

Delta Winds

Volume 26 A Magazine of Student Essays 2013

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Letter from the Editors

As we prepared volume 26 of *Delta Winds*, we were mindful of just how remarkably collaborative it is to publish a magazine of this type. It seems that cooperation from all areas of the Delta College family play a part.

We have always had the support, financial and otherwise, of our division deans: Dr. Mary Ann Cox, Dr. Kathy Hart, Paul Kuehn, and currently, Joe Gonzales. Our faculty members have shown their support by encouraging students to submit essays for publication and by assigning *Delta Winds* as a supplementary reader. The campus library makes past copies available to students, and the campus bookstore sells current volumes. Tutoring centers make copies available to students, and the public information personnel distribute copies to various community leaders and members of the board of trustees.

Stan Rapada has generously allowed us to use his spectacular photographs for the covers of numerous *Delta Winds* volumes, and we have had the pleasure of working with remarkably talented people in the duplication center on campus. For the past several years, Susan Lovotti has been in charge of graphic design. She has spent numerous hours ensuring that color tints and print type meet her standards. As a result, *Delta Winds* has had the artistic quality of a professional publication. As of this year, Susan has moved on from Delta and is enjoying her retirement. We are extremely grateful to her for all she has contributed.

Of course, the main focus of *Delta Winds*, and for the college, is the students. Every semester, hard-working, creative students write and revise essays and submit them for publication in the magazine. In the current volume of *Delta Winds*, students pull readers into their sensitive world—a place where they observe life, and write honestly and openly about the situations they have experienced. As has been the case all along with this volume and volumes past, we believe this *Delta Winds* will leave a strong impression on you, the reader.

Finding Jeff

By Robyn Puskaric

It is another Monday morning, no different from the rest. Our shift supervisor, Susan, Karon, and I have, once again, risen before the sun. The morning is like night—a black sky full of stars, cool air stinging our face and arms, and the city is engrossed in a pool of silence. We lock ourselves in the building that is our home away from home, and promptly begin our work at 4:30 a.m. Susan counts the money and prepares our registers. Karon begins her list of duties—brewing iced coffee and teas, stocking syrups, prepping the espresso bars, and ends with brewing all four coffees for the day. My task is the pastry case. Breads, bagels, scones, and coffee cakes, pastry after mouth-watering pastry, I fill up the trays in the case. Five o'clock comes, and, “Good morning, Lodi! Starbucks is open and ready for business.”

The morning passes in its usual frenzy, customer after customer, car after car, and drink after drink. A whirlwind of noises engulfs the building. Employees are taking orders, both up front, in the café, as well as on the drive-thru headset. Almost an ear-piercing cry, the milk screams as it is steamed. Fridge doors shut with a slam left and right. Ice bounces off of the plastic sides of the blenders, inevitably falling victim to the revolving blade that crushes it to make the perfect Frappuccino. Unintelligible chatter of the customers sitting in the café drowns out the sound of the music coming from the hanging speakers. When more coffee is needed, the loud sound of the beans being ground acts as a cloud, blocking all the other noises for a short while. With this, a wave of rich, robust, coffee aroma crashes

through the building, grabbing the attention of everyone. Judging from the morning, I would have guessed this day would turn out the same as any other. Little did I know, it would turn out to be one of the most horrific and memorable days I have ever had at work.

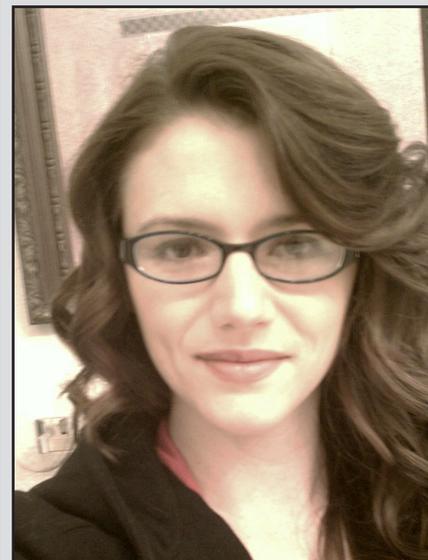
It is about noon now, and the scene of the store has completely changed. The drive-thru is basically dead, only having a customer here and there. Three to four people are sitting at different tables with either books or computers, but no new customers are in line. Walking around the café with a rag drenched in sanitizer solution,

“Good morning, Lodi! Starbucks is open and ready for business.”

I wipe down the empty tables. After I am done, I walk outside to do the same to our patio tables. As I head back inside, in the reflection of the front door and windows, I see Jeff and Joey headed my way. Tan and gangly, Joey, in dark, denim shorts and a striped, scarlet red shirt, is running towards the front door. Jeff, a tall, stout man wearing eyeglasses, is not far behind. I hold the door open and let Joey inside before I hear Jeff say, “No Joey! Not inside.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” I say. “I thought you two were on your way inside.” Jeff responds by saying, “It’s okay, it’s just that—” he turns to Joey, “—let’s go sit outside.”

That is when I notice the two drinks in Jeff’s hands, and I put it all together. There is a new rule about Joey not being able to drink in Jeff’s truck. Recently, Joey started an unfavorable habit of spilling his cocoa in the truck. This is why Jeff has been pulling back into the parking lot to sit on the patio after ordering at the drive-thru



Robyn Puskaric is 23 years old, and has just returned to Delta after a four-year absence. She had this to say about her experience at Delta College: “I was incredibly nervous about being able to do well in my classes. The thought of taking an English class that required us to write essay after essay was terrifying to me at the beginning of the semester. However, that quickly changed after completing my first assignment, ‘Finding Jeff,’ in Professor Nugent’s class. When she gave it praise in class and told me it made her cry, I felt so accomplished. I have never had a teacher give me so much confidence as a writer! Although I used to dread it, I thoroughly enjoy writing now. I have also overcome my nerves about returning to school, and love my continued journey towards becoming a nurse. Thank you, Professor Nugent, for all of your guidance and encouragement throughout the semester. You are an amazing teacher, and I have you to thank for this!”



counter. However, Joey insists on sitting inside, so he and Jeff take a seat in the café.

Jeff and Joey are father and son. They have been coming to our store daily for years. They come around six o'clock in the morning, and use the drive-thru. A Venti, two-pump Mocha is Jeff's drink of choice, and he orders Joey a child's hot cocoa. Everyone who works here knows Jeff and Joey. Why? A little boy with the quirks Joey has is hard to forget. Out of the five autistic people I know, Joey is the most severe case of autism I have witnessed firsthand.

"Good morning, Jeff," all of us say when he pulls his truck up to the drive-thru window. After he responds, our attention turns to Joey. We say good morning to Joey, and wait with anticipation to see what his response will be. How will he act today?

Joey often yells at us. Sometimes he yells, "Hi!" Other times he yells, "Bitch" to whomever is at the window. Some days he even yells at his dad to shut up. A few times he has let out a scream, as loud as his lungs will allow. We have been told that the best thing for us to do is ignore his behavior, so we oblige. However, the actions usually lead us into discussion about this eight-year-old and his disease. Questions from "Does he know the meaning of what he just said?" to "Does he like to swim?" are answered by Jeff. We ask these questions, hoping the answers will give us some insight and understanding of this boy who is different from us.

His yelling is not the only difference. Other common symptoms of autism affect his daily life. He very rarely makes eye contact with people, although I have noticed he makes more eye contact with his dad than he

does strangers. While his body sits in an awkward, hunched-over posture, he wears a bland facial expression with his mouth hanging open. I have only once heard him say a complete sentence; delayed communication is also a common symptom. Although we ignore his obscenities in the moment, we often find ourselves laughing and seeing the humorous side of it. Most days, Joey shocks us with the words he speaks, and with his actions, but those things are the reason we love and remember him.

At this time, I am behind the counter, working on refilling the pastry case with more food.

"Welcome to Starbucks. What can I get started for you today?" says the Barista working in drive-thru.

The shrill sound of steaming milk reaches my ears once again. Dishes crashing around the sink in the back room can be heard

all the way in the front of the store. That is when I hear it, an unidentifiable sound.

"What was that?" I think to myself. Scraping, sliding, something falling "Where did it come from?"

After looking around, I see it. I have heard the sound of one of our paper cups, with a plastic lid, sliding across the floor, and crashing into the wall with a thud. Joey, from where he is sitting, has intentionally thrown his hot chocolate across the café floor, behind our counter, and under one of our small refrigerators, where it hit the wall. A long, wide, river of chocolate liquid marks the path it has traveled. Jeff jumps up from his seat and meets me at the end of the counter, the river running between us.



"I am SO sorry! If you get a rag, I will clean it up," says Jeff.

Talking at the same time as Jeff, I try to tell him that it is okay and we will clean it up. Continuously apologizing, he insists on cleaning it up himself.

Trying my best, I attempt to reassure him that it is not a big deal, and I will be glad to clean it up.

I can sense the embarrassment and anguish building up within him. His hand slides from his forehead, down to his hip, and back to his forehead again. He anxiously glances from me, the chocolate river, Joey, and then back to me. All the while, words of apology come from him.

"Jeff, I promise it is okay," I say again.

He does not listen, nor does he calm down. It goes without being said that he has dealt with numerous situations of humiliation, but for some reason he is beyond tolerating this one.

It is as though I am trapped in a glass box. Jeff cannot hear me, and I cannot escape or reach him. A feeling is building up inside my chest. There is a sudden heaviness within me. My throat, I can feel, is starting to tighten. I need to calm myself down.

"Jeff, it is OKAY! We will clean it up. It is not a problem at all," I say yet again, a bit more firmly. How can he not believe me? He finally complies. However, the pressure in my chest is not gone. This is not over yet; there is more to come. "Would you like us to make him another hot chocolate?" I ask, trying to turn this nightmarish moment around.

"No, no! He does not need one. Again, I am so sorry," he answers.

Then he hits me with it, the dagger that opens a wound in my chest.

"I promise, I will NEVER bring him here again," says Jeff as he looks me directly in the eyes.

My heart stops, sinks, and starts pounding all at the same time. Suddenly, I feel empty, and at the same time feel as though my heart is pounding hard enough for people to see. I am engulfed in a hellish dream and cannot wake up. There is no way he can be serious. I have to do something!

"Jeff! No! Really, it's—" I begin to say, but he cuts me off.

"No, I PROMISE," he says.

"I promise, I will NEVER bring him here again," says Jeff as he looks me directly in the eyes.

I am frozen where I stand.

As he walks away from me towards the front door, with Joey's hand

in his, he repeats two words, "Never again," over and over, each time sending the dagger a little farther in.

Then they are gone, and the pressure and the heaviness pour out. My cheeks are suddenly wet with streams of tears. The tightness in my throat has not gone away, and crying only makes it worse. On the positive side, my heart is no longer pounding. Instead, it has been shattered, exploded into a million microscopic pieces.

For the first time, the boy who has always consumed my attention has gone completely unnoticed. His father, his facial expressions, and his emotions have been all that I could see.

