

FOR THE BIRDS: AN ACADEMIC NOVELLA

by

Dori-Ann Granger

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Masters of Art

In the

English

Program

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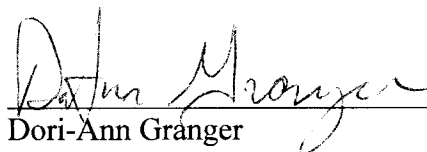
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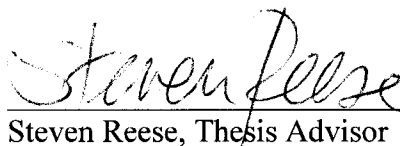
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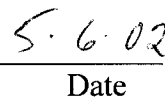
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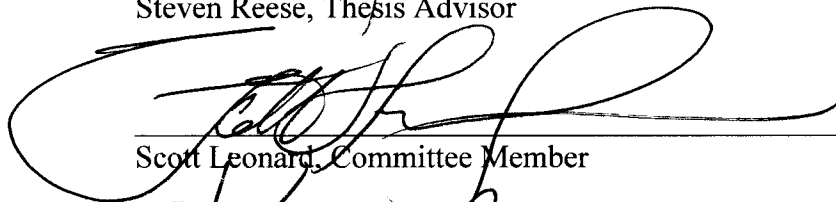

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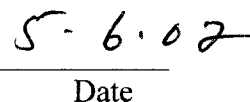

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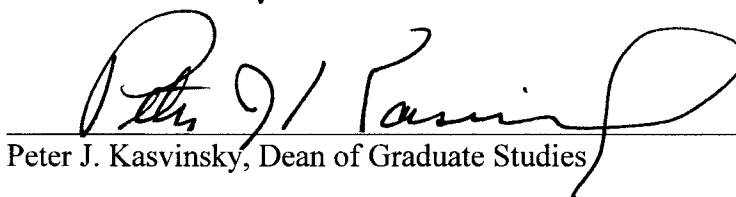

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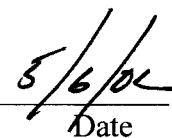

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Abstract

There is a long tradition in the literary world--the academic novel, books by those who have entered academe, seen the inherent illogic of the whole process and written about it. My thesis would continue with that practice, telling the tale of a typical day for a graduate student in an urban, mid-western university, and the adventure that said student might have, such as trying to survive on a pittance, eating day-old Krispy Kreams, and attempting to edit a literary publication without ever reading a submission. Can a student escape the world of the university, or is the vortex created by people trying desperately not to learn too powerful? Is it even possible to graduate sane? Our heroine struggles with these questions and the problems of identity created by being neither a student nor a teacher, but having the penalties of both.

This thesis is dedicated to Joanne and David Granger.
My love always.

Writing is hard. People who don't write treat those who do as some sort of mystical creature, rarer than a unicorn and far more disreputable. There is a certain look, an awe, amazement. "Where do you get your ideas?" they breathe. "How do you just sit there and write?" Occasionally, they ask "Why?"

Why, indeed. I don't really feel like I have a choice in the matter. If I don't write, I get twitchy, like a cat before a thunderstorm, or a freshman in spring. Writing relieves the pressure in my head--far more advanced than trepanation. Milton wrote in Sonnet 19, "On His Blindness," in lines 1-3, "When I consider how my light is spent, /Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, /And that one talent which is death to hide." This is just how I feel. I could not stop writing, even if I wanted to. Milton was talking about his blindness, something that could not stop him composing.

Writing, like any art, is habitual, obsessive. A photographer sees the world through a view screen. A sculptor molds the life around him. A writer collects words, images, people, and perspectives and from them other lives. She re-sees everything, making it fit into a story arc, or a certain cant. It becomes difficult to see other people as anything but characters, or events as anything but fodder for plot lines. Writing allows me to become other people, experience other lives, see things differently, and more clearly.

The people and events that I experienced while attending graduate

school became a fiction, a plot, a series of events that signified. For me, these things resonated. They seemed more considerable than just my day-to-day frustrations and pleasures. They told a tale, not of an institution, but of the people that worked and lived there. It told the story of me.

Even before I started writing, I worried that people would read this novella and assume that because the main character and I are both in our early twenties, female, and attending graduate school at a state university in Ohio, that she and I were the same person. Writing in the first person did not help delineate between us, but I felt that it was necessary to get the character's perspective on her world, which she seems only grudgingly to accept. Hers is a world of constant frustrations--teachers, students, family, friends, society and the incredible pressure that any person faces in the last year in graduate school. Her life is a litany of not-yets--she is not yet completely independent, she has not yet gotten her degree, she has not yet found a job, she has not yet figured out what to do with students, she is not yet a colleague to her professors, and not quite just a student.

Many of the things that she tries to accomplish don't happen. She starts out with the best of intentions, and then doesn't reach her goal. I will admit that much of that frustration comes from me--this semester was full of things that were never done, no matter how finished I thought I was with them. It is not a matter of writing "the end" on the last page of this thesis. I have to print out copies for my thesis committee, have them approve it, take it over to an office, have them approve it, print it out on paper that must be

made out of gold for what it costs, take it back to the office, have it bound and find money in my extremely limited budget to pay for it all. Even then, I am not sure that some member of graduate studies won't chase after me when I get my diploma complaining about the typo on page 74. It's a scary thought.

It's also rather scary to be finished. To be honest, this thesis ended sooner than I had expected it to. I thought I was going to have about ten more pages, but as I was writing, it felt like an ending, so I ended it. That seems to happen a lot in my writing, because I rarely plan. I often have a vague idea of where I want to end up, but I am as surprised as the reader when I get there. Whole scenes type themselves. Characters appear without my summoning them. That is when the muse is with me. When she absents herself from my chamber, then I don't write. I might try, but when the inspiration is lacking, the words usually are too.

I have been told, along with every other beginning writer, that I should write what I know. In my writing that is more true than it should be. Often there is little revision because I am transcribing things nearly word perfect, a feat that should only be attempted by people with phenomenal short term memories and poor long term ones. With that combination, one can forget all of the trouble that one gets into by using this method.

What is also true, however, is that one should write what one does not know. When I started graduate school, I knew very little about how that whole

thing operated. It was entirely new, something unknown. Some of that not knowing is transferred into my writing. When I examined what I thought I didn't know, I found that I understood more than I thought. Perhaps more importantly, when I examined what I thought I knew--as a second-year GA--I found out that much of what I took for granted, I didn't, in fact, know after all. This became apparent as I wrote about people and also the underlying structure of the university. There are still things that I haven't figured out yet.

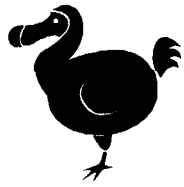
In any case, for me, my life and the things that I notice are as much of the writing process as writing longhand in a yellow legal pad. I am constantly filing things away for later use, and constructing phrases and sometimes sentences in my head. A lot of my writing takes place on the subconscious level, which is why I can seemingly sit down and type large chunks of text with seemingly little effort and what appears to be very little revision. However, revision is going on all of the time. I revise as I type, and I often go back and read the piece out loud and change what doesn't fit.

This has made people (and even writing teachers) both jealous and suspicious. I had one professor who told me that most writers agonize over nearly every word, and regaled me with tales of mediocre writers who revised themselves into great writers. He made me feel as if my method was wrong because that didn't happen. He also accused me of having my writing come too easily. The implication was that I could never be a good writer if I didn't suffer for my art. I did. For the next four years, I didn't write a bit of fiction. I doubted my poetry. I have only recently gone back and re-read my work from

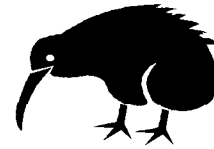
that time. It gave me confidence that I was a writer and that maybe I could do this difficult thing after all.

