then I have to remind them that we don't wear shoes in the house. It's in the historic district, a true Southern plantation, but completely refurbished with granite countertops, solid hardwood floor from Brazil, commercial quality stainless steel appliances, a custom-made wooden covers for the refrigerators —everything.

Winston and I invited all the neighbors to the party so they wouldn't mind the loud music. We didn't want the police to show up and give us a noise violation or anything like that. And we thought it would be good to invite as many guests as possible so Madison would get lots of presents.

I held Madison and posed for pictures while she opened her presents. I looked at every picture after Winston took them, and I couldn't believe it, but my hair still looked great even though it had been a while since I fixed it. I looked like I have a big head in a few where my head is in front of Madison's, but oh well. My favorite presents she got were a purple sweater, a Play Doh fun kit, a Playskool xylophone, a XOXO pocketbook, a Mrs. Potato Head, a birthday Barbie, a Disney princess storybook, a kitchen set, and a toddler's

Bible story book. Of course, that's not including my favorite present of all, the one from Winston and me, a junior tennis racquet with a pink can of balls. Madison's going to be a tennis player.

She got lots of nice presents, but some people like Tammy and Chuck, our neighbors across the street, stopped by and forgot to bring a present. I couldn't believe it.

"We saw all the cars out there and remembered that it's Madison's birthday," said Chuck. "Sorry we didn't bring a present. We just came in from out of town and it totally slipped my mind until now. Had to go to a funeral. We'll just have to bring her one later."

"Not bringing a present to my child's birthday party. What kind of neighbors are you guys anyway?" I asked. "No, no, you know I'm just kidding. I'm tickled pink y'all could make it. The more the merrier. I think the burgers are almost done over there if you want some."

People have no etiquette these days. I learned etiquette at Miss Mary Sue Branch's Southern School of Charm and Grace when I was ten years old. I learned things like manners, how to write perfect thank you notes and invitations, and how to set the table. How could they show up to my child's birthday party without a present? But I didn't want to make them feel bad or anything. I think they just came over for food and alcohol. They're like that. Moochers.

Soledad cleaned up all the trash from the presents and cleaned the kitchen while the kids were breaking the piñata. There were only about four other toddlers at the party, but that was okay because there were a few older children there, too, to help the younger ones break the piñata. Everyone was impressed with the piñata, especially Tammy, the neighbor who didn't bring a present.

“Wow, Marla. What a great piñata! Where’d you get it?” she asked. “I only saw small ones that were donkeys and stars and flowers when I was looking for one for my nephew’s birthday party. Oh yeah, and one was a train. But no characters, and certainly not any that big.”

“I just got it at Party City.”

“I love it. It looks just like Dora. I never had things this nice when I was a kid. I always had a little cake and a sleepover. Nothing like this. You and Winston sure are good parents to do all this for your daughter. It must have been so much work.”

Madison and the other toddlers couldn’t really reach the piñata that well, and she didn’t want to hit it because Dora the Explorer is her favorite TV character and she didn’t want to hurt her. She has such a good heart, just like me. I pulled up a chair and Winston steadied her as she peeked through the blindfold and tapped Dora’s backpack with the stick a few times.

“Come on, Madison,” said Winston. “You have to hit it hard and get all the candy. It’s your birthday party. Have fun.”

An older child hit Dora all over and finally ripped the tissue paper open right in the chest. Madison started crying and candy came pouring out. The child continued to hit Dora in the face. I guess he didn’t have as big of a heart as Madison. I gave all the kids paper bags to pick up candy and treats from the piñata, and would you believe it, that bitch Veronica, my friend from the gym, took *two* bags for little Johnny and filled them both up to the brim. Knowing her, she’s going to use it for his next birthday party. Filling up a piñata is more expensive than the actual piñata, so I understand why she’d do something like that, but I had to pay for Madison’s piñata, so she should have to pay for Johnny’s. If she can’t afford it,

she could just have pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey or some other cheap game. The nerve. I saw her. She picked up not one but *three* kazoos, a handful of Starbursts, five or six parachute men, peppermints, four yo-yos, bags of skittles and M&Ms, and a little doll. Johnny's not even a girl, so what would he do with a doll? I know exactly what she's planning on doing with all those goodies, but I guess I shouldn't be mad about it because a lot of people don't have as much money as Winston and I do. And she doesn't even watch her son. The whole time during the party, he was trying to run out of the back gate, disappearing into the moonwalk for long periods of time, and playing with my CDs. He even dropped one and scratched it up on the concrete and I had to put him in time out for a while. And Veronica didn't even notice. Not one time. She was just talking and drinking all afternoon.