In that moment, reality hit me about as hard as Babe Ruth hitting a homerun ball. Joey's life is not the only life affected by his disease. I realize Joey's disease is probably more



difficult for his father to deal with than it is for Joey. Unlike Joey, Jeff is fully aware of, and understands, the consequences of Joey's actions. Although outsiders, such as my co-workers and I, can take Joey and his actions "with a grain of salt," it is not a matter to take lightly. For his father, it is a struggle day-to-day. He has to deal with embarrassment that stems from his son's obscene words and his rash actions. Frustration builds because of his son's differences and slow development. Looks of judgment from surrounding strangers anger him. Moments fill with selfish thoughts of "Why me?" or "Why MY son?" Inevitably, at the end of the day, he will fall victim to guilt, for letting anything or anyone take away from his love for his little boy.

After all of these years, I find that I have been overlooking Jeff. While I have been fixated on

Joey and understanding his life, I have underestimated the life of Jeff. A great deal of strength and dedication is needed to deal with such trying circumstances. I have never realized the toll it could take on a parent to have a child who is a little different.

It is Wednesday, two days after the incident. Jeff comes through drive-thru. By now, word has spread, and it is the store's mission to talk to Jeff. I have told my manager, Tom, about what happened, and asked him to try to talk to Jeff and restate what I tried so desperately to convey to him. Once Jeff places his order at the speaker box, I run to the backroom.

I tell Tom, "Jeff just ordered! He is four cars back in drive." When Jeff pulls up to the window, Tom begins his speech. Although I do not hear the very beginning, I hear the end, and see the result.

"If Joey throws his hot chocolate, we are here, and happy, to clean the mess. We will even make him a new hot chocolate. And you know what? If he throws that one, we're going to clean it up and make another one. We will do that all day if we have to. That is what we are here for. You are not alone, Jeff", Tom says.

Jeff starts crying. My heart sinks again, as I recognize his tears to be ones of relief.

On a daily basis, for years, although we talked with Jeff, our attention, my attention, was on Joey; all eyes on the Autistic Child. But on that day, I found my eyes to be blind to that same boy. The only person I saw in that moment was the tall, stout, soft-spoken man

... although we talked with Jeff, our attention, my attention, was on Joey; all eyes on the Autistic Child.

wearing eyeglasses. Fine wrinkles curve around his mouth, while his dark hair is lightly speckled with gray. Weary eyes

gaze back at me, and his shoulders are slightly slouched. Wear and worry seem to be the very essence of him, although I never noticed it before that moment.

Being a parent presents numerous challenges and hardships, all without a "How-to" manual. If a disease is added into the picture, such as autism, life and parenting become that much more difficult. The incident with Jeff helped me get a closer look at the type of person he has to be to make it through life with his son. The characteristics that define him as a person and a father are beautiful and desirable. Parents have to show an exceptional amount of patience, like Jeff always has. He has an enduring strength that comes from the day-to-day challenges he has to overcome. His love for his son is unwavering, even when he finds himself in those frustrating moments. Kindness fills his heart, helping him nurture his son.

When life becomes overwhelming for Jeff, I think it helps him when there is a little normalcy and acceptance in his life. This is something he always experiences at our store. For him, our Starbucks is his safe place. Although we ask questions about his son, we are never judgmental. We have never had an incident with Joey like we had that day. Jeff, I feel, became exceedingly upset that Monday afternoon because he felt his safe place was gone. In that moment, he felt he lost the bit of normalcy his life had, and therefore, lost himself.

After talking to Tom on Wednesday at the drive-thru window, Jeff knew he was finally understood. I caught a glimpse of what it is like for a parent of an autistic child, and how the parent can disappear behind their child's disease. However, I am

I caught a glimpse of what it is like for a parent of an autistic child, and how the parent can disappear behind their child's disease.

no longer blinded by this child and his differences. At the end of that frightful Monday, I felt touched and accomplished. Jeff was lost, caught in his own world that was different

from ours. Now, he knows I see him, not only his son. He never will disappear again, because on that day, I found Jeff, and he became free. No judgment or cruelty would ever reach him or his son in our store. The safe place he longed for was staying right where it was.

The next morning, I walk into work around 5:45 in the morning. As I walk towards the backroom, I look up at the drive-thru window directly in front of me. Sitting in the gray pickup truck are Jeff, AND Joey. I pause long enough to make eye contact with Jeff. We both remain still for a moment, and just smile at each other.





Adrienne Silver was an escrow manager for a successful home building company when she realized that having a well paid job wasn't the same as having a career that she loved, so she decided to quit her job and go back to school full time to pursue a career in nursing. At the age of 46, she found returning to school after such a long absence (28 years) a frightening endeavor, but the support Adrienne receives from her husband and family has made all the difference for her. She would like to say to all the "adults" out there who have considered making a change in careers, "It's never too late to figure out what you want to be when you grow up!"



Bullying Law Proposal— Mandatory Counseling/ Family Counseling

By Adrienne Silver

From elementary school to high school, bullying has become an increasing problem in schools across the country. More and more, we hear reports on the news about a student who has been brutally beaten by one or more of his classmates or about a suicide of a teenager as a result of years of incessant bullying. Because of the rise in violence and suicides, parents are voicing their concerns for their children's safety at school. As a response, many states are now requiring implementation of anti-bullying policies in their school districts.

In 2009, eleven-year-old Jaheem Herrera hanged himself in his closet after being teased by classmates at his Georgia elementary school. Afterwards, Georgia lawmakers modified their bullying law. With the previous law, schools had to report any bullying incidents to the police. But now school districts are required to have in place a process that will move the bully to a different school.

In California on April 13th, 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed Seth's Law (AB 9) as a result of the suicide of thirteen-year-old Seth Walsh. This new law requires California school districts to establish anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies that include "actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, as well as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, and religion." It also requires prompt

responses to all harassment complaints and a subsequent investigation of those claims. Seth's Law also puts in place continuing education and training programs for all school staff to assist in recognizing and preventing discrimination and harassment.

Yet with all the anti-bullying policies, procedures and training being implemented nationwide, not much is being done to address the behavior before it reaches the level of violence.

For example, in the Georgia law, the bully's only punishment is being moved to another school. Nothing prevents the bully from harassing another student at the new school. Nothing is done to determine what caused his or her behavior. In the case of Seth Walsh, the school was aware of the bullying, but did nothing to intervene. No one was held responsible for Seth's death even though several of his friends and school staff knew that other students were tormenting him.

Nothing prevents the bully from harassing another student at the new school.

Many perpetrators of harassment display destructive behavior for several years. But nothing is done to resolve the cause of this behavior. Many school administrators are turning a blind eye to the problem. In "Bullying: Carrying the Pain," published in the *Stockton Record* on July 3, 2011, Lori Gilbert interviews a local administrator: "What we have to do for starters is to own it," said Renee Sweeden, principal of Roosevelt Elementary School in Stockton Unified School District. "We're not owning

it. We're trying to ignore it. I've got principal friends who don't talk about that stuff."

Unfortunately, this way of thinking is typical in many schools, especially in the lower grades. Many teachers have the opinion that teasing and taunting is just "kids being kids" and that nothing needs to be done. But these kids grow up to become teenagers with destructive behaviors. If we are to reduce aggressive behavior, we must first understand the cause and next deal with the offender while the behavior can still be corrected.

In order to reduce the problem of school bullying, I propose to establish a new law that will operate in conjunction with Seth's Law (AB 9), The California Student Safety and Violence

Prevention Act (AB 537), The Safe Place to Learn Act (AB 394), Student Civil Rights Act (SB 777), California's criminal parental responsibility law, and California Education Code Section 48900 – 48927 to make bullying or discrimination and harassment a summary offense. Consequently, a jury trial will not be required to prosecute.

Unlike the existing laws that provide only guidelines and procedures to protect our students from acts of discrimination and harassment, this new anti-bullying law will take the course of action one step further. If the student is found guilty of a bullying offense, it will be mandatory for the incident to be reported to the police. The student will be charged with a summary offense and must appear in juvenile court for disciplinary action.

The penalty for this offense will include court-mandated counseling to determine the severity of the student's behavior. In accordance with the California Education Code, suspension from school may be recommended,

and family counseling may also be imposed. The student's parents or guardians are responsible for adhering to all treatment(s) as recommended by the court counselor. Non-compliance by the parents or guardians will result in a fine of \$2500.00.

If the student commits a second offense, the student will receive a one-week suspension. Also, family counseling will be required by the court and the school district as a condition of the student returning to school. A third offense will result in mandatory expulsion from school. Each incident and court ruling will be noted in the student's permanent school records and police record.

Many teachers have the opinion that teasing and taunting is just "kids being kids" and that nothing needs to be done.

Enforcement of this new anti-bullying law will be the key to its success. It will be the responsibility of the teachers, school counselors,

school administrators, and parents or guardians of each student to ensure that all claims of discrimination and harassment are reported and investigated. Failure of a school administrator to investigate any discrimination and harassment complaint can be reported to the school board. The school board will be obligated to compel an immediate investigation of the discrimination and harassment complaint.

Once a student is found guilty of discrimination and harassment, the police and juvenile court will enforce the penalty. The court will monitor the individual's progress through family counseling, and the school administrator will be advised of the student's status.

Each day another bully becomes empowered when his actions are dismissed and his victim's cries are ignored. We must be more proactive in dealing with these offenders before more young lives are needlessly lost.



À la recherche de soi

By Rebecca Taylor



Rebecca Taylor, 22, is a Music, English, and French Language major at Delta. Her primary academic interests are music, languages, literature, and philosophy. When the Fates allow her and the Muse inspires her, she also enjoys thinking. She currently works as a French tutor in Goleman Library. She plans to attend the University of California, Santa Barbara and would like to teach English abroad before eventually teaching French.

My voice evades me. I read volumes of literature, from archaic translations of ancient Greek poetry to a friend's creative writing blurbs, hot off the press (no, Facebook), yet I cannot put a finger on what constitutes my voice. Is it little more than a hodgepodge of the greats, a sad plastic rip-off of the originals, or is it "a song of the universal, full of manhood, womanhood, infancy," as Whitman puts it?

As an individual, I used to crave normalcy. Being raised on a small farm and taught a dead language did nothing to satisfy this craving. The world constantly reminded me that being homeschooled and having a religious upbringing (horror of horrors) meant an impoverished social life, a questionable education (what of state standards and standardized testing?

Children simply *must* take Earth Science in the ninth grade!), and above all, indoctrination. These accusations are not entirely false, but nor are they completely grounded. I admit with sadness that I failed to convince others

that Latin was among the noblest of pursuits, but otherwise, life is not half bad.