And the thing that I did this time was an Academic Novel. I first came across the genre in Dr. Greenway's senior seminar of the same name. We read books by David Lodge, Jane Smiley, Don DeLillo and others. I enjoyed the class and thought, "since I'm in academia, I could write something like this," an idea that filed itself away in my head for later consideration. When I became a graduate student, I realized that my life would be ripe for plunder, and the genre fit perfectly. Never before had I been so completely immersed in the academic life, and never before had I seen the other side--teaching. I also saw another side to my professors--more like real human beings, than gods of knowledge. They invited me into their homes, and some even shared things that they were concerned about. But with all of their sharing, I still felt a sense of isolation--I was, after all, still a student and not one of their colleagues proper. So I was both a student and a teacher, but not exactly either. This spelled conflict, and from conflict comes great writing (also really bad writing, but that is another essay entirely).

This work is the culmination of many things: a class I took as a senior, my life, the age that I live in, my mother's editing, the teachers and friends (often the same) who helped this little idea turn into a big, bad novella. It is part art, part truth and a whole lot of work. This is what writing should be. It has been a long strange trip, but I am glad to have made it.



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Chapter the First

Many birds migrate to avoid winter and its accompanying stresses

Or:

Where the main character is introduced and does not kill anyone, despite provocation

In Ohio in winter the grey sky colors everything from cars to outlooks. There are those that drive under these leaden skies; there are those that walk--chiefly among these plodders are the women who scream obscenities at innocent patches of air, children who dodge cars and the bikes of friends who are better off and there are also, in all seasons and weathers, pregnant women. These women in various states of gestation roam the streets and sidewalks. I don't know if it is the weight gain that drives them to this dangerous practice, or if it is being cooped up with well-meaning older female relatives who rehash unwanted birthing horror stories-- "and Georgia, bless her heart and soul, ten months and three days it was, and she was ready to

take the tike out herself, let me tell you, and it was 36 hours after that that she gave birth to little Jacob, not bad considering he was breech and twelve pounds at that. But neveryoumind, dear girl, put your feet up and tell me about the color of the nursery again..." that sends these poor round women in all weather to heave their swollen bellies down the side of the roads of this desolate and desperate place, so close to oblivion that all of the street signs point there, no matter the direction faced.

It was all no matter to me as I drove home from that place of higher learning, ranked in the middle of the third tier of schools (out of three). The traffic was beginning to show signs of the three-hour festival of bad judgment and poor impulse control sadistically called "rush hour." The signs were all there: school buses full of bovine-eyed children, the cars ahead stopping for no discernible reason, the pervading smell of car fumes and stress, the sight of a man who barely stopped for red lights or crossing guards screaming at a woman for the entire ride home, and the woman with 25 kids in the back seat who tail-gated me all the way to Meridian.

The radio station had clearly run out of originality sometime in 1993 and had decided to play nothing other than blond cookie-cutter teen girls who had been hired mostly for their ability to wear small clothes well, rather than their ability to produce anything that could charitably be called good music. When I turned to the station that bills itself as Urban Contemporary (which means they have added a few hip-hoppers all of whom have closets full of \$3000 shirts and who sing about how hard it is to survive on the streets to

their play list) and found them playing the exact same music three beats behind. Payola is alive and well and operating in Ohio. The classical station was playing "Movers Dropping the Contents of a Kitchen Down a Spiral Staircase with Overblown Soprano Giving Her Impression of Janet Leigh in the Shower" in G-minor. The other three stations had at some point decided to all become all-sports-talk radio without informing anyone.

Having exhausted the legal entertainment possibilities of my vehicle, I considered the deep and long-term sociopolitical ramifications of the complete lack of food in my living quarters. I decided--without any thought to personal safety, mind you--to visit the great and wonderful land that is Giant Eagle.

Giant Eagle is a microcosm of society--at least the middle class part. There you will find wonders beyond imagining, produce of every description, most of which is a wax replica, since no one in Ohio really knows what to do with an Ugli fruit. You will also find, if you look really hard, the ethnic food aisle, filled with Chinese food that no Chinese would even deign to look at, Mexican food that would make any Mexican shudder violently, and Italian food that would make any Italian worth his Parmesan Reggiano fall to his knees and sob. This is ethnic food for white people, so heavily processed that it is only the bastard second cousin to the real thing. The store does, however, have Ben and Jerry's, so life is good.

During this particular visit to the rather large national bird store, I was attacked by the old--sometimes with their carts, if I didn't move fast enough. I

was kind enough, even then, not to gaze in horror over their shoulder, point and ask if they saw the man with the scythe behind them. I did not defend myself against the couple who were so intent on each other that they stalked me through produce. I smiled pleasantly at the small child whose screams could be heard throughout the entire store. I said "excuse me" to the three people who stopped their carts in front of me so violently that I nearly sliced their Achilles' tendons with my cart. I did not strangle the woman who had to read every ice cream container in the store. I also did not yell out, "It's ice cream for god's sake! You don't have to read the label. It's not good for you. It will never be good for you. And even if you get the black cherry ice cream, it will still make you fat." I did not stare at the single men with carts full of beer and meat. I did not lecture the women with baby cut carrots and Special K that if they really wanted to enjoy life, there was fettuccini alfredo and garlic bread just one aisle down. I did not trample any of the tired, the poor, those yearning to breathe freon. I got my Froot Loops, milk and box of easy mac, and tried to get the hell out, only to be stymied by the electronic cashier.

I was in tears by the time the manager came to the flashing help light. I had already attempted to bribe the damned machine, offered it violence if it did not comply and surreptitiously kicked it, all to no avail.

"Problem?"

"It's the milk. It won't go through. I tried. I really did, but it just..."

"I know." He swiped some sort of magic card across the laser thingie.

He picked up the milk. He made some sort of mystic pass and the machine

accepted it. I hate it when that happens--the tech person comes over, presses the same buttons I do, or does the same thing that I tried, and the machine responds like a properly trained border collie.

I thanked the man profusely and practically ran to the door, wanting nothing more than a breath of air that had not been processed by a million lungs and a machine. What I got was an expansive view of the parking lot and a face full of car fumes, but I'll take what I can get. Unfortunately, what I got was the same rush hour traffic going in the opposite direction.

The day had not started this chaotically--in fact, it had been a rather pleasant day with birdsong and happy e-mail from friends, and, except for being awakened from a rather nice dream about a rather tall man with good bone structure by my mother who has called me every day this week before God wakes up to remind me of all the thousands of things I should be doing other than being in my warm bed, life was good. Then I left my warm, cozy apartment. That was my first mistake. I should have gone back to bed, cancelled my classes, told my professors that I had the plague, and called my mother back and told her that if she called again at that hour I was putting her in a home. But, alas, I left all of these creature comforts and left for school.

Chapter the second

Songbirds are especially pleasant in the morning hours

Or:

In which we learn the importance of the proper driving techniques

My car was the only one on the road that morning that was driven by a competent driver. The rest seemed to have behind their wheels people who had not yet digested the alcohol from the night before or the old who were unwilling to drive more than 25 because of the dangerous driving conditions of a clean dry road, perfect visibility, and having half the state behind them honking.

Before you think that I am being ageist, or lacking respect for my elders, let me explain. I grew up revering the elderly. I loved my grandmother dearly. My parents were older than most. I always listened whenever someone my elder told me something, but these old people have got to get going. They are so slow. Shouldn't they be more willing to go fast? After all, they don't have all that much time left--especially if they get in my lane and refuse to do anything more than coast. They are in a car finely tuned and crafted to go at speeds unimagined in previous centuries, with speedometers that extend well into the triple digits. The car has had its oil changed, and its brakes inspected by a competent repairman. There is no need to be creeping along in a 35 zone at 15. Move. If it takes me more than 20 minutes to go the 10 miles to campus, they are moving too damn slow. Move faster.

Because it was a Monday, and before noon, there were no parking spots in the western hemisphere. When I was an undergrad here, I seem to remember that more people skipped on Mondays. When did this sense of duty infect the student body, and why is so very little of it present in the students that I teach? They are certainly doing their civic duty. No more than half of them show up at any given time, so who do all these damn cars belong to? Math majors? Teachers who arrived too late to fit in the faculty lot? Are the cars there as some kind of ploy by the University to convince the state that enrollment is up?