After the piñata, Soledad put candles on the birthday cake and gathered everyone around. Madison looked a little nervous to be surrounded by so many people but clapped and laughed when everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to her. Then she started crying when she got icing all over her fingers. She hates getting dirty. Thank goodness her party dress wasn't ruined—a sleeveless white corduroy dress with a bubble hem and a pink bow at the waist – it was from Gymboree. They have such nice clothes there, but they're not cheap.

It was almost eight o'clock and the mosquitoes were starting to come out, and I didn't want Madison to get eaten alive, so I put Soledad in charge of watching Madison and getting her ready for bed after she cleaned up the trash, put up the food, and tidied up the kitchen. I had to because Winston and the other guys were smoking cigars, so he couldn't watch her, and I was busy mingling with everyone and changing the CDs to make sure good music was on. I had rented some removable plastic tiles to make a dance floor just in case.

They were uneven on the grass, but people were still dancing. And anyway, that's what we were paying Soledad for, to help us with the party.

About an hour after I sent Soledad and Madison inside, I noticed Johnny playing with the French doors, opening and closing them. He was eating a lollipop, smearing sticky handprints and nose smudges all over the glass and doorknobs.

"Veronica," I called. "Come get Johnny. I've been cleaning all day and he's messing up the glass. I'm not usually picky about things like that, but it's just that people are over and all, you know? And he might close a door on his fingers. Don't want any accidents tonight."

"I understand," she said. "Actually, I think it's almost his bedtime. We're going to need to get going."

"You guys should stay for a little while," I said. "The party's just getting started. We've got more drinks in the cabinet. What do you want to make?"

"Well, I guess I could put him to sleep on your couch if that's okay with you guys."

I couldn't believe that she would suggest such a thing. My couches are from Pottery Barn, and they're honey colored. Winston and I don't even sit on them to watch TV—we'd rather sit on blankets on the floor than mess up our nice furniture—and she asked me if her lollipop-covered son could take a nap there. And I'm talking about a bright red lollipop, too. Not to mention that she probably doesn't bathe him every day.

"Um, we don't really use those couches, but . . ."

"That's alright," Veronica said. "We'll just go ahead and go. Jake's probably ready to go home because he has to work early tomorrow. He has to be there at seven."

"Alright, suit yourselves. Can you guys get out or do I need to ask someone to move?"

“We’re fine. We parked at the end of the driveway. The driveway and street are packed with cars, but we should be able to get by without them moving.”

“Okay, well thanks for coming. Be careful driving home. You should drive because Jake looked like pretty tipsy last time I was out there. He was stumbling around the dance floor singing. Better go get your drunk husband. Thanks for coming. I think everyone liked the party, don’t you?”

“Yeah, everything was great,” said Veronica.

“Maybe I’ll help you plan Johnny’s party if I have time. I like helping people and you’re one of my best friends, so I wouldn’t mind. See you at the gym on Monday!”

When I went back outside, Soledad was calling Madison’s name.

“Madison! Madison! Where are you? Are you playing hide-and-seek? Come out,” she said, shining a flashlight into the moonwalk.

“I told you to put her in bed,” I said. “And why weren’t you watching her?”

“I did, but she must have climbed out of the crib. I was washing dishes. I think she is outside because the sliding glass door was open. I was picking up the cups and plates and when I went upstairs to check on her she was gone.”

“Maybe she’s playing under one of the tables. She does that sometimes at the mall. Well, not under tables, but inside the clothing displays, you know, the round ones. I’ll be looking at clothes and she’ll just disappear for a while until I find her. One time she grabbed an old lady’s leg. I was so embarrassed. Anyway, you check under the tables on that side and I’ll check the ones over here. But stop calling her name so loud. I don’t want folks to think I’m a bad mother or anything. Losing my child at her own birthday party. We’ll find her.”

“Okay, sorry,” Soledad said, and started looking under the tables.

“Oh, and Soledad, when you get a chance, go wash the French doors, okay? They’re covered with handprints.”

I was on my hands and knees lifting up one of the pink tablecloths when Veronica came running through the back gate screaming and waving her arms in the air.

It took a few seconds for her to say anything, but finally she said, “Oh my God! 911! My phone . . . I don’t know. Madison was . . . I didn’t know. I didn’t see. . . Somebody call 911.”