I occasionally feel lost. The "white" or "Caucasian" checkbox on official forms reminds me that while I am most assuredly of good European stock, I have little connection with any one tradition. I have no heritage language, no cuisine, and no unique culture of which I am a part. In that sense, I suppose I am fortunate; I am free to choose what gives me pleasure and what makes me the best possible version of myself. I don't feel pressured to choose any particular one. Perhaps that is just my way of justifying learning several Romance languages (and their mother, Latin),

appreciating Korean culture, wishing to study abroad in France, and feeling at home with Russian hospitality. My writing reflects my desire to be a student of the universe,

When I write, I am given an opportunity to set foot in that castle in the sky, to give voice to the endless stream of words flowing through my mind.

to learn anything and everything at whatever opportunity, to be a juicy Sun Crest peach rather than a cardboard hybrid variety. As I wrote in a French journal, "J'aimerais voir le lever et le coucher du soleil à l'autre coté du





Kelly-Ray Morriston is a 22 year old Delta student. She is an extremely proud single mother of an amazing daughter. She has wanted to be a registered nurse since the age of 13, and is currently waiting to join the Delta ADN program. After graduation, she'll continue her education in the medical field, obtain a bachelor's degree, and hopefully achieve her master's degree. At the age of 19, she became an EMT. After working in Oakland, CA, she was able to view the world through the eyes of the ill, the injured, and the elderly. The lack of passion she has witnessed has sparked the urge to make change for those who depend on medical personnel. She hopes to become a nurse and influence others to use compassion in their professions. Her outlook on life is to treat others with complete kindness, and to give love to those who need a hand to hold every now and then.



The Pale Hand That Holds My Heart

By Kelly-Ray Morriston

Every morning started with our old school, duct-taped Nokia radios. I remember my first day, my first time using that ancient walkie-talkie. I was so nervous, stumbling over my words that simply involved stating that we were in service. That day, we were told to go straight to a nursing home and pick up a patient who was in distress due to difficulty breathing and altered level of consciousness. We hauled that ambulance down I-880, blew through Oakland, and arrived in a shockingly terrible neighborhood. As I jumped out in my big boots and my jacket covered in badges, I felt my heart begin to race. I felt so important, so significant, to be the one yanking the gurney out of the back as the wheels banged against the uneven concrete.

I felt so heroic walking into this nursing home. We rushed right in, and I expected it to be like a TV show with people running up to us and shouting out the dire situation, handing us files, and a doctor somewhere screaming "Clear!" I was halted by quite the opposite. When my partner and I walked in, no one even seemed to notice us. It was as if we weren't there, as if there was no emergency. What I walked into was a gas chamber that reeked so horribly of ammonia from urine that my lungs literally tried to close. I awkwardly approached the desk, where four nurses were hovering, sharing laughs and pointless gossip. I said, "Excuse me? I'm here to pick up Mrs. Chan." One nurse allowed her eyes to roll up to mine, looked at me as if I were an annoyance, and in almost

incomprehensible English, slurred, "Room twenty eight," and threw me a giant envelope that held a stack of papers.

"What?" I asked myself. "Are these people serious?" There's a human being lying in this building somewhere fighting to stay alive, and this woman is telling her co-worker about a barbeque. My partner snickered, "What'd you expect?" What I expected and what I walked into were two completely different things. Through the fog of odor produced by rotten skin and unchanged adult diapers,

What I walked into was a gas chamber that reeked so horribly of ammonia from urine that my lungs literally tried to close.

I searched for and found room number twenty-eight. What I saw was an Asian woman who had to be no more than eighty pounds. She was lying on her

back, somewhat tilted to the side. She was stiff and decrepit, and her body was folded into a shape I never knew humans could be in. From a distance the naked eye couldn't even detect that she was breathing. I walked up slowly and was able to see that her chest was moving; she was breathing extremely shallow breaths, about six times a minute. I introduced myself, as I was taught, and looked at this helpless woman. I told her my name, and while touching her hand, I noticed that her fixated stare never even varied.

I tried to flag down a nurse, but nobody cared to help me. The situation was insane. This was just a wait for them, a period of time passing until the body was taken to the hospital and removed from their care; it was a bed that they cleared and a diaper they

wouldn't have to worry about for the rest of the day. Finally a nurse walked in. She walked up to the small, fragile woman, and screamed, "Okay Mama, they go to take you now." She reached down, grabbed the patient by the sheet that she lay on, and effortlessly snatched her tiny body to the side of the bed. The woman's ghastly facial expression didn't change, and neither did one bone of her body. She seemed to slide along the bed as a mass, a chunk of body that was no longer human.

I have encountered hundreds of health care employees who do not possess even basic medical skills, and who lack the minimal compassion needed to care for others.

Once I walked into a room with a man lying on his back, the left side of his body completely motionless and the left side of his face drooping. Any person with basic medical training knows that these are obvious symptoms of a stroke, and the victim has three hours to be treated. When I asked the nurse when this happened, he stated, "Around dinner time." I had to dig it out of him what time that was, and I finally found that it was two and a half hours prior to the call. In another half an hour, this patient could have been brain dead for the rest of his life—because of the incompetence and indifference of the medical personnel assigned to help him.

There was always an eerie feeling that lingered during those night visits, a sense of sadness and loneliness that radiated from the poor souls trapped in this hell called a nursing home.

It is truly devastating to grasp that there are so many people who work with individuals experiencing the end of their lives, yet who care nothing about letting these people die with dignity. I never got used to the woman in a wheelchair trying to roll after me, crying and begging me to talk to her. When I was leaving, she would hold her pale, wrinkled hand out for me to hold in return, and ask me to stay for just a moment. I never got used to the man sitting in his wheelchair, staring out of the front door, wondering where

he was. People walked in and walked out of that front door day after day, yet he never showed any interest in them. He just sat there, staring out into nothing, or possibly out into his own imagination, not knowing that there was a gauze pad falling off of his open scalp.

There was always an eerie feeling that lingered during those night visits, a sense of sadness and loneliness that radiated from the poor souls trapped in this hell called a nursing home. Some patients were unable to speak, unable to move from various medical issues that stole their being from them. What was left was their soul, their poor hearts imprisoned in lifeless bodies that couldn't express their pain, but their eyes would lock with mine and reveal how they had to suffer through every second, hoping and waiting to die.



Surviving My Childhood

By Angelica Lopez



As far back as I can remember, I never quite had the perfect childhood of playing, laughing, riding bikes, and family road trips. Some of my vivid memories as a child are of red and blue police lights flashing in my eyes, but smoke and liquor are the most dominant images I can recall. When I was age seven, my father was murdered. His killers locked him in a shed at gunpoint and set fire to it. He burned to death in the fire. I hardly knew him before he was gone. He was like a stranger in my life.

My mother was always involved with the wrong crowd, including gang members, drug addicts, and alcoholics. Her boyfriends were either in prison or just

released. It was common for me to notice a new bruise on my mother's arm before I could even understand how she got it. The boyfriends she had hit her and grabbed whatever objects they could to either swing or throw at her. At times I tried to help her by biting, hitting, scratching them, but I was so small that I easily got thrown against a wall or tossed to the floor. Then all I could do was cry and run to the neighbors for help. Whether the boyfriends were arrested or not, my mother always seemed to take them back. She was the type who put her boyfriends before others.

My whole childhood I raised myself, surviving on the Social Security benefits I got from my father's being deceased. The school supplies and materials I needed all came from monies I received from the government. I can't even remember the last time my mother bought me something with her own money. Without gas money, she wouldn't take

me to school half the time, so I often walked at least an hour every day to get there and back. My mother often sent me to live with my grandma for weeks at a time while she partied. She would come home for a day, grab a bag full of clothes, and leave, with no word about when, if ever, she was coming back. I remember crying and shouting, "If you love me, you'll stay." I always got a hand shoving me back and a door slammed in my face.

My grandma was the only one to comfort me, telling me everything would be okay. She became my mother figure, the woman I looked up to for everything, and the woman who told me to "never give up." After everything I had been

through, I started to hate my mother for whom she had become. It got to the point where I told everyone I didn't have a mother. My grandma always said, "Blood is blood, no matter what." Because of those words I allowed my mother the opportunity to change, which she never did until she got pregnant again when I was age twelve. As young as I was, I convinced her to keep the baby instead of having the abortion that she wanted to get. For a while she changed by not smoking, drinking, or partying. At that point, I thought to myself resentfully, "Why change *now*?" I wondered why couldn't she have changed for *me* when I needed her. However, I realized that her transformation was better late than never. She went back to college and got a certificate to become an administrator. Then, just when she seemed to be getting her life together, my baby sister's dad left my mother. Now, my mother was alone and had to raise a child on her own. She struggled a lot, juggling school and raising a

When I was age seven, my father was murdered.

baby, but I helped her as much as I could, quizzing her on upcoming tests, and babysitting frequently. Then she started changing for the worse, drinking in the mornings and constantly smoking cigarettes. She became depressed about being alone without a man in her life.

When I started high school, her regression to these terrible habits changed my attitude toward helping her. We became more distant with each other. Constantly, I threatened to leave her and to go live with my grandma. Her reply would be “You’ll have to call the cops on me first before I let you leave.” We

couldn’t have one civil conversation without arguing, no matter how hard I tried. I joined clubs and tried out for almost

every sport just to avoid going home. During my senior year, she got another boyfriend, and I hated him. At three in the morning on a school night, I would hear them drunk and shouting. I tried to ignore them and stay out of the way, but her boyfriend always seemed to agitate me. He would say things like, “Hi, angel, hi,” “You better talk to me soon,” and “I’ll tell you right now I’m not going anywhere!” But when I confronted him, my mother would always choose his side. Whenever they fought, he always ran back to his ex-wife, leaving me for mother to blame. She would zone out and cry. No matter how much I told her she deserved better, it just went in one ear and out the other.

Our last argument was the final straw. I heard the words “It’s all your fault. You make him leave me and go back to her.” Her voice got scratchy as she started to cry. My eyes got watery, and I felt terrible, as if my being there brought her misery. My 18th birthday was around the corner, and all I asked for was a simple dinner with my family, but she couldn’t even provide

that. I didn’t receive a birthday card or greeting from her. After she left for work, I spent the entire day locked in my room, listening to her boyfriend and his family laughing and talking in our house. The next day I left, living with different friends for weeks at a time, not wanting to go back home. Then I officially moved out. I showed up, gathered all my belongings, and told her I was leaving. All she had to say was “Okay, and that’s my pillow,” and she grabbed it as I walked out. I moved back in with my grandma, and even though I was happier, I still hurt. My grandma understood my anger. “In time, things will change,”

**Whenever they fought,
he always ran back to his
ex-wife, leaving me for
mother to blame.**

she said. Once again my grandma became my role model, and anything she said I tried hard to believe. I always regretted

leaving my sister behind. I never wanted her to live through the childhood I faced, but it was too late. My sister was convinced that my mother’s boyfriend’s family was *her* family, and we were simply nothing without them. In my book my mother ran out of second chances. I was done trying to fix things between us.