I finally spotted an empty space in the deck that has a different number of floors depending on which entrance I use. On the west side, there are three floors that are available. On the east, there are 10. I cannot imagine the people who could have designed such a structure, but I have no doubt that they graduated from here.

After I parked, I was not entirely sure how to get to the ground floor without seriously violating some physical laws. I wandered the length of the deck twice before I eventually found a staircase that had light at the bottom, which I assumed meant that it was an exit, although in this deck, it could just be an alternate dimension. I escaped into a world that I hoped was my own and breathed a fume-filled breath. I realized that I may never see my car again, because I had no idea how to get back to it. I would not be the first student to have this happen--perhaps this explains all of the cars that never seem to leave.

Chapter the Third

When hunting larger birds, stealth and cunning are often required.

Or:

Hunting plays a pivotal role

My first task, after I snaked in between the students flowing down the stairs like salmon ready to spawn, was to participate in the 200 Meter Freestyle Professor Hunt. The rules for hunting professors are simple. One must find the Prof during office hours and one must always release them back into their natural environment after one has caught them, otherwise their numbers will dwindle.

Office hours, in their purest, unrefined state, are the time during which a professor is in his office, absolutely and without fail, ready to help with and smooth out any of college's little bumps. Of course, this is only true in an Utopian society where there is liberty, justice and truly delicious non-fattening ice cream for all.

In this universe, however, office hours have been transmuted into a time when weary, hungry and generally unhappy students with large and heavy book bags practice the Freestyle event. Points are given for creativity, difficulty and success. The penalty for failure is never graduating, or even untimely demise from lack of food and general unfulfillment.

The easiest, and conversely least effective, method for hunting the prof is the Wait. In this technique, the student hunter naively waits outside of

the Professor's door until she appears. This is effective only with the Dedicated Professor, who is almost always in her office and is known to spend extra time with each student, inquiring into lives and discussing matters with the student. These Dedicates are so rare as to almost be extinct. Their numbers have been steadily declining since the fifties, and it is thought that their species will soon vanish, due to diminishing habitat and the unfortunate tendency of the other Profs to kill them on sight.

This technique is least effective on the Wiley Prof. This cunning subspecies is known for its camouflage and distraction abilities. Its most effective ploy is to enter the office, open the door, turn on the lights, and leave some immediately recognizable accessory on the desk. The Wiley then goes off to the nearest bar for a quick half. It has been reported that this technique was once pulled off to great effect by another member of staff covering for a Wiley who had gone to the great sabbatical in the sky many years before, although this has not been substantiated in the reputable journals. I have also heard claim of a professor who had his door and lights hooked up to an automatic timer, and had not actually been to his office in ten years. He, however, was an engineer, and therefore not within my personal realm of experience.

The Wiley can most easily be recognized by her absence and the piles of bones just outside her office from the students whose diligence outweighed their common sense and who foolishly believed that if they just waited long enough, the Wiley was bound to return, if only for her coat. The

Wiley can only be reached if contacted through a mail (voice-, e- or -box) and then only if she is the responsible type. If not, then the student is shit out of luck.

There are many other variations--the Hider (the spaces under desks are a popular habitat for this creature), the Liar (with its haunting call, "I should be in my office later"), and the Avoider (they prefer any medium that avoids face-to- face contact, such as phones or the computer), but the one I was hunting this Monday morning was the Wandering Prof (Flightius Professorius), the second most difficult prey to find and capture.

There are actually two subspecies of the Wanderer--the Busy and the Bored. The Bored is the less common of the two. He is likely to wander because he has nothing to do, and very little in the way of mental resources to keep himself occupied--which explains his rarity. Professors are rarely truly dumb--although they will act the part occasionally.

The behavior of both the Busy and the Bored is remarkably similar. They start off with the greatest of intentions. They check either their e-mail or voice mail. There will be a message that will cause them to leave their office. This is where the fun begins, for the Wanderer often has little idea of where he will end up. What began as a simple errand to get an envelope from stores, soon turns into a three-hour trek, as the Wanderer is stopped for chats, ends up in other people's offices, checks his mailbox, goes for a snack from the machine, is accosted by book reps, grabs a cup of coffee from the communal font, pays his 57 cents, and finally returns to his office, just in time

to leave for class, original errands still incomplete.

I was hunting a Busy by the name of Dr. Bird. He is a lovely man, nice, smart, but easily distracted--a typical wanderer. I needed to ask what I hoped was a simple question involving a course code I wasn't sure of. I had one hour to complete my task before I, too, had to teach.

First I checked Dr. Bird's office. Lights were on, and a still steaming mug of coffee was just inside the door. Good signs. He was not in the main office from what I could tell, but I had not checked all of the hallways that branch off at odd angles all over the English department. I stopped just outside the graduate assistant's office to listen for Dr. Bird's distinctive voice. Nothing. Oh, there were noises--the shrieks of merriment from the main part of the office, the ringing of phones, the wailing of lost freshman, but none of the bray that I have come to expect from the good doctor. He had been waylaid beyond the walls of the office, perhaps. The thing to do now was wait.

I stepped into the part of the office dedicated to the growth of graduate assistants, portioned off, as it was, with dull brown metal bookcases. There were eight oddly-sized desks from at least four different decades, all of which happened to be the same ghastly industrial yellow that is found nowhere else on earth. In the office were milling graduate students, spanning at least 3 decades themselves.

A graduate assistant is a frightened creature--frightened of the real world, of her parents, of failure, of success. She is afraid of her students, her

teachers, the admin folks and especially those people she knows who got jobs right after the first go-round of college. She is afraid that she will never pay her bills because grad students are barely paid. She is afraid of her fellow GA's--and for good reason. These people are weird. It is among the grad students of the world that I have met high-strung neurotic hysterics whose nervous tension caused them to be skeletal, angry young men who chain-smoked anything, including the office aloe plant, and the earth mothers who tried to keep us all from killing each other as midterms reared their ugly heads. They mostly succeeded--although poor Bob was never the same.

Today there was a discussion in progress in which Todd claimed that Brittney Spears was merely a reinterpretation of Meg March from Little Women based on Ms. Spear's hairstyle at the last awards show.

"Of course. I mean, Justin Timberlake is obviously simply a Laurie character, what with those curly locks and boyish appeal." This from Corbett, the angry GA.

"He can't be," replied Todd.

"Why not?"

"Because Laurie married Amy, not Meg."

"He should have married Jo," I said, still holding on to an opinion that I had formed roughly in fourth grade.

"But Jo had to marry someone who was her intellectual equal, not someone as frivolous as Laurie. Besides, she and the professor fell in love. It was sweet."

“Yeah, but think about this. This is supposed to be semi-autobiographical, right? I think that Louisa May had fallen for Laurie at some point--I mean look at the way that she writes about him. But she knew when she was writing the book that he was going to marry Amy, something that I’m sure broke her heart. So she had to write about this professor guy to make sure that we didn’t suspect that she loved Laurie all along.”

“But why didn’t she just marry Laurie in the first place, then?” asked Corbett.

“Social restrictions?”

“No, I don’t buy it. The restrictions that she would have had would have applied to Amy as well. They were sisters, after all. She married the professor because Alcott couldn’t be too feminist in her interpretations, or she’d never have been published.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jo had to be married off to someone who was her superior. The Professor had a greater intellectual standing than she did, and therefore, she had to get married to him. The only thing that Laurie had over her was his money. Amy could marry him because she didn’t have anything that would threaten his masculinity--she didn’t even consider herself a good enough artist to continue with it, and she had nothing else to offer, other than being a trophy wife.”

“Jo never loved Laurie. She never said that she did,” said Joanne a motherly GA, who had wandered in at some point in the discussion. “Her love

for the professor was a mature love, not the childish affection that she had for Laurie. Besides, Amy's life is not anti-feminist. Amy's life is made up of the dreams that the reader has for Jo--a way of showing how Jo's life could have been--not the dreams that Jo had for herself. Do you really think that someone as uncongenial as Jo would have been happy living that frivolous life with Laurie?"