Winston and some of the other guys went running to the driveway, sloshing and dropping beer cups along the way. I turned the music off and followed. When I got to the front yard, Winston was standing at the end of the driveway holding Madison, rocking her back and forth. The streetlight shone down on them and I saw that there was blood on her ears and her skin looked pale. I stepped over a puddle of blood and snuffed out cigars and stood next to them.

“Is she going to be okay?” I asked Winston.

“I don’t know.”

Veronica’s Expedition was still running in the driveway where she’d parked it and everybody was gathered around, no one saying a word. Johnny was asleep in his carseat. There were only about twenty other people at our house by that time. Veronica walked over to me and put her hand on my wrist to make me feel better, or maybe to make herself feel better, but I pushed it away.

“Is she going to be okay?” I kept asking.

I'm not sure who called 911, but I heard sirens and the ambulance and police came. A policeman asked me all kinds of questions and scribbled on a notepad. He thought what happened was my fault. He didn't really say it, but I could feel it. I couldn't believe it. All this happened because of that maid Soledad not watching Madison and Veronica drinking and driving and not watching where she was going and now people are trying to blame me. A terrible thing happened to my child at her birthday party, but I didn't have anything to do with it. It could have happened to anybody.

A Kleeland County Emergency

After the thunderstorm, a ladybug crawls up the side of a fancy antique bathtub in the ditch on the side of the highway.

Beatrice climbs out of the lopsided Ford pickup truck that ended up in the ditch when her husband tried to avoid hitting logs in the road.

“Clyde, it’s all your damn fault, and that was my grannie’s,” she says, straightening her tight-fitting house dress over her large hips.

“Don’t you fret about that old tub right now,” he says, putting his hand on her shoulder.

“Everybody’s okay and our family’s got us a fresh new start ahead; that’s the important thing.”

“For God’s sake, don’t you give me a speech about what’s important; get off your ass and get it out of the ditch before someone steals it!”

Greenery and distant mountains frame the rural highway.

“How am I gonna do that with the truck broke down and pine tree trunks from that semi loose in the road for miles?” he says.

“I don’t know, but you better call a tow truck and have it delivered to our new house; it will be the only nice thing about that broken down shack,” says Beatrice.

“Juice? Juice?” the baby cries as an ambulance siren nears.

“Kleeland County, Tennessee Emergency Services” is written on the side of the ambulance weaving between wrecks and stopped cars to check for injured people.

Logs and debris are scattered along the highway for miles – tire tread, a ladder, paint cans, broken glass, McDonald’s napkins, pieces of bumpers, full garbage bags.

“Maybe we could just call a helicopter to come get it, Clyde,” suggests Beatrice.

“Nobody hurt?” asks the EMT as he approaches the family.

“Only that bathtub over there – it’s a priceless antique, I don’t know what to do, and I wonder if I can borrow your walkie talkie to get someone to help,” says Beatrice, yanking the baby out of her car seat.

Playing with a ladybug on the fringe of her soggy diaper, the baby stops crying and begins clapping her hands and giggling.

“Questions like that are for someone else; I have to make sure no one is hurt before worrying about your bathtub, Ma’am,” says the EMT.

Raging, Beatrice swats at the ladybug on the baby’s arm and marches over to the bathtub, shouting, “I’m gonna sue that bastard who was driving the log truck – a million dollars for that bathtub, easy!”

“Someone’s got to do something; what kind of a man are you, anyway, Clyde?” she screams, plopping the baby in the bathtub.

Tracing the designs of the brass claw of the tub with her plastic nails, she waits for someone to come save the treasure.

Until traffic clears and the tow truck arrives for the pickup truck, she sits on the wet grass beside the bathtub while the baby coos over the ladybug and Clyde helps emergency workers.

“Vince, my second cousin by marriage, lives somewhere around here and we could go find a payphone and look for him to help us out and give us somewhere to stay for the night, but we gonna have to leave that there bathtub, Bea,” says Clyde, peeling off his work gloves.

“Well, I’ll have to stay here and sleep in the tub tonight then, ‘cause my grannie would roll over in her grave if I abandoned that tub.”

Xs and scratches cover the side of the pearly pink porcelain.

“You gone have to leave it so we can go find a gas station before it gets dark, Honey,” says Clyde as he lifts the baby out of the bathtub and starts walking up the hill.

Zeroing in on the flower-shaped knobs, she looks at the bathtub, flicks a ladybug off her shoulder, and jogs to catch up with Clyde, shouting, “You better get back over here and hand me back my baby right this minute!”

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