When I was age nineteen, my grandma passed away. I felt I lost the one person I had left in my life that I loved very much. I wanted to give up. I felt alone. Then I remembered that my grandma taught me to never give up. Everything I began to do I did for her. I was able to get my own place and a car, go to school, and juggle four jobs: daycare on weekdays, babysitting and house cleaning on weekends, and hostessing on holidays. My grandma always said, "Hard work pays off in the end," and it does. I don't like being pitied because the struggles I faced are what made me who I am today. Having my own responsibilities at a young age made me grow into a mature young woman. Despite the hatred I had toward my mother, I have forgiven her for everything she has put me through. Her neglect turned me into an independent and strong young woman. I don't want to live struggling like my mother has always done. I do what needs to be done to pursue a career because when the time comes and my sister wants to leave the chaos of my mother's home, she'll always be able to live with me, as she grows older.

I'll admit it's hard for me to trust people after the way I was treated by my mother, but in a strange way that's also good.

Although my mother and I still don't get along, we talk occasionally. We don't share secrets or talk about our private lives, but we are civil now. She apologizes often for the trials she has put me through, but I say, "No,

it's okay, because it allowed me to grow and learn from others' mistakes." I'm not an emotional

person, so sharing my feelings is hard, but that's my mother, and no matter what she'll always be part of my life. My grandma always said, "Never rely on others to do things for you; instead do them yourself." I'll admit it's hard for me to trust people after the way I was treated by my mother, but in a strange way that's also good. I keep to myself a lot, which helps keep me focused on staying on the right path. My grandma was a strong, independent, hardworking, and amazing woman, and I hope to follow in her footsteps, building a successful, responsible life for myself. If and when I have children of my own, I will surely know whose path to follow—and, just as importantly, whose to avoid.



A NEW VIEW OF THE OCEAN

By Morgan Millunzi-Lasater

If someone were to ask me a year ago where my favorite place in the world was, I would have said the ocean. I loved the ocean. I loved everything about it: the smells, the sounds, the way warm sand felt between my toes and a cool breeze felt against my face. I also loved how little I felt in comparison to the large mass of crashing waves, and the feeling of being absolutely free from all distractions: free to run up and down the beach like a child exploring for the best seashell, or if I was lucky, a sand-dollar. I loved the whole experience, from sunup to sundown, until one day when I witnessed another side of the ocean I had never seen before.

The day my whole ocean perspective changed started off like any other early Saturday morning; my husband Travis and I were up before our two-year old son Jace, and we were discussing what we should do on such a beautiful June day. After a minute of sharing ideas, Travis suggested the ocean—a prime example of why I fell in love with him in the first place. I was elated. Like a child who just found out she was going to Disneyland, I jumped off the couch and dashed to get ready. We kept a beach-bag prepared for the most part, so all we had to do was wake Jace, pack some clothes and a lunch, and we were off to Santa Cruz.

The ride there was wonderful. Jace did not make a fuss the whole way—anyone who has spent time with a two-year-old would know what a rarity this is! We enjoyed a little bit of talking and a whole lot of singing; it was turning into a fabulous day. When we reached Santa Cruz, we realized

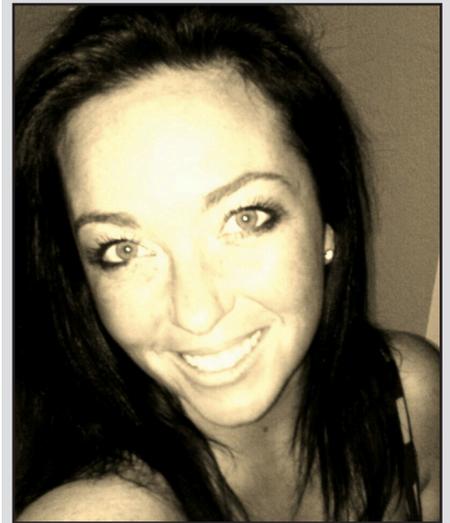
we were not the only ones who were looking to be beach bums that day: the town was busy, and the beach was packed. It took us a little while to find a suitable spot, but when we did Travis stabbed our beach umbrella into the sand as if he were staking claim to our homestead.

The ocean was freezing, but Travis still wanted to take a swim. Knowing Jace would want to follow his dad, I put his life vest on. I stood there at the edge of the shore, holding our son's hand as the waves hit our feet and watching Travis dive under a wave. When

The day my whole ocean perspective changed started off like any other early Saturday morning.

the wave finally settled, I watched my once lifeguard-of-a-hunk husband doing his scary sea-monster act, with seaweed he had grabbed from the ocean floor. He was always acting like a goofball to get a laugh out of us, and of course, he was successful in delighting us with his playfulness. He did not stay long in the water because it was so cold and decided to go warm up while Jace and I played some more. That is when our day turned upside down.

There was a little boy, maybe three or four years old, who was playing in the water with his older sister. His sister looked beyond bored and would run back and forth to their parents, ignoring her little brother. As Jace and the little boy began to play together, I noticed that the sister had been gone for a while; moreover, I felt as if I was the only one watching the other family's little boy. I remember at one point thinking, "Did someone just leave a three- or four-year-old to play in the ocean by himself?" I felt stuck: Jace was having a great time, Travis



Morgan Millunzi-Lasater is a mother, wife, and student. Returning to Delta College, she says, has been the best decision she has made for herself: "In a quest of furthering my education, and setting an example for my young son, I have found a treasure map to self-discovery. I have found that I enjoy writing, history, and dare I say, some science. I have also found that a student that was overlooked and brushed aside in high school can soar in community college. It has been my experience at Delta to have had great professors that have assisted in helping me grow and aiding me with tools that will last a lifetime—I am extremely thankful for that. I am now excited for my future and furthering my education. The sky truly is the limit."





was up on the sand tanning his back, and I was watching someone else's child.

After a little while the little boy became braver in the water. I remember holding Jace back and telling the boy to be careful, but he acted as if he did not hear me. I also remember holding Jace's hand firmly and looking back to see where the little boy's sister or mother were; I was beginning to feel very concerned. As I was scanning the beach for the boy's family, I remember hearing my mom's voice in my mind: "Never turn your back to the ocean." I quickly turned back around, but it was too late—I saw what I desperately did not want to see. The little boy had dropped his blue shovel, and he was going after it. The ocean had removed its jovial, benevolent mask and looked cruel and voracious. I kept yelling, "No! No! Come back!" but he did not listen, and from one second to the next he was pulled under a wave and out of my sight.

I am still haunted from time to time with the image of the little boy's face under the water.

I stood there on the beach with my son feeling more stuck than I have ever felt in my life. My eyes had not left the place where the little boy went under. The question that went through my mind was "Do I endanger my own child's life for someone else's child?" But before I could realize it, my natural instincts and adrenaline had taken over; I had picked my son up with a death grip and had plunged waist deep into the freezing water that I had shivered away from thirty seconds before. Everything from that point on went into extreme slow motion. I remember methodically asking myself, "What will the ocean do next?" The building wave that pulled the boy under had peaked, and I watched his bright orange shirt go up into the wave and crash back down. I kept thinking to myself, "He needs to breathe, he needs to breathe!" I realized that he was most likely behind me, as the wave crashed against my waist. I continued to scan the water. As the wave was beginning to recede, I spotted the little

boy's orange shirt again. He was being pulled right to me, but he was about a foot under the water. As I clenched onto my son, I reached down like a bear fishing for salmon and snatched the little boy up out of the ocean. In the split-second between grabbing a fistful of his shirt and pulling him up to the surface, time suddenly seemed to speed back up again.

I was now standing in freezing waist-deep water, with my son under one arm, and holding a little boy whom I had never met before up by his T-shirt. Thankfully, another woman came out to meet us and grabbed the little boy. As I turned around, Travis and the little boy's sister and mother were running towards us. I kept asking the little boy if he was okay, but he could only look at me blankly with his big brown eyes before he started to cough and cry. Travis came and grabbed our son, and the mother grabbed her little boy. As I walked back to what had been

the happy little spot we had claimed a couple of hours prior, I began to shake uncontrollably. The realization of what had just happened hit me. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind from "What if I had dropped my son?" to "What if the little boy was not wearing a shirt and he slipped through my hand?"

Thankfully, everyone left the beach alive and healthy that day, but my perception of the ocean was forever changed. I saw a dark side to the ocean: I saw it lure a little boy out and toss him like a rag doll. I saw the sheer strength of the ocean, and while it is beautiful, it is very dangerous. My family and I have still not been back, and I am still haunted from time to time with the image of the little boy's face under the water. I found out later his name was Jordan, and he was more concerned about his missing blue shovel than about almost drowning. I hope he and his parents never forget that day, because I know I won't.

Can We Truly Know Who We Are?

(A Soldier's Perspective)

By Chad Hammerback

It's December, almost Christmas, and it's hot as hell. It's always hot in this coastal equatorial city. My combat gear does nothing but make the heat even more insufferable. After picking up our food supplies at the seaport, our convoy is winding its way through the twisted mess of streets on its way back to the university where our base is. While I'm normally the commander's driver in the lead vehicle, somehow I pulled gunner duty today. As such, I'm still on the lead vehicle, but manning the M-60 machinegun mounted to the roof of the vehicle. It's been an uneventful run, as the generally are, just the usual unsettling crowd of natives lining the road the entire way. You never know which ones are armed, which ones were dragging the bodies of our dead soldiers through the streets just a few months ago. That makes them all dangerous enemies. Because of that, we are under strict orders to never stop . . . for anything . . . under any circumstances.

But there is something in the road ahead and the driver begins to slow. I can hear the First Sergeant yelling at the Private to get his goddamned foot off the brake and drive, dammit! The 5-ton truck lurches as the Private punches the gas pedal in compliance with the order, and the engine roars as it responds sluggishly to the new command. We rumble on, unable to define the object in the road due to the glaring mid-afternoon sun and the heat haze coming off of the road. The crowd is too pressed in on the

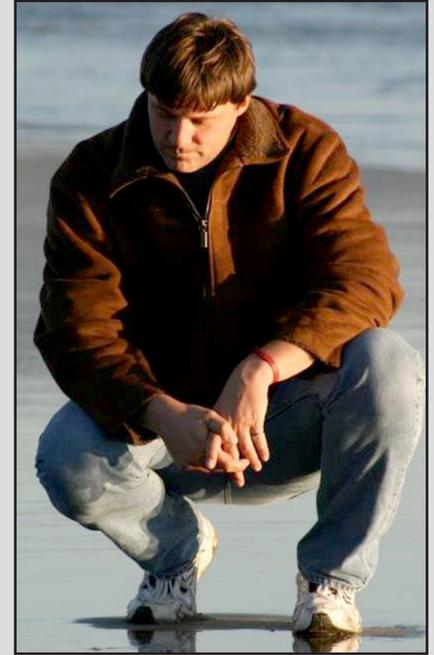
road for us to go around whatever is in the road, so we'll just have to go through it. Wouldn't be the first time. The image begins to sharpen, and I realize at the same time as the driver that it's not something in the road, but someone. The driver slams on the brakes at the last possible moment, and the entire convoy skids to a halt, trucks nearly piling into each other at the unexpected stop. *Shit!* This does not bode well. As the Private guns the engine of the truck to try to bully the person out of the way, I can hear the First Sergeant yelling at him. The person just stands there with his arms behind his back. The driver continues to try to bully him out of the way, but instead he reveals his hands and the

You never know which ones are armed, which ones were dragging the bodies of our dead soldiers through the streets just a few months ago.