"I still think that there was a part of Louisa May that wondered what her life would have been if she had gone with Laurie, and especially what her life would have been like if she had been the one to go to Europe."

"That well may be, but in the story as it stands..."

I tuned out for a moment because I thought I heard Dr. Bird. "Excuse me," I muttered as I eased out of the opening to the main office. I tracked the sound carefully. Dr. Bird was in the midst of what appeared to be a lengthy discourse about red-winged blackbirds--one of his many obsessions--with one of the other professors, a Dr. Arthur. I didn't particularly like Dr. Arthur, so I stood unobtrusively behind a filing cabinet as he searched desperately for a way out of the conversation. He caught my eye through the spider plant. I smiled sweetly at him and shrugged. Serves him right for referring to all books written by women as "slightly less interesting than the prattling of newborns, and far less coherent." His eyes filled with panic as the lecture went on.

"... But they really prefer the woodland habitat to the urban, although in recent years, they have been found more and more in cities in the northern

part of the continental United States, where their food supplies are generally..." I wandered back to the GA office, content that even if I didn't get my answer, I at least came away with a sense of accomplishment and contentment. Stupid chauvinist prof got what he deserved. In any case, it was time to teach. Yippie.

Chapter the Fourth

The circular nests of birds help to protect their young from predators and falling

Or:

The mysteries of the campus are explained and our heroine earns her keep

I taught the dreaded Freshman English composition--dreaded by freshmen and professors alike. Twenty-five students per class, two classes back-to-back, one halfway across campus from the other. The book for the course was marginally more interesting than operating instructions for a can opener translated from Swedish by way of Korean, but without the charm of either language. The only reason that I used this particular book was that I was forced to for the first semester that I taught and was far too lazy to redo my entire lesson plan just for the sake of changing the book. I am nothing if not economical. The students hate it and show this by never cracking the covers. However, I am not confident enough in my teaching yet to wander into class without some framework in place, and the book supplies that if nothing else.

As I walked to class, I wondered what I was going to do that day. I had a vague idea in mind, but I get bored if I plan too much too soon. I find that the walk to the classroom provides ample opportunity for thorough lesson plans.

I entered the classroom. There were the same ten students who would show up if there were a blizzard. They would return from the dead to attend class. I appreciate their enthusiasm, if I cannot always understand it. I was

one of those undergrads who would attend class if I wasn't distracted by any colorful moving objects. Also attending were a couple of students who I doubted were still enrolled because I saw them so seldom.

There was the inevitable rush to the desk. Students were flapping papers at me. I dodged as best I could. I have this fear that one day I will be buried under a small hill of late work and die of numerous paper cuts. There were other students wanting to know what they had missed, or asking questions, which wouldn't be so bad if I had the answers. The worst students are the ones who come to the desk and proffer excuses for absences.

"I'm really sorry I missed class for the past week. You see, my cat?, he was sick, and I realize that that doesn't sound all that important, but I've had this cat since I was in fourth grade and I love her like some people love their kids, and you always let parents take the day off if their kids are sick, so I should be allowed to, too. And then, after Pertunia, my cat, was better, I had to work some extra shifts to pay for the vet, and the only time that Denny's-- that's where I work--had open was during your class, and I'm real sorry, but I e-mailed you and you said that if we let you know ahead of time, that you would let us make up the work. For the ten points? Anyway, I was just wondering what we did in class."

My teeth, after a semester or three of these sorts of conversations, have been worn down so much that my dentist can now afford to retire.

"Well, on Monday," I said, "we had a discussion, so not much chance of making that up. Then on Wednesday, we watched a film and the class

wrote a response to it. Friday, we sacrificed newborns to the Dark God Bal'eth, but the planetary alignment has shifted, so that's not a possibility either."

"Huh?"

"They wrote a response to the articles in the book." *The exact same thing that we do every Friday. Do any of you pay even the slightest attention to what I've done here for the past five weeks?*

"Okay. Thanks. Is there anything else I can do?"

Come to class, would be a favorite. Ask your sodding classmates. Read the damned syllabus? "Not really, Justin, I'm sorry."

"Okay, thanks."

"Mm-hmm." There went another molar. After counting to ten and screaming in my head, I started class. I have begun to pretend that my students read the book. It is not as difficult as it might seem, given that they are all pretending the same thing. As long as I don't inquire too deeply, it all works out.

"What would you like to do today...?"

"Nap!"

"Go home?"

"Have cake."

"Have a sing-a-long!"

"Those are not among your options. Talk or write?"

"Talk," answered the majority of the class.

“Okey-dokey. What do you think about political correctness?”

“It’s bad.”

“Why?”

“Ummm...” Robert pauses. “Because it’s like lying?”

“Okay. How is being PC like lying?”

A few strangled answers later and the class was flying. The debate wandered from truthfulness, to etiquette, to the confederate flag and ended up with dress codes. It was a good discussion, even if PC in its truest form (and anything having to do with the readings) had perhaps not been given full time. But the students had thought about something that they might not have thought about, they heard from their classmates, and some of them left with thoughtful looks. I felt like I had accomplished something as a teacher.

I practically skipped to the next class, which takes me far longer than the laws of time and space should dictate, because college campuses have a geometry all their own. It is only on campus that it can take ten minutes to walk less than the equivalent of one block.

The worst part was that I was occasionally late to class because the buildings would move. How else can I explain that the faster I walked to a building, the farther away it seemed to get? As I trod the optical illusion that is my campus, I contend with headwinds that never end no matter what side of a building I am on, frat boys discussing last night’s score, and of course, the beautiful curving paths that make the architectural statement “going half the distance in twice the time on windy, switchback paths is worth it, as long

as there are trees to look at.” This all combines to make the twenty-yard distance to the next building take twenty minutes.

None of this, however, accounts for the buildings themselves, especially the science and engineering ones. I would have guessed, when I first arrived, that the art or education buildings would be chaotic, and filled with staircases that ended in blank walls and lectures held in classrooms that don’t exist. But it is the buildings that house people destined to design and build structures for the rest of us that have entrances on the ground with signs that read “4th floor,” Mobius strip corridors that loop upon themselves, small dead-end hallways, and classroom numbers affixed to blank walls, with no doorways in sight.

This might explain the poor students who walk through the halls bewildered and bedazzled and why some are never seen again. The older, more experienced students are more prepared—they wear camping gear and walk with an un-holstered calculator in one hand and a compass in the other. Those great black digital watches so prevalent on the wrists of those thin bespectacled men are not geeky, but rather a matter of practical survival because of the time distortions found on the lower levels, where the corridors have no numbers and the professors have no names—the hallways between rooms 3 and πr^2 .

My class, happily, is in the building without windows. Some designer decided that looking at Ohio was depressing, so he created all of these little boxes without any reference to the outside world, including clocks.

The next class was not my favorite. It could have been the time--late afternoon seems an inauspicious time for teaching English. It could have been the lack of enthusiasm on behalf of the students. It could have been that I wanted nothing more than to go home and take a nap after consuming something suitably fatty, or it could have been tidal activity, but for whatever reason, the class dragged. Where the first class might have shouted with the glee of their ideas, this class stared at me as if aliens had drained their brains the night before. It was possible. The countryside wasn't that far away, and that is where the aliens traditionally gathered their specimens. A few generations of that sort of thing, and the inhabitants are bound to show some signs.

"So," I asked after the opening pleasantries, "What do you guys think about being PC? Is it good or bad?" They just watched me. "Oh, come on, you must have some ideas." Nada. "Ookay. So it is perfectly permissible for me to insult you here in front of your classmates?" A few wagged their heads. "Why not?" Again, nothing. "Sarah, I saw your head shake. What's wrong with that?"

"I don't know. You just shouldn't, that's all."

"But why not?"

"Because," said Larry, "it's not polite."

He had a point. "Does the fact that I am the authority in this class," (however nominal) "make it less okay for me to insult you?"

"I suppose."

"But why? What is it about me being in charge that makes it less okay for me to insult you than Tim over there?"

"Tim can't insult me either."

"Okay. Duly noted. Tim, watch your step."

A hand was raised in the back.