AK-47 he was hiding. Fuck! This isn't good, not good at all. He points it at the truck as I begin to squeeze the trigger and bring the massive machine gun I'm manning

to bear on him. My mind begins to catch up with all the information being processed, and I realize that this man in front of us is just a kid, no more than nine or ten.

In his poem "The Man He Killed," Thomas Hardy relates a tale of two infantry soldiers on opposite sides of the battle lines, staring each other down as they fire bullets at each other. Now, here I was smack-dab in the middle of my very own Hardy poem. For Hardy, his background dictates that the other soldier was his enemy, but Hardy ponders what may have been under different circumstances.



Chad Hammerback is a very happily married father/step-father of nine with children ranging from two to twenty-one. He is also a grandfather to a three-year-old grandson. He is an avid reader and sometime writer hoping to one day publish a novel or two. As a South Dakota transplant, he quite often struggles to understand Californian society and many of his essays deal with this disparity as he pursues a degree in Philosophy and Religion.





Now, I was at a crossroads. Life and death weighed in the balance. I realized that who we know ourselves to be is transient. Life happens and forces us to re-evaluate our perspective. It alters the way we view our beliefs and ourselves or opens up a new awareness of self that didn't exist because we were never in a position that forced us to consider it.



So who was I? For me, during this time in my own history, I was a soldier in the U.S. Army. I was a member of one of the world's most elite fighting forces. I was an American badass. With that came a certain amount of cockiness. A "mess with the bull, get the horns" attitude. The military did a fine job harboring this attitude as well. Stuck in the African desert half a world away from home, we felt that anything and anyone not of the American westernized way of life was a threat to our freedoms and way of life. As such, this young boy was my enemy. Never mind that we were technically a non-combatant force attached to the United Nations peacekeeping force sent in to aid the innocent people caught in the middle of a violent civil war. This boy was still an enemy. The fact that he was aiming a weapon at us only reaffirmed that. And, if you see one armed enemy, there are, like roaches, hundreds more in the shadows that you don't see.



But was this mind-set really the truth of the matter? Perception is not flawless. This young boy was an enemy. As such, his actions only proved my expectations of him. Only a critical eye could see beyond the surface to the truth that lay beneath. It was time to think, not feel. The convoy that I was on was one of dozens of "chow runs" that took place each week. "Right of might" insured our continued nourishment as well as our American way of life in the form of Coke, Doritos, Oreos, and Snickers. We used the threat of violence to guarantee three squares and more a day. Meanwhile, countless millions around us starved. Does it not stand to reason that they would take a lesson



from us and try to employ the same tactics? As I stood there, eyes locked on my enemy, other thoughts came to the forefront. I was a son, a father, and a brother to siblings about this boy's age. As I continued to stare this boy down, I began to see him from my new perspective. This boy was not my enemy; he was merely a starving child desperate for food.

As the title of Thomas Hardy's poem implies, one man dies while the other is left to ponder what might have been. My tale has a much different outcome. Seeing this young boy from a different perspective led me to roll the dice on a different tactic. Uncle Sam had trained me to kill, but I was not a killer. I was a humanitarian. Instead of riddling this boy with bullets, I offered up a crate of food, throwing it over the side of the truck, spilling oranges instead of blood on the ground. The boy threw his weapon down and made a grab for as many oranges as he could. Our convoy was moving again. As we rolled away, I looked back at the boy and did the unthinkable. Standing there in the gunner's nest, dressed in full combat uniform, I flashed him the peace sign. He grinned up at me, orange juice running down his chin, and gave me a thumb's up.

We are not static beings. We are ever changing. Who we are today is not who we were yesterday or who we will be tomorrow. Because of this, we must always be cognizant of the influences of the world around us. We must always think critically on our quest to discover the truth of who we are. It doesn't always take something as drastic as life or death for us to find our truths. Sometimes, it can be as simple as writing an essay for Mrs. Villegas' English 1D course, much as this one that helped to clarify many questions about myself that I've been harboring for over two decades. All in all, the only Truth that I know is that none of us will ever know ourselves. All we can do is continue to search, because there will always be more questions than answers.

Every Fifteen Minutes

By Julius Durham

I am sitting in the driver's seat. I'm wondering, listening, aware of my breathing; I'm covered in thick sticky blood. My best friend sitting behind me is frantically calling 911. She gets out of the car only to see me almost unconscious; our car has slammed head-on into another car. I open my eyes and begin to scream out her name: "Carissa! Carissa! What's going on?" I see someone run up to me; his face covered in blood. He falls to his knees sobbing, clutching me through the shattered window as the ambulance arrives. I realize he is my boyfriend as Carissa pulls him off of my body. The paramedics use the Jaws of Life to get me out of the crushed car. Glass falls on me and digs into my skin; I squeeze my eyes shut as I am strapped into a stretcher. As I am being carried into the ambulance, I open my eyes and see the entire Junior and Senior class of my high school watching. I see my classmates' faces paralyzed with shock and my closest friends' eyes filled with tears. We all get a taste of what it would be like to die at the hands of a drunk driver.

This crash, although simulated rather than real, changed my life forever. Before the crash, all of us involved in the Every 15 Minutes program gathered in the gym. The whole room was filled with smiles and laughter as friends said hello and teachers joked around with their students. The "crash kids" all sat down and got our make up done. We had fake blood poured on us, and fake gashes and broken bones glued to our skin. It looked as if the gym had been transformed from a room filled with joyful students to a room filled with the cast of a

zombie movie. As we lined up to go out to the crash site, my stomach was flip-flopping. I knew this would be dramatic, and I was nervous to be doing this in front of so many people. As my cheer coaches set us all in our positions and covered the cars with a tarp, I reminded myself to just breathe and stay calm.

The crash happened so fast it felt as if I was seeing things happen but was not a part of the action. The paramedics talked to me as if I was really a crash victim, but I couldn't respond. I was taken by ambulance to the emergency room. My parents were notified, and they rushed to the hospital. They were escorted into the room where I was

There we were introduced to ... volunteers who had been affected by drunk driving.

strapped to the stretcher and covered in a sheet. I had been declared dead. The doctor removed the sheet, and my parents held each other as they cried. Both of them kissed my forehead. Then, they said goodbye and that they loved me. Tears rolled down my face, but I couldn't speak to them; I couldn't hug them back and tell them that everything was going to be all right. They were escorted out of the room, and I was taken back to school. That was the last time they would see me for the next two days.

When all the participants were reunited in the gym, we were no longer smiling, laughing, and joking with each other. The room was now cold and quiet. Many of us had been crying, and many of us were in shock. We were taken to a hotel and escorted to a conference room. There we were introduced to the adults in charge of the Every 15 Minutes program: the local law enforcement officials and



DOMINIC'S DESIGNATED DRIVER



volunteers who had been affected by drunk driving. This was the longest, most emotional night of my life. We were kept in that conference room from 1:00 in the afternoon until 3:00 the next morning. My head was filled with other people's catastrophic accounts of drunk driving accidents. All of these emotions from my fellow students and the speakers were filling the room, as if at any moment the room would overflow and all of us would flow out with it. I could relate to so many stories. They were kids just like me, they partied just like me, and I could have died or been in jail just like them.

After nine hours of physical and mental exhaustion, we were handed a piece of paper and a pencil and given one last assignment. At the top of the paper were the words

How was I supposed to put all of that down on a piece of paper? How was I supposed to express how much I loved them in a simple letter?

"Dear Mom and Dad, today I died and I didn't get the chance to say . . ." We were told to write a letter to someone we love and to tell that person what we would have said if this were real. I looked around the room and saw everyone was busy writing their letters. I just looked down at my blank paper and thought. I thought about my childhood and all the wonderful memories I had of my parents and me. How was I supposed to put all of that down on a piece of paper? How was I supposed to express how much I loved them in a simple letter? First, I wrote to my mom and thanked her for spending countless hours with me, baking and listening to all of my stories about my friends. Then, I addressed my dad and thanked him for all of the adventures he provided, for always acting silly even when I didn't appreciate it, and for always protecting me. I was so relieved that I had not actually died—that I got to go home and be reunited with my friends and family.

The next morning we all came down to the lobby, our bags packed. We were all dressed in black. We were off to the funeral. One by one we all walked into the gym, put our flowers on the symbolic casket, and sat in the chairs alongside. I looked in the audience to find my friends and my family. They did not smile, and they did not wave. The whole gym was filled sadness. We listened to speeches and stories and listened to the advisors tell the students what the rest of us had gone through the night before. I was sad, and I was tired, and I thought there were no longer any more tears in me; I was sure that I could not take any more emotions. Then they started the video. It was of our school and all of

the kids at lunch and in the halls, and I was excited to see something happy. But then the video changed. It showed the crash . . . and me

at the hospital. It showed my boyfriend getting arrested and booked for killing me and another girl while driving under the influence. It was awful. To see everything we did played out all together made it seem even more real.

The Every 15 Minutes program turned me into a different person. It opened my eyes to the common dangers of drinking and driving. It gave me a sense of responsibility. For the rest of my time in high school, I made sure that I was the designated driver to and from every party and that I was able to take home anyone who needed a ride. I took countless rings of keys and made sure everyone had a safe plan for the night. Some kids thought it was annoying or that I was overreacting, but what I had experienced was so real to me that I wanted to make sure it would never actually happen to anyone else.

Inward Turmoil, Outward Expression: Overcoming The Dark Night of the Soul, or Not!

By Barbara Armstrong

Every human being goes through valleys of darkness while searching for answers to life. Some people face up to and go toe-to-toe with their demons in those dark places and come out victorious on the other side; others succumb to its resident evil emerging with only the mask of an overcomer. In "The Psychology of Racism," Peter Loewenberg describes the authoritarian personality who easily represents this second character. He is one who hides behind a "façade of strength . . . [is] preoccup[ied] with issues of power such as who is strong and who is weak . . . [of] masters and slaves . . . [while]

playing the role of the 'tough guy'" (217). John McLendon, in William Faulkner's "Dry September,"

fits Loewenberg's description of the authoritarian personality as he plays the role of the tough guy, thinks in terms of dominance and submission, and seeks to destroy any form of weakness, whether in himself or others.