"Yes, Ken?"

"Can I go home?"

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I just don't want to sit here through all of these pointless generalities."

For a long moment, I was speechless. I just looked at Ken, unable to believe what he had just said. There is a rhythm to discussions, a movement from the general to the specific, and one that moved from barely considered ideas to more thoughtful responses. I had seen it happen at least three dozen times already, and I was a beginning teacher. At some point, I just sat back and watched the students debate, with little prompting from me. And now, Ken, the guy who started his introduction paper claiming that he was horse, was questioning *my* teaching technique.

"Well, we'll get to specifics in a moment, Ken, if you'd just like to..."

"I don't want to listen to this, though. Can't I just go?" *Please do. You are being unaccountably rude, both to me and to your fellow students. If you go, don't bother to come back, however. And that goes for the rest of you. If you don't want to be here, the door is always open. Feel free to use it.*

Sheesh. In fact, I'll leave. They don't pay me enough for this kind of stuff.

“Perhaps you might want to share your opinion, then. I’m sure that your views on the matter are enlightening.”

He shook his head.

“All right, then, I think I saw your hand up, Yejide.” The class was awful after that. No one wanted to talk. I couldn’t blame them. I let them out ten minutes early and slouched back to the department.

Chapter the Fifth

Non-migratory birds often "fatten up" for the winter, but easily shed this weight in spring

Or:

Kickboxing. Kvetching, and ~~Kommiserating~~ Commiserating

Robin, one of the second year GA's, was waiting there when I arrived. We had a long-term arrangement to exercise together, absolutely, without fail. Unless one of us didn't want to. I told Robin about my class and she sympathized.

"What a dips hit."

"Yep. And of course, he has to be the one student who wrote in his essay that he was anti-social, had few friends, claimed that he could create fireballs with his hands, and had occasional angry outbursts that he couldn't always control."

"Christ."

"Why me?"

"Are we kickboxing?"

"As far as I know, pretty lady."

"Don't even start with that 'why me' shit," Robin said as she grabbed her gym bag. "You remember the class from Hell I had last semester?"

"Yeah, but I seem to get the weird ones. And I think that he's developing a crush on me. He keeps calling me over, like, eight times a

class.”

“Is he cute?”

“Nope. Ugly and scary. My dream guy.”

“Whoo. Could we share?”

“Nope. He’s all mine. Besides, you have an actual cutie at home.”

Robin got that silly grin on her face, and the goofy smile that she always had when she thought about her honey, Sam. If I didn’t love them both, it would be sickening beyond belief.

Before I knew it, I was in kickboxing, which would surprise the hell out of anyone who ever knew me before grad school. Then I hated exercise, hated gym class--with its emphasis on mindless competition, the people who sincerely believe that hitting the ball actually matters, the endless horror that was the locker room, the gym teachers, always being picked last for every activity, the complete lack of good books--all of it. All through school, I raged against the very concept of Gym.

I can remember playing some damn game with a ball. Gods, I hate all things that involve thwacking some poor sphere around those dull cinderblock walls and into the grey steel girders because, inevitably, the ball would bounce off of my head. The times I ducked--like any sensible person would--I was yelled at by everyone in the room for being afraid of the ball. When I stood my ground, I would end up going home with a migraine from the light concussion.

Balls would zoom past me and from the throats of forty enraged

adolescents would come the cry, "Get the ball! Get the ball! Gettheball!"

"If you wanted the ball so damn much," I would mutter as I made the appearance of getting the ball, "you should have held on to it when you had it, and not thrown it away." Needless to say, I was not the most popular player of sport to ever pass through my high school's hallowed halls.

Now, instead of fighting those testosterone poisoned fools, I fight my hips, and so, there is kickboxing, and step aerobics, body shaping and yoga, and they are good. My contentment stems, in part because no one forces me to go. And there are no teams to be chosen last for, no points to get yelled at about, and no creepy gym teachers, who always seemed like they were up to something nefarious. Why else would you hang out with a bunch of sweaty teenagers? There is only my own achievement, the pounding music, and friends to commiserate with.

In cardio kick boxing, we are warriors of techno'd pop, punching the hell out of innocent air molecules and walking the thin line between fierce Amazonian warrior movements and silly cheerleader hopping. There is something about three dozen young women kicking in time to the Red Hot Chili Pepper's "Roller Coaster" that sets a soul to marveling. It's also very odd. I sometimes feel like I am in some kind of really perky and slightly ineffective militia group.

I wonder, as I am picturing Ken's face hovering just in front of my fists, whether aerobic instructors ever get tired of saying the same thing over again. "Punch harder. And kick. And two and three. Grapevine left." Do they

ever want to count beyond 25? Do they ever long for higher maths? How many ways of doing a sit up does one really need to know? And how do they know them all in the first place? Is there a sit-up institute that publishes a journal? Do they offer classes? Are thousands of our tax dollars funding this? Is there a prize committee somewhere? How do they face themselves in the morning?

I asked Robin. She tried to stifle a giggle in the middle of the infamous “twist and scream,” which has been known to kill small animals. She couldn’t answer until we were well in to the third set of “there-is-no-way-on-God’s-green-earth-that-I-am-going-to-be-able-to-move-tomorrow” before she did anything more than glare at me.

She posited (after having informed me that she was going to kill me) that there is, in fact, a secret, South American government-sponsored camp where these women learn their deadly trade. “They train in the physical arts,” she said in between gasps, “carefully honing their masochism until their poor, kidnapped victims can take it no more. Then they are sent to gyms all over the country, and there they are provided with victims for their vile ministrations.” There are reasons that Robin and I get along.

Chapter the Sixth

Almost all birds feed their young by regurgitating insects and worms

Or:

The miracles of female anatomy are discussed and boys are dissed

Sometime after that, the class ended with a soft “thank you” and Robin and I walked slowly and carefully to the other side of the gym where we all stashed our stuff, clutching our water bottles like plenary indulgences at the pearly gates. We passed our things with longing looks and continued out into the hall, schlepping towards the water fountain. There is a body-shaping class after this one that we also go to.

“Why do we do this to ourselves?” I asked after gulping the rest of my water and looking forlornly at the emptiness of the water bottle.

“I’m not sure. There was something about losing weight? Toning? Cute butts?”

“My mother thinks that I exercise too much. For some reason, she seems to think that six hours of heavy cardio a week over five days seems excessive.”

“Sam, too. He says that he loves me the way I am, but...”

“You doubt.”

“I doubt. The women he dated--they look nothing like me. They are all Calista thin, gorgeous. I’m pretty, but I just... I don’t know...” She starts to fill her water bottle.

“Even if he isn’t comparing, you are.”

“Exactly.”

I looked at the cleaner’s cart stationed outside of the women’s restroom. “Vacucide” is printed on the front of the vacuum, “for your safety and protection.” Hmm. Fratricide is killing one’s brother. Homicide is killing one’s fellow man and insecticide is used for the killing of insects, so vacucide mean that this vacuum hunts and kills its own kind. It is astounding what lurks in the halls of campus buildings at night. I got the sudden vision of this vacuum lurking in the shadows of the psychology department awaiting the perfect moment to spring upon its unsuspecting prey and leave its mangled corpse for the cleaning man to discover and wonder about.

Robin finished while I was contemplating and I attempted to fill my bottle from the fountain with no water pressure. It sputters, sings, moans and trickles--none of which resembles a properly working device. Still, I persevered.

“You will never believe what happened in my poetry class last night.”

“Charles read another one of his god-awful poems?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not it. Do remember Rhoda? She was in that class we took in the summer?”

“Uh-huh.” I have no idea who she’s talking about, but I figure that the explanation will be too long if I ask.

“Well, she had a baby last week. And she brought it into class, which, you know, bonding, great. In the middle of Marie’s poem, she starts

breastfeeding.”

I dropped the water bottle. “What?”

“She breast fed her child.”

“In class? Right there? Just whips it out?”

“Yep. Right there. Right across from Dr. Bantam, no less.”

“Dear God.”

“How could he talk about someone’s poem with nipples not ten feet away from him?”

“I have no idea.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing. He ignored it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. The thing is, I always thought of myself as pretty open-minded. No hang-ups about the female body. But this...”

“It’s so tacky.”

“Exactly.”

“Is she going to do that every class from now on?”

“I hope not. It’s hard enough keeping a straight face in there most of the time, anyway, and having Emma and Patrick just across the circle from me doesn’t help any. I almost didn’t make it with boobs everywhere I looked.”

“Ye gods.” I picked up my bottle and finished refilling it. “Couldn’t she have done that before class? Or after?”

“Or in the restroom?”

"Also a good choice."

"Yeah, and half of the times she did it, the kid didn't even look hungry."

"It was more than once?"

"Oh, yeah. She had her boobs out for practically the entire class."

"What possesses some of these people?" I asked as we walked back down the hall.

"Exhibitionism?"

"You may have something there. It is pretty much the only time in a western female's life when she is allowed, and even sometimes encouraged, to expose herself. But in a grad class?"

"I know."

What would I do if one of my students did that? What if one of the young ladies with children decided that it was a good idea to breastfeed in my class? How do I approach that as a teacher? "Please Ma'am, put that away?" "Do you really think that is appropriate in this environment?" "Wouldn't you be more comfortable in private?" "Could I have two squirts for my coffee?" *Gott in Himmel*

The second exercise class went rather quickly if I didn't count the moments of absolute agony when my muscles had done just about all they were going to. I pushed them farther and responded with deadly force--a cramp. "I'm doing this for your own good, damn you," I muttered at my leg. Robin laughed at me.

As we did our leg lifts, I told her about my mother's daily wake-up

calls.

“Before the sun has come up, she calls me. To nag. And to remind me at this ungodly time of the morning all the things that I could do that day. All she’s doing is freaking me out before I even have my contacts in. I’m certainly in no position to deal with that stuff when I just wake up, ya know?”

“Yeah, my mother too. ‘When are you getting this done? Is it done yet? Can I see it?’ I’m like, Mom, please. Stop.”

“I know. And spring break is going to be work camp for me. She says that I’m going to work for at least five hours every day. I have to produce a certain amount of stuff each day, or I’m pretty sure that she’s not going to feed me. ‘Oh, it will be great! You can finish your two research papers and your thesis and then you can help me put up shelves. It’ll be wonderful! Don’t forget to bring home half of the library and I’ll go through and mark all of the things that you should look at.’”

“Mine too. ‘Sweetie, can you help me with my presentation? If you can just do this half, I’ll be fine. Oh, and can you do these other fifteen things for me?’”

“Whatever happened to the break part? Cause, I really need one. Like this one prof. He decides that we should do like thirty extra things. Is he going to pay for the nervous breakdown that I’m going to have?”

“That’s nothing compared to mine. She expects us to take this test over 300 pages of material and then do a presentation afterwards. She’s insane.”

“Aren't they all?”

“And they're trying to drag us along for the ride. Sheesh.”

The class ended and we gathered our stuff and wiggled into another layer to protect against the cold. We do all this cardio and walk out of the class looking like overfed penguins. The cold hit us as we opened the door and we suddenly found a new burst of energy to hurry to the parking lot.

It was on the way to my car that I spotted one of my ex-boyfriends. This is not one of those sappy, pathetic novels where the female heroine makes herself look like a damn fool over some bloody man. I will not spend the next however many pages moaning about a lost love. I will not discuss what might have been. There will be no running through the moors, or tossing myself off of a bridge. Frankly, I think that when I break up with someone, they should disappear from my life. They don't have to die—just get the heck out of my half of the hemisphere. They can move to Belize, or Liechtenstein or Abu-Dhabi. I really don't care. They just have to be so far away that I never see them, or hear about them again. Is that really too much to ask? I mean, if I were being unrealistic, I would have everyone who knew about the relationship selectively brainwashed to forget any and all of my former dates, so that they might never embarrass me. That and a large helping of world peace will complete tonight's improbability section, but you've been a wonderful audience.

This ex-boy of mine was physically incapable of taking a hint. In the past month, he has called me four times, e-mailed me five or six times, made

me hide in the woman's restroom twice, chased me into the English department to hide in the really out-of-the-way places once, and actually caught me sometime last week. I said, "I'm really busy" and "uh-huh" a couple of time. I'm only missing, "I'm washing my hair," "I've decided to join the Peace Corps," and "the Master doesn't like us to talk to outsiders" to complete the avoidance set. If I get any more blunt, it will be battery with a non-sharp object. But not one glimmer of an inkling of a clue has reached the thought processing center of the brain. It's rather like being chased by a well-intentioned terrier. He gets so caught up in the chase that he's not sure what to do when he catches the crook except piddle on the carpet and look vaguely embarrassed.

To be honest, if he would stop chasing, I might stop taking flight, and just happily ignore him. The worst part is that he is so damned courteous, so nice, so polite and well mannered that I want to knock him to the ground and dance on his spleen. There is, after all, a difference between being genuinely nice and being a complete nebbish.

Robin covered me (I duck walked and she held out her coat so I could hide behind it) and we meandered to her car.

"Is he gone?" I asked when safely inside.

"Not yet, but he looks confused."

"That's normal. Tell me when he leaves." All right, he's not such a bad guy. And someday, I really hope that he'll settle down with the nice, completely repressed, submissive blond fundamentalist of his dreams and

has two or seven vaguely inoffensive children who blow up abortion clinics in the spare moments they have between voting Republican and Wednesday Bible study. And I hope that all of this happens soon so that he can move into the bowels of Midwest and leave me the hell alone.

When they say that opposites attract, do not believe them. They lie and try to sell you insurance over the phone. Opposites drive each other absolutely bonkers when forced together for long periods of time. This is how wars start. This is how the world ends, not with a whimper, but with the bang the signifies that person A has had all the he can take of person B's incessant sloppiness, and person B has had just about all she can stand of person A's loud noises. Opposites attract all right, and then there's cold fusion.

"He's gone. Would you like me to drive you to your car?"

I looked up from the floor of Robin's car where I'd been hiding. "I should be able to make it. Thanks."

"No problem. You'd do the same for me."

"I'll see you later. Meeting at 6?"

"Yep."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Chapter the Seventh

Although the life of a bird looks idyllic, there is little rest for these industrious creatures

Or:

Relaxing home life

I drove home, and I was back where I started, which is a nice metaphor for the semester I'm having so far. It's not that I'm not learning things, or not even having moments of fun, but I am so busy that I barely have time to breathe some days. And my apartment is my refuge from that scary, busy world. Although I still do school work there, and worry there, and have to do house work, it is the one place where I don't *have* to do any of those things. This can be embarrassing, like when I have to clean for an hour and a half if I order Chinese because I don't want the delivery guy to know what a slob I am.

To add to my stress, this was the week that my apartment complex had decided to do semi-yearly inspections, which meant that sometime during the week, strange men who I didn't know would be entering my apartment. This was bad enough, but these men also had the power to kick me out if my apartment broke health code violations, which I'm pretty sure it would, given the state that it is normally in. So I cleaned frantically Sunday, and I had to, on pain of expulsion, keep the place tidy for an entire week. The strain was beginning to show. Not only was I having nervous tics every time I dropped something on the floor, but I was running out of places to hide things--under the bed had been full for a while, the dishwasher was full of

dirty dishes, and the closet was full of clothes that should probably be washed before they start their own civilization. I cannot even talk about the fridge. It was not a happy time.

I wish I could keep my apartment that clean all the time, but I'm far too busy to be able to clean during the week. Sometimes I envy the male professors who go home and don't have to worry about these things. If they are messy, everyone just thinks it's some sort of cute bachelor trait, like the inability to wear socks that match. When I don't clean, I feel like some sort of pariah. Somehow, something is wrong with me because I don't live in freaking Martha-Stewart-land. Well, I don't want to live in the land of Stewart anyway. There are only so many ways that one human being is able to fold a towel, and she should just accept that.