Throughout "Dry September," McLendon operates in a role that Loewenberg coins the "tough guy." McLendon's initial entrance into the story sets this dimension of his character. The script says, "[t]he screen door crashed open . . . his feet apart . . . his heavy set body poised easily . . . his hot, bold glance swept the group" (194). He presents himself in the barber shop as someone who is strong and battle ready and immediately

demands that the group take a stand against the accused black man, Willy Mayes. When one of the men rises to reiterate Hawk's argument on Mayes' behalf, "McLendon whirled on that speaker and says, "What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it" (194)? This confirms Loewenberg's report on the study done by T.W. Adorno stating that "[h]e acts the role of the 'tough guy' trying to appear hyper masculine" (217). Whether or not the accusation against Mayes is true makes no difference to McLendon; he's ready

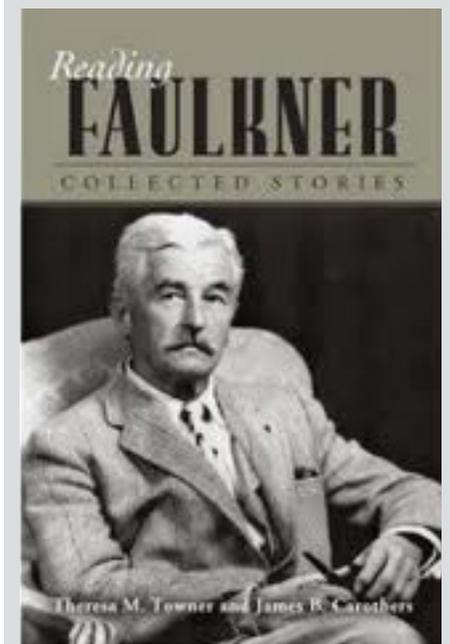
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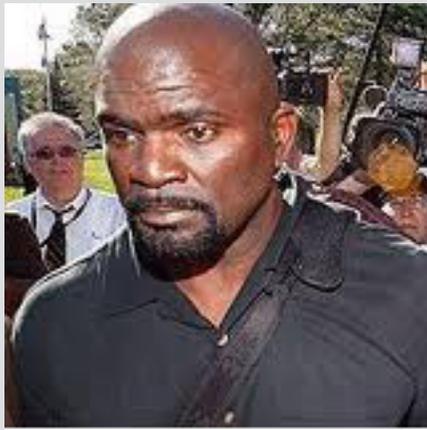
to charge. Just like when "[h]e had commanded troops at the front in France" (194), he assumes the lead role in this situation, and in that hyper masculine stance tries to shame the other men into following his lead.

Loewenberg then explains, "[t]he authoritarian thinks in rigid categories of dominance and submission, those who command and those who obey, masters and slaves" (217). As McLendon incites a few of the men to come under his command, he then leads the charge to the lynching scene. His most prominent display of these rigid attributes is seen when the group charges at Mayes to kill him, but McLendon forcefully stops them because he is in command and wants absolute control of how Mayes will be dealt with. There is no physical sign of weakness in his character at this point.



Barbara Armstrong is a returning student to Delta College after a 43-year absence. After working for 40 years and experiencing many difficult twists and turns in life, she realized that a person doesn't go far with a limited education. She likes to pass on the wisdom of her years to her younger college counterparts by telling them, "You can't hit the 'delete' button to get rid of an old low GPA. Make your education count while you're young. It will serve you well in the long run."





McLendon's tough exterior typifies Loewenberg's speculation that when "relationship between father and child is cold and remote . . . [t] he son tends to see the father as an oppressor . . . creat[ing] a compelling fear of weakness which is defended against by a façade of toughness" (217). With Loewenberg's insight, it becomes apparent that by McLendon's aggressive behavior he is trying to rid himself of this profound fear of weakness. And in order to escape it, he projects that which he hates in himself onto a weaker vessel that can then be destroyed, thereby

The question is, if he doesn't face up to his inner turmoil, who will be his next victim?

confirming Loewenberg's theory that "what is [projected onto another] can be repudiated and destroyed" (212). The story goes on to say, when McLendon returns home he "glared at [his wife] with his hot eyes . . . caught her shoulder . . . released her and half struck, half flung her across the chair" (201). He is now a reflection of Loewenberg's "classic example [of] the man who is mistreated or misunderstood by his [father] . . . comes home to yell at his wife and beat his children . . . displac[ing his hostility] from its true source, which is too remote or powerful to be attacked, to a closer defenseless object" (214). In spite of his activity in France, the lynching of Mayes, and the subsequent erratic behavior against his wife, he has not received a reprieve for his inner frustration. In the end, he is still angry. The question is, if he doesn't face up to

his inner turmoil, who will be his next victim?

In one of his final thoughts on the authoritarian personality, Loewenberg concludes, "because the pressure of his anxiety weakens his personal controls . . . he seeks relief through prejudice, which . . . facilitates the discharge of hostility" (218). However, McLendon proves this theory weak since he obviously is not able to dispel the darkness of his soul through

destructive means. The authoritarian personality hides from whom or what he really is and isn't able to

address the dark areas of his inner man. When man seeks to clear himself of evil by destroying another human being, it only serves to fuel that evil in an unending cycle of prejudice, hatred, frustration, and destruction. So in actuality, at each event, the authoritarian is worse off than he was before.

The test of a healthy psyche is determined by the cleanness of a man's soul.

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The Sound of War

By James Wilson

In December 2012 Senators Dianne Feinstein and John McCain opened fire from opposite ends of the political spectrum on Kathryn Bigelow for her unsparing portrait of CIA interrogators in *Zero Dark Thirty*, her new film about the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, but no one who saw her previous film should be surprised by the intensity of her approach, nor by her scrutiny of American tactics and values. *The Hurt Locker* (2008), for which Bigelow became the first woman ever to win the Academy Award for Best Director, focuses on a three-

man American Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team in occupied Iraq. The film is noteworthy for the intensity of

its mood, largely transmitted through its soundtrack. Indeed, sound effects in this film are so influential that they go beyond mood to meaning. And the meaning delivered to Americans viewing this film is to make us wonder what the hell we are doing in Iraq.

The Hurt Locker's opening bomb-defusing scene and its cacophony immediately put the viewers' "boots on the ground," and we quickly realize that this is not where we want to be. Sound mixer Ray Beckett combines authoritative and panicked Arabic with passing car horns, the bleating of goats, and other jolting sounds to put us into a state of heightened confusion. Like the American soldiers plopped into chaos and seeking dubious cover from whatever surface seems to offer a chance of it, we get the feeling that we could very well die in this hellhole, where the fine line between friend and foe is often blurred. Who can

think straight in such a frenzied and otherworldly place?

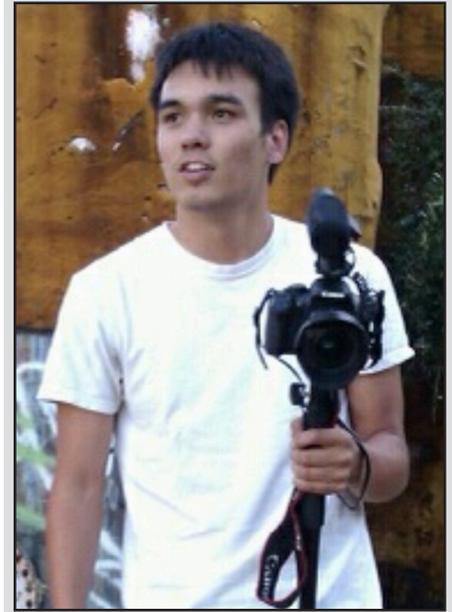
The use of Arabic, prominent throughout the film, plays on the xenophobia within many viewers. We don't know what the locals are saying, but we do know they aren't wishing us a fine day. We assume the worst, adding to the general malaise of "What am I doing here?" When we hear the Islamic call to prayer, which fills the city, its tonality is extremely unsettling to the typical American

we get the feeling that we could very well die in this hellhole, where the fine line between friend and foe is often blurred.

ear. In Middle Eastern music, a different scale utilizes many more minor notes and sounds menacing to most Americans brought up listening to music based on major scales. These minor

scales strike us as creepy and raise our level of paranoia: among the faithful Muslims being called to worship, how many are jihadists being called to blow themselves up in our midst? We don't want to stay to find out. We want to go home.

In contrast to the unsettling sounds of Baghdad, the conversation among the three, featured American soldiers, Sergeants James and Sanborn and Specialist Eldridge, in their barracks sends us back into our comfort zone. The casualness of their banter makes us feel right at home. We are grateful to hear them joking, cussing, and speaking in colloquialisms; we laugh with delight at their irreverent bravado when, even though their lives are constantly imperiled, they compare the EOD robot's arm to their genitalia. In a later scene, the tension of combat is broken by the chatter of an Iraqi boy who sells bootleg DVDs to the



James Wilson, 20, was born and raised in the Bay Area. Once he graduated high school he moved to Acampo and enrolled in classes at Delta. This is his last semester before transferring either to UCLA, CSULB or UC Santa Cruz. He is majoring in film production and hopes to someday work in the film industry. James loves making videos, watching movies and playing with his dog.





Americans on the base. Ironically, given the “moral grounds” upon which America went to war, we are put at ease when he speaks vulgarly, curses, or peddles pornography: it’s much more familiar and infinitely more comfortable to us than hearing the Arabic call to prayer.

In its action scenes *The Hurt Locker’s* soundtrack takes us into the “kill zone” with Sgt. James by putting us right inside his special protective suit. We can hear his breathing and heartbeat, and we are constantly wondering if he’ll be breathing for long. Although James is calm in the face of death, it is hard for us to feel the same way.

As he approaches danger, we hear the rubbing of the suit’s material against itself, reminding us that although it provides some protection, it’s really just a thick uniform, not a truly safe place to be. Besides, we’ve already seen suited Staff Sgt. Thompson, the engaging bomb tech from the first scene, killed by a detonation sixty feet away from him. We want no part of wearing that ineffectual suit, even if for James it’s the only thing in life he truly loves.

The soundtrack enhances the impact of another critical scene after Sgt. James finishes his tour of duty. He is back home in the States, at a huge, uncrowded supermarket with his wife and infant son. The feeling of emptiness within James is communicated through the squeaking wheels of the shopping cart and the elevator music playing in the store. These peaceful domestic sounds make James feel out of place, reinforcing the disorientation he feels when confronted with a comically vast array

of cereals, from which he eventually makes his selection in an exasperated random snatch. He is more comfortable facing imminent, violent death amid the cacophony of the battlefield than he is in the tranquility of the grocery aisles. One of the main themes of the movie is that war is a drug, and James is clearly addicted. He will not be happy on the home front, so he must go back to Iraq, forsaking his family for the adrenaline rush of war. He may never be a well-adjusted member of society again, thanks to his

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experiences inside the suit.

While *The Hurt Locker* is not on the surface an anti-war film, those who listen closely and gauge its overall

impact will find it saying that unlike Sgt. James, most Americans don’t want to be in Iraq, for the danger there is infinite and not worth the risk. It is not James but Specialist Eldridge, ultimately headed home with a femur shattered by friendly fire during one of James’s beyond-the-call-of-duty adventures, who becomes the film’s Everyman. Eldridge’s physical wounds, however devastating, may heal in time, but it seems likely that he will carry in his head forever the sound of war. Haunted by his failure in the film’s first scene to identify and eliminate Sgt. Thompson’s cell phone-armed civilian killer, Eldridge points out to his naïve therapist Major Cambridge (who is soon to share in Thompson’s grisly fate) that the difference between life and death in this conflict can be boiled down to the sound of a trigger pulled and the click of a hammer against the firing pin. In a war where we often can’t see our enemy, or can’t recognize him even when we *can* see him, it is impossible to tell which side of that hammer click we’ll be on.

The Summer of My Almost First Kiss

By Ilona Rydel

Camping is like Nirvana for kids. It's a "can't miss" combination of sugar highs and dirt, and not a single shower in sight. There's the ubiquitous food on a stick, the "dangerous" critters that could leap out and steal your mother's fudge at any moment, and the endless stars that can actually be seen with the naked eye. It is the five-day play-date. It's where the inner pyromaniac is born. Kids are primed and ready to try anything with all the eagerness of the last day of school. I was one such eager kid. One summer I went camping in the Santa Cruz Mountains with my best friend Jamie, her parents, and their two cats. They thought nothing of taking their cats camping. I thought it was pretty funny, watching two cats on leashes walk on pine needles, but when the sun went down, I wasn't thinking about the cats.

Jamie was an only child, and as such was spoiled pretty much rotten. Her parents had misplaced trust in her because she took out the garbage as she was told. This didn't change in the woods of Santa Cruz. We were given our own tent to pitch across from her parents, and checkpoints throughout the day; otherwise, we were on our own. As evening fell on our first night, the moon, the flicker of the fire, and the crickets' song all came together to make a potent cocktail—one we were eager to binge on.

When the sounds of snoring could be heard from across the campfire, that was our cue. We had gone to bed with our clothes and jackets on, our escape premeditated. We quietly crept

across the campsite. This was not an easy feat for two giggly fourteen-year-old girls. What was our destination? We had no clue. We were on the lam, like two fugitives escaping from the prison yard. We walked, breathlessly, electrified in our victory. We had made it! We were smug in our triumphant trickery. Soon the sounds of the surf could be heard, and I knew we were close to the beach. The destination had spoken.

There weren't many people on the beach, as you can imagine, at 1:00 in the morning. There were a few folks making out. There was a group of teenagers drinking beer by a bonfire, and some stoners smoking weed in an alcove. We had never seen these things before. We were babes to badness. We didn't know what to do with ourselves or what we were looking for.

As we passed that group of teenagers, one of them locked eyes with me. He was a few yards away. Before I knew it, he was walking towards us. This was *not* what I had in mind when we took off that night.

"Hey, what are you two doing out this late? Isn't it past your curfew?"

"Yeah," I giggled nervously.

"Well, do you want to go for a walk?"

I don't recall actually answering him. The next thing I remember this guy, "David," his friend, Jesse, and Jamie and I were walking down the beach. Naiveté was an understatement when

There weren't many people on the beach, as you can imagine, at 1:00 in the morning.



Ilona Rydel was born and raised in Stockton, California. She and her husband of twenty-five years own and operate a business in Lodi, California, and together are raising two children, aged eleven and five. She has been a certified massage therapist for seventeen years, and for the last six years has worked with terminally ill patients in a hospice care setting. She has been writing short stories, poems, and comedy sketches since childhood. She is currently taking classes at Delta College with the goal of pursuing a bachelor's degree in nursing at CSU Stanislaus in the future. She and her family love to hike and travel; California coastal towns are a favorite destination.





it came to describing my perception. Why were these guys walking with us anyway?

Suddenly, I realized Jamie had disappeared, and so had David's friend. I was alone with David, and we were *truly* alone. I hadn't noticed how far we had walked away from the others on the beach. Suddenly I was frightened.

"Where did our friends go?" I asked.

"Oh, just over there."

He pointed to a small cliff hanging above the beach. I could barely make out the two figures sitting there, but one of them was wearing a pink bandana on her head. I squinted into the semi-darkness.

What were they doing up there? I could see the back of Jamie's head, and that's when it hit

me. Was she *kissing* him? We didn't kiss boys; at least, I didn't *think* we did.

We had not discussed this before. This was the age of discussing everything, absolutely *everything*, with one's best friend. I just naturally assumed we would talk this one out too, and then come to some mutual agreement on *when* it was okay to start kissing boys. Instead, she just went ahead without me and did the dirty deed. I was angry. The nerve of her! I didn't approve at all. We didn't even know these boys! As I turned towards the cliff, prepared to stomp up there in all my righteous

indignation, David gently grabbed my shoulders.

"So, let's talk about what we *are* going to do and what we're *not* going to do." I stammered out, "I gotta go," and ran, as fast as one can in the sand, away from this hormonal sixteen-year-old boy. I ran up the cliff, grabbed Jamie by the back of her jacket, and tugged hard.

"Let's go," I said, panting from the sprint uphill. "What if your parents wake up?" She didn't even come up for air, just waved me away while continuing her business. I appealed to her conscience:

"Jamie, we shouldn't be here. This isn't right."

Was she *kissing* him? We didn't kiss boys; at least, I didn't *think* we did.

I had played the morality card. It didn't work. She finally broke away and looked at me, incredulity written

all over her face.

"I'm fine. Please, leave me alone. I'll see you back at camp."

She had never done this to me before, shooing me away like an annoying fly. I wasn't mature enough or old enough really to insist that she go. If I waited around, well, what does one do while a friend is locking lips with someone? I did what any fourteen-year-old would do when faced with a dilemma. I left her there, slowly meandering back to camp alone. I never looked back to see



what became of David. The truth was he was probably suffering from some minor disappointment, much like anyone feels when their ice cream hits the pavement. You can always go back inside and get another.

I made it back to camp, although it took me awhile. I felt disoriented in the dark. When I finally found my way back, there were no signs that anyone had been awake. As I unzipped the tent, imagine my surprise to discover Jamie, peacefully snuggled in her sleeping bag. I hit her sack with my flashlight, but she didn't wake up, and I was too tired to hash it out anyway.

We didn't venture out anymore after that and I never did ask her about that boy. There was an unspoken understanding: Jamie kisses boys and

I don't. I did eventually kiss a boy, but later, and on my own terms. I have thought about that night many times since. It was a "coming of age" moment in a sense, opening my eyes to things

She had never done this to me before, shooing me away like an annoying fly.

to come. I have played out different, far more ominous outcomes in my head. I have been awe-struck at how brazen we were to sneak out like that.

Now that I am married, and a mother with children of my own, I still love camping. I still get excited come nightfall. The moon and the stars come out to play, and we build a big fire, and eat as many s'mores as our tummies can handle. I am aware that someday my children will experience their own first kiss, or almost first kiss, and I will be nowhere in sight to stop it. For now, however, they will sleep in the big tent with their parents—safe and sound.





Vanessa Rodriguez was born in Lynwood, California, and was raised in the Bay Area. She then moved to Stockton and graduated from Edison High School. She is currently a full-time student at Delta College and is looking forward to transferring to a four-year university. With her strong passion for helping people, she hopes to one day become a paramedic and a registered nurse.



For All, Not For The Few

By Vanessa Rodriguez

Beginning in 2014, there will be a change in the enrollment priority at community colleges all throughout California. This new registration priority will favor two groups of students: new students who have set up a clear educational plan and returning students who have no more than 100 credits. Many people think this change will benefit students at community colleges, but I disagree. I don't believe this new enrollment priority is a good idea. Currently, it is difficult for students to complete their college education.

But this change in priority registration will make it even harder for some students to get through college.

One reason I don't agree with this change is that it will unfairly shut out hundreds of students. Some of the students who will be shut out are those new students who are undecided about what they want their major to be. I was one of those students. When I first started at Delta, I had no idea what major to declare. I knew that I wanted to transfer, but I didn't know

what I wanted to be. I took random classes from different areas until I decided that I wanted to be a nurse. I had the liberty to try different classes, and decide what I liked and didn't like. With this new priority registration taking place, students won't have the same opportunity I did, and that isn't fair. Other students who will be shut

But this change in priority registration will make it even harder for some students to get through college.

out are the life-long learners. Those older adults who take classes simply to enhance their knowledge won't have the opportunity to take classes any

longer. Some of my classmates are re-entry students in their 30's or 40's. It is a pleasure to have them in class because they are serious about learning. They also have the chance to share with the class a little of their own knowledge, and that enhances the education the professor gives us. Since they are older and have had more experience, they are able to teach us important things, along with the teacher. That is something you can't get with having only new, inexperienced students in class.

Another reason I disagree with this change is there aren't enough faculty and counselors working on campus. The new registration priority will force students to set up an educational plan, and many aren't capable of doing that on their own. All students will have to meet with counselors to get help setting up their plan. It is already a struggle to see a counselor on this campus. In my first semester at Delta, I called to make an appointment with a counselor, and it took two weeks to see one. With the new change, all new students would have to make an appointment, which would probably take all semester to accomplish. It would also make it harder if students decided to change their major in future semesters. This would mean they would have to meet with counselors again and make a whole new plan. Allowing students to try classes, without forcing them to decide what major they want to declare right away, avoids all this chaos. These students have the chance to see a counselor on their own time, when they are ready and sure about their decision.

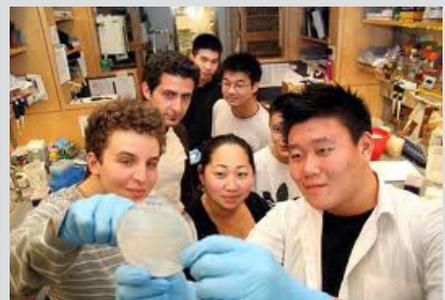
Lastly, the biggest reason I disagree with the new registration priority is it would change the essence of what a community college is. For many years, people all over California have seen community colleges as a chance to further their education. Community colleges provide education for all, no matter what age, marital status, educational or financial level people are. Students are able to sample classes, either to decide what they want to be or simply to learn new things. They have the freedom to enjoy themselves, while getting an education, by taking extracurricular classes. Students who want to transfer and aren't ready for a university just yet, like myself, are

Lastly, the biggest reason I disagree with the new registration priority is it would change the essence of what a community college is.

able to attend community colleges. People who want to get a degree at their community college are able to attend as well. Lastly, people wanting to enhance their knowledge have the chance to come back and take classes for the sake of it. With the major change coming in 2014, much of this won't be allowed. Community colleges will consist mostly of young, new students and some returning students who haven't gone over 100 credits. Students who, like my friend John, have been taking classes for more than

ten years simply to further their knowledge will be unfairly shut out when it comes to enrolling for classes. Also, students who, like myself, are undecided on what to be will be placed in the back of the line when enrollment time comes. This is extremely unfair. A community college is about education for all, not for the few.