There were three messages on my answering machine. One was for Joe Paserelli, who had apparently changed his number two years ago and never bothered to tell anyone. I had inherited both the number and his calls from the phlebotomist and the car place. The second message was from someone who mispronounced my name, offered to take an exorbitant amount of money from me to re-pave my driveway, and a message from my mother reminding me that I had the first half of my thesis due the next day, and telling me that she loved me. I wasn't sure I believed the latter comment in light of the first. Would a woman who loved me truly needle me into killing myself over a little thing like an uncompleted thesis? I think not, but I called her anyway.

The phone rang five times. Then the answering machine kicked on. "Hi answering machine," I said. "It is nice that we are having an affair, answering machine--you leave messages on my machine, I leave them on you. It is a happy relationship, and indeed probably the closest I will get to a real one..."

"It better be," my mother interjected.

"It is rude to interrupt, mother. I was talking to the machine. We are in love, you know. We are running off together. Isn't that right, machine?" It chose that moment to emit a long, loud, high-pitched beep.

"I think you have your answer, dear." She laughed.

I sighed. "It is the way of my life. I fall in love, and after all too short a time, I am beeped at, and the relationship is no more."

"Have you finished your thesis yet?"

"Well, considering that I just got home from teaching two classes, and exercising, no. I have not. Nor do I expect to any time soon."

"Maybe you should work on it tonight."

"Yes, mother. Just after my meeting, and my class, I'll hurry home and run right to it, typing away. Won't even stop to eat. Right to the typing."

"Good. Otherwise it won't get done."

"Mm-hmm."

"Well, it won't. You know how you are."

"Delightful?"

"A procrastinator."

"Do you want to go to the home?"

"If you send me to the home, dear girl, you will never see your cat again."

"I love you, mama."

"How was your class?"

"The first one was okay, but the second one was awful." I told her all about my horrible students and she sympathized--after all she had taught for 37 years in the public schools.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Strangulation might be fun. And there's always..."

"Honey..."

"Oh, all right. If he does it again, I'll talk to him."

"Perhaps not in front of the other students?"

"Yes, Mother. After class. And then I shall fillet him with a nice sharp..."

She used my full name.

"Oh, all right. No violence. You are no fun."

"I know that."

We said our goodbyes and I hung up. And sighed. I was very tired and hungry. I opened my refrigerator. A nice selection of things from the mold, fungus, and liquids that glorped families. The milk that I had bought earlier in the day had already expired, so the macaroni and cheese was right out. The freezer was bare except for empty ice cube trays. Someday, assuming the sun has not turned red and consumed the Earth, I will fill the trays and have

ice. For lack of anything better, I had dry Froot Loops as I read the stuff for that night's class. "And in the secondary place of the modification is the socioeconomic policies that led to the pedagogy of semantic discourse which was a direct result of the..."

It was just about there that I threw the book across the room. Why can't academics just write a simple sentence? What is their fascination with clauses, usually within clauses? Why can't they use the language that we have all agreed on, to paraphrase Carlin? Why did I do this to myself? The idea of combing a beach for bottle caps and selling them for daiquiri money was becoming more appealing with each passing moment.

It was all because I was in the last (please the fates) semester of graduate school, the time when professors and administration decide that free time is bad for the students. At last count, I was writing a thesis, teaching two classes (and grading fifty papers every other week), taking two classes (one of which had a weekly paper), editing a literary magazine and writing both a cv and a cover letter so that if I graduated I could possibly not starve to death. I would have been filling out applications for various low-level positions, like all of the other people with Masters, but 6 years as an English major has made me almost useless for things that don't involve long discussions of proper punctuation, something that does not set personnel staff to quivering.

I rubbed my eyes, but knew that if I closed them I would fall asleep and not wake up until just after the next ice age. I looked around and saw

piles of guilt everywhere--research for the two final papers I had yet to write a word of, three piles of papers to grade, a pile of submissions that I was supposed to read and decide on, the plants that were three seconds from dying from lack of water, and the bills I should have paid a week ago. I sighed. I wondered if suicide was still a sin. I wondered if they were accepting new patients at the psych ward. I wondered who was on the other end of the phone that had just started ringing. I let the machine get it--no one can say I learned nothing from my mother.

"Hi, this is Robin."

I picked up. "Hi."

"Have you checked your e-mail yet?"

"Not since this morning. What's up?"

"Bad news."

"Oh good. Just what I needed."

"Yeah, me too. Rooster boy lost his submissions."

"He what?"

"He claims that they were there one day and gone the next."

"Oh god. Oh god. Oh god, what am I going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Wait. Wait. He sent this in an e-mail?"

"Yep."

"I'll kill him."

"I'll hold him down for you."

"Thank you. You are a good soul." I thought for a moment. "So do we know how it happened?"

"He says that he had people over and when they left, he noticed that all the poems were gone."

"Is he trying to imply that someone stole *poems*?"

"I think so."

"On purpose?"

"Yep. That seems to be the theory."

"That boy has lost his mind."

"What mind?" Robin had never liked Rooster boy, named for both his remarkable ability to think slightly more intelligently than a chicken without a head, and also his hair, which resembled a rooster's comb in full pecking fury.

"Point."

"Will they convict for the murder?"

"I think there are enough extenuating circumstances."

"Good." I thought about all those irreplaceable submissions lost forever, and how much hot water I was now in, and I felt like crying. "I knew this was a bad idea when Jay suggested it. I just knew. But they all thought it was such a *great* idea. Stupid men." I paused. "Except yours, of course."

"Of course."

"Thank you for telling me."

"Thought you should hear it from me."

"I'll see you at the meeting?"

She laughed. "If you're going to inflict harm on Rooster Boy? Wouldn't miss it."

"You promised to help."

"You got it."

Chapter the Eighth

*The beautiful and often haunting calls of birds are communication--both of warning and
friendship*

Or:

Stress, stress, and phone calls with a side of stress

I hung up and stewed. This entire editorship had been one big giant pain in the ass after another. Staff would show up to two meetings and I wouldn't see them for a month. The book sale that everyone was so damned enthusiastic about and signed up for shifts to work was manned by Robin, the third girl on staff, Eanna and me. I toted fifteen boxes of books, each of which must have weighed half a ton, to and from every building on campus every day for a week. The males would occasionally show up for 10 minutes or so, and then get distracted by shiny objects and flutter off. Now, I am all for female equality, and I resent it bitterly whenever a male even dares to imply that I am lesser in any way, shape or form, but there are three men on staff, and I was the one who drove the dolly and carried every single damn book.

Then there was the fiasco with the office, in which every member of staff was supposed to hang out, but for which we had only two keys. Robin kept getting yelled at for the inadequacies of the former staff, and I was harangued by members of the campus to know when the damn thing was going to be published. And let us never forget the fact that we had to extend the deadline submission because we had 12 submissions, 4 of which were good. It had not been a great and soul-fulfilling experience, and now Senor

Rooster had lost the submissions. I was either going to kill him, or possibly myself. It would have been bad enough if I had just been on staff, but I was in charge. I was going to be blamed for this. I could see the disapproving looks now.

The phone rang again. I picked up. It was someone mispronouncing my name at me and attempting to sell me aluminum siding. I told them to bugger off and hung up. What was I going to do? The phone rang again.

“I told you to bugger off. If you call again, I shall call the police and...”

“Don’t talk to you mother like that.”

“Sorry Mom.”

“I forgot to tell you. The insurance bill came in the mail today.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“Three hundred.”

“Sure. Why not? And have you burnt all of my books and killed my cat as well?”

“What?”

“It’s been a bad day, and it’s just getting worse. I’m thinking seriously of going to bed, pulling the covers over my head and not coming out until June.” I told her about Robin’s news.

After condolences, she said, “Well, honey, you’re just going to have to suck it up and deal with it. No use whining about things you can’t do anything about. And if you’ll recall, I told you that that was a bad idea.”

“Yes, mother. But there was no time when everyone could meet, so...”

"I realize that, but you never do listen to my suggestions. Isn't your meeting coming up?"