Some people argue in favor of the new change and say the new registration priority will leave room for students who are serious about their education. I agree with this, but I think the new change has more negatives than positives. Many students will be unfairly shut out and put in the back of the line. There aren't enough counselors to make it happen easily and smoothly. It will also change the essence of community colleges and the type of students who attend. Yes, this change will make many smart students who have set goals and plans. However, it will create many more people who are unable to get an education or job, and it will make their futures tough. A community college is about providing education for all, without the pressure of having to set up an educational plan right away. The new enrollment priority will negatively affect many students, and that isn't what we want.





Cara Rappuhn was raised in Mobile, Alabama, and moved to Lodi, California, with her husband and children a few years ago. She is attending Delta College in hopes of completing her degree in English and Education. She is currently working as a caregiver and hopes to continue making a difference in the lives of others as a teacher. Cara is down-to-earth, loves people, and she never meets a stranger. She likes spending her free time with her kids, outside running, walking on the beach, hiking in the mountains, or at the gym working out, but she is happiest being at home curled up with a good book.



Leaving Alabama

By Cara Rappuhn

My life can be broken down into two parts—the part before the accident and the part after. The accident set into motion the major changes that have occurred in my life. It has changed me. In one moment of carelessness, my life as I had come to know it was destroyed. I wasn't the one who got hurt that day, but I was the one who lost myself in the months following. Little did I know that the hardships I would face over the next three years would lead me to a much better place, and best of all, that I would come to discover myself in the process.

I grew up a Southern belle. I said y'all. I ate corn bread cooked with bacon grease, fried okra, collard greens, and veggies soaked in butter. Boiling crawfish and corn or tearing through wooded trails on a 4-wheeler in the rain were the perfect weekend

activities, especially with family and friends. I liked sweet tea and baseball, Bud Light, country music, and NASCAR races. I was also a die-hard Roll Tide fan—the Iron Bowl, my favorite game of the year. In Alabama, blood runs red for the University of Alabama or it runs blue, for Auburn University; mine will always run red.

I also liked the slow pace of living in the South. There is something there that makes people laid back and in a hurry to go nowhere. I lived a short drive from

the beautiful, white sandy beaches of the emerald Gulf Coast, and I loved the serenity of listening to the crashing of the waves and the begging of the seagulls. My family and I would go camping on the river and fishing all night, and I would revel in the breathtaking reflections of the rising sun in the water and the cool morning

I ate corn bread cooked with bacon grease, fried okra, collard greens, and veggies soaked in butter.

breeze against my face. I lived in the country, away from the city noises and lights, near an old plantation farmhouse with two-story wrap-around porches, magnificent pecan trees, and oaks of historic proportions. I was enthralled by the beauty of the intertwining Spanish moss and seemingly endless rows of orchards along the back-county roads. When I got married, we bought our house in a small country township with the hopes of raising our kids there, keeping the family traditions, and creating deep family roots of our own. I was living in the heart of Dixie. And if home is where the heart is, then Alabama was my home. However, what I didn't know was that sometimes fate has different plans for us, and dreams don't always come true.

While I was outside playing with my kids, I answered a phone call that would be the catalyst of life-altering change. My husband had been hurt; he was in the hospital. I remember for a brief moment I was relieved because he was still alive. However, he had extensive damage to his knee and wouldn't be able to walk normally for quite some time. After suffering from an inverted patella, torn ligaments, and more, my husband could not work for over a year. Watching him struggle was heartbreaking enough, but the worst part about the accident was the uncertainty. After he was released to go back to work, the job market was non-existent. Our region was hit first by Katrina and then by the oil spill, so he couldn't find work. I knew I would eventually have to sever ties with the familiar; I couldn't keep up with the house payments on only my income. Eventually, we decided to leave the area. I had family who lived in Stockton, so we prepared to embark on a new adventure without knowing

what opportunities might lie ahead. But the thought of leaving my home was worse than words can describe.

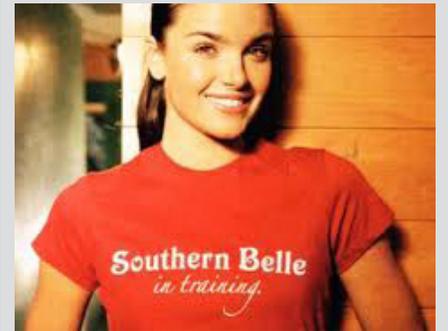
The few weeks following the decision to move have become a blur. I quit my job and started the long process of packing up the house. What can go wrong usually will. We were caught moving in the summer heat and the thick sweltering humidity of the South. It was July, and a heat wave came through Mobile. While we were packing, the air-conditioner went out in our house. It was already a miserable task to load the truck in the one-hundred-plus temperatures, but now we had nowhere to escape. After a torturous week, we said good-bye to the only home my children had ever

To an outsider, California is almost like a separate country within America.

known. We headed to California.

To an outsider, California is

almost like a separate country within America. It is one of the leaders in





new innovations, and it regulates new laws with a democratic government and liberal citizens willing to adopt anything outlandish enough to muster opposition from the conservative states. California was the polar opposite of Alabama. And I was afraid. I was leaving behind everything that I knew, everything that made me who I was.

My beloved pecan trees were replaced by palms, my giant hurricanes by devouring earthquakes.

However, it was still an entire day's drive from the border to Stockton. Among my few remaining possessions were my prized houseplants; unfortunately, these were now confiscated by the border patrol. The officer told us he feared the possibility of fire ants from Alabama moving in and taking over the Mojave. And so, we continued driving through the impossibly hot desert without them.

The first day of the trip was exhausting; we drove straight through the night. The next day, with Mississippi behind us and Texas not far ahead, I followed our U-Haul in a mirage of summer heat. I had a lot on my mind, and soon realized that I had missed the turn off—and the truck was on its way without me. Now lost somewhere in the middle of Louisiana, I pulled into the parking lot at a Waffle House. It was there that I panicked and called 911. The highway patrol calmed me down and talked me back to the right road, where the U-Haul was pulled over waiting for me. I was emotionally drained and ready to turn around and go back home. The trip was proving to be too much.

In Alabama we had thunderstorms almost every day. In California, there wasn't a single cloud in the sky to shield us from the intense heat of the summer sun. There was zero humidity, but the heat was more searing than I had ever thought possible. Without a working air-conditioner, I felt my skin cooking onto the bones of my arm. We could hardly wait to end our ordeal and reach our new house.

After several more mishaps, we finally arrived at the border of California; I felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

Thirty minutes from our destination, after five full days of driving with the kids, two dogs, and a cat in the car, a final catastrophe awaited us. The headlight on the U-Haul had dimmed, giving cause for the CHP to pull us into a weigh station, where the officer made us sit overnight until AAA could fix the problem. The next day when

we finally pulled into the driveway of our little rental house, I knew it was time to embrace the unfamiliar surroundings—our new home.

The end of my family’s traumatic trip was just the beginning of an even more challenging personal journey for me. My life had taken a drastic turn; I was a Southern Girl suddenly trying to fit in with the Valley Girls. I suffered from culture shock and personality whiplash. My accent was part of who I had always been, but it was also what tied me to the South, so it was the first thing I thought I

needed to mask. When in social settings, instead of saying “ya’ll,” I tried to say “you guys” and “totally.”

But I found myself laughing each time I tried to say “hecka.” Gone were the good ole days of fried chicken and cornbread, traded in for sushi and wine tastings. Plantation houses were exchanged for stucco homes, and the slow pace gave way to cars full of people hurrying to go everywhere. My beloved pecan trees were replaced by palms, my giant hurricanes by devouring earthquakes. I learned to enjoy astronomy nights in the park, art museums and classical Broadway concerts. And since I’ve been here, I haven’t thought much about football or four-wheelers. Instead of eating deep-fried Southern foods I took charge of my health, adopted a more healthful diet, started running, and lost more than forty pounds. But this still wasn’t enough; I was longing for something more. I no longer felt satisfied watching my displaced life go by, so I started taking steps to do more than just fit in; I really needed a more substantial change.

Education wasn’t always important to me. From the time I was seventeen, I

was a busy working mother, so I didn’t think a degree was a realistic dream to have, but as I grew older I began to feel the desire to go to college. I wanted to set a better example for my children, and I wanted them to know that it was possible, in the face of adversity, to still achieve anything they wanted to with hard work and determination. Had I remained in Alabama, I don’t think I would have ever adopted that dream. I probably would have remained a housewife working a dead-end job, but it was the thought of something better for my life and for my children

It was at that moment I was certain that college was not for me, and I thought about withdrawing.

that kept urging and pushing me forward to pursue a degree. So I enrolled in Delta College.

Unlike the circumstances that pushed me to move to California, the decision to go back to school was a deliberate one that I made for my family and for me. It was twenty years since I had graduated from high school, and although I was excited, I was also terrified. The only two classes I could get were an online English 1A and Interior Design. As a student, I had never done very well in English class, and an interior designer I was not, but I took what I could get, and I decided to do my best. I can still remember the panic I felt when a few days before class started, I received an email from my online professor to remind me of our face-to-face meetings; it wasn’t an internet class after all, but a hybrid, and my presence was required. I read through all of my paperwork, and nowhere could I find where this class would meet. I emailed the professor, and he informed me that class was held in Locke 302. I had never heard of Locke before, and I wasn’t sure what that even meant. I felt so unprepared. It was at that moment I was certain that college was not for me, and I



thought about withdrawing. But I'm not a quitter, and again, it was the desire for something better that kept me from going through with the drop. On the first day of class, I showed up early, found the building and stopped in the stairwell for a deep breath of air so I wouldn't throw up. I didn't give up. I faced my fears that day. I was going to college, and I was on the road to something better.

I am now in my final two semesters at Delta College; I will have my degree that I have worked so hard for, but more than that I will have the satisfaction of accomplishing what I set out to do. My children are proud of me, and I am proud of myself. More important than the good grades I earned or the publication of my essay in the campus literary magazine was that I became comfortable and confident in the classroom. I shared my personal history with my classmates and made friends with other women who were facing similar circumstances, and we have helped each other along the way. Through all of the obstacles I faced, I found a way not just to "fit in" but also to flourish in the academic setting, and as I get ready to transfer, I see a completely different person in the mirror from the one I

saw just three years ago. California was an unlikely place for me to find anything, much less myself, but I have realized that sometimes it takes losing everything and starting over to find what you didn't know was missing in the first place. I will always be from Alabama, and it will always be a part of who I was, but it no longer defines me or provides my identity.

This concludes my story for now, the remaining chapters not yet written—the story of how one careless mistake caused an injury that took my life from where it was to where it is now. I went through hell, and it looked like there was no way out, but I have found myself in a much better place than I ever thought possible. I am following my dreams by going to college to become anything I choose to be. The part of my life before the accident is in the past; it's the part of my life after the accident that made me stronger, and it is the following chapters that will decide what comes next. It's a journey on the road to self-discovery. It's not been without many tears, and a lot of heartache, but it has been worth the trip: leaving Alabama—and uncovering a new, improved version of me.