I looked at the clock. "Shit. Talk to you later, Mom."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

I hung up. Shit. Damn. I ran around my apartment frantically trying to stuff things into my Sierra Club book bag (free with a fifteen dollar donation) that I might need for either the meeting which was in ten minutes, or my class immediately after. The phone rang again. "Damn it, can I just get out the freaking door?"

"Hello?"

"Yes, this is the printer. We were just wondering when we could expect payment for the job?"

"Um, I was thinking when we turned in the issue."

"And when would that be?" I thumped my head against the wall.

"Shortly?"

"Well, It's just that we're under time constraints, here and..." *And I'm not? Look, buddy, if you left me alone for more than three days, we might be well on our way.*

"I understand that. I am late for a meeting, so if I could just..."

"Of course." There was a pointed pause. "Do call us when you have time."

She hung up. I stared at the phone for a moment, and slammed it

down. It fell. "Goddammit." I tried two more times before I finally managed to place it so it didn't fall. Then I ran out the door. I jogged to my car, narrowly avoiding the pack of children trying to sell me things, jumped in my car and, making sure that none of the little darlings were going to be under my tires, sped off out of the parking lot and into the sunset. This made me realize two very important things. One was that there is some beauty in the world that I wish I had the time to enjoy. The second was that I had forgotten my sunglasses in my apartment.

Chapter the Ninth

Swallows are the fastest birds--but they generally have inversely short lives.

Or:

A pleasant drive in the country with picnic to follow

I squinted until I turned onto the freeway and pressed the gas pedal until the speedometer hit 80. Normally, I do not speed. I usually don't even take freeways--something that baffles my male friends--but today, I had no choice. It was either risk a ticket and eternal damnation from my insurance company, or have all of my staff members leave in a huff. The latter seemed far more important.

I arrived at the office, a drab, vaguely unsettling room with suspicious stains on the carpet, only a few minutes late. The natives didn't look too annoyed, although the advisor was glaring at me. I got the distinct impression that he found me unsatisfying. It couldn't have anything to do with the constant lateness, lack of preparation, or the fact that I hated running meetings and so generally had barely controlled chaos at each of them, could it? Nahh.

I slid into my seat, which none of the males had appropriated today. I have tried to explain that I am the editor, and so I get the big swivelly chair, but they rarely listen. There is something about 20-year old males that makes them incapable of listening to a woman they do not intend to sleep with. This

may also be true of older males, but they seem to hide it better.

Rooster boy was not there. I was not surprised. I exchanged a significant look with Robin and she grinned smugly.

"Well, I have some bad news to open the meeting with...." There was a sound from the door. Rooster boy bounced in. I was really going to have to kill him, for that, if nothing else. He was also grinning. I scheduled his imminent demise in it my imaginary Palm Pilot: 6:00, start meeting. 6:15, Kill Rooster boy. 6:32, clean up and adjourn to local bar for celebratory margaritas.

"Hi," he said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Hello." Perhaps I should cut off his ears first.

"I found them on my couch." I was confused. His ears?

"What?"

"The poems. They were under a pillow."

"A pillow?" What kind of pillock doesn't pick up the stuff on the couch when searching?

"Yep. I looked this morning and they were right there. Isn't it great?"

"Yes." I wondered if I could still maim him. I'm sure the court would understand. "It is. Please sit."

He did and reclined in his chair, grinning. "You weren't upset or anything, were you?"

"Of course not. As long as they are safe." I heard the music from Psycho in my head. "You did bring them?"

He brandished a roll of shredded paper that looked like something had begun eating it and found it unpalatable. I had had that particular set of poems before and didn't blame whatever had done it. Those poems were pretty untasty. However, I could not explain either the scorch marks or what looked to be pudding on one end. Not even in my fevered mind could I come up with a reason for singeing poems. They had seemed rather overdone as it was.

"So," Rooster boy asked, "what's the bad news?"

I thought rapidly. "We're out of cookies."

There was a chorus of disappointed moans. You'd think that the entire staff was made up of five-year olds, instead of college students.

"If y'all will contribute a dollar or two, I might be able to restock the supply."

"I'm broke, man."

"Will you take a quarter?"

"Do you have change for a twenty?"

"All I have are fives."

"You should get some of those pecan sandies. I love those things, man."

"I mean I'm really broke. I won't even have any money until next week. Stupid K-mart."

"Or maybe some of those big oatmeal raisin ones"

"Does anyone have change for a five? I'll take three ones."

"They reduced my hours again so that all I'm working is 10 a week."

"That bites, man."

"I know it. How about brownies?"

"Hey, I gave the book sale an extra couple of bucks. Can't you take it out of that?"

I exchanged a significant look with Robin. She rolled her eyes.

"Gentleman, if I could..."

"You know what kind I like? Macadamia. With white chocolate."

"I always thought the peanut butter ones were good. I never knew how they got those little patterns on them though."

"Gentleman..." I said a bit louder.

"I think there's a special tool, you know? Like one of those little hammer things."

I whistled as loudly as I could. As one, all of the men shut up and looked at me. Rooster boy was rubbing his ears.

"Thank you. The patterns are made with the back of a fork, those little hammers are for tenderizing meat, and none of that has anything to do with producing a literary magazine by the end of the semester. So if I could have your undivided attention for the next twenty minutes, we might actually get on with our lives before dark. Drake, where do we stand with the "Friends of the Loons" fund?"

After that the meeting went relatively smoothly. We talked about the magazine, the Loon, for a good ten minutes before the male staff members

were drawn into a discussion of astrology and how it affected dating. Then they had a three minute long discussion about, I kid you not, hair. I could feel a tension headache coming on. When I couldn't stand it any more, I shouted a very loud "hey," and brought the meeting to some semblance of order once more.

"All right, then it's agreed. We'll postpone the voting on the best submission until we get the first proof."

"When did we decide on that?"

"Yeah, where was I?"

"I don't think that's how we should do that because once, I think, we did it that way and it didn't work because we didn't put the names in as winners, and then some of the staff members got reamed out about it and I was one of them, even though I never had anything to do with that part, because I was just in charge of the art submissions that year and there were some really cool ones; I remember this one where there was like this girl and you couldn't tell unless you looked real close, but she was actually really old, because when the guy, who was a buddy of mine took the photo, he was in the wrong place for the light and it turned out blurry, but it ended up kinda cool, at least I thought so."

There was a moment of silence during which the staff members waited for Bertie to say something else. I turned to Robin.

"What was I saying?"

"Umm... Proofs?"

I blinked for a moment or two and then nodded. "Okay. Uh, this is one of those editorial decisions, so you guys don't have to worry about it. You can blame me if it all goes wrong. And if there's nothing else, I'd like to adjourn because my class is in 20 minutes. Is there anything else?"

Glum silence. "All right then. Next time, same time, same place, same faces?"

They nodded. I was almost out the door when I heard Drake say, "Do you have a picture of that girl? I mean is she in an issue? How was it done again?" and one of the other lads saying, "Or ginger snaps. I've always liked ginger snaps."

I ran.

Chapter the Tenth

Birds must be taught how to fly; otherwise they fall to their deaths.

Or:

Knowledge is gained and gnomes play an important part.

I had two classes that semester--three if I counted the three hours that I received for writing my thesis. They were the last two classes that I had to take in order for the university to let me go into the world. The first class was heavy theory, which is not my favorite thing in the world. The weird thing is that if someone shows me a complex, scientific quantum mechanics-physics theory, I can understand it without a problem. Show me one that has to do with English, or writing, my areas of expertise, and I rip my hair out and throw the book against the wall. I don't understand it, and neither does my mother. She says that I am "bright, but stubborn." Yesterday, she called me arrogant. The day before that, she said that I was a procrastinator. She also tells me that she loves me. I'm beginning to wonder.

In any case, after a brief visit to the vending machine to get my supper--a bag of over-priced stale popcorn-like substance, I was prepared for class. Tonight was the other class that I take, the slightly less theoretical one. It has the awe-inspiring name of Studies in Lexical Teaching Techniques. Damned if I know what that means. What it seems to be about is how to understand English usage well enough to teach it. This is normally the kind of class that I avoid, but I am taking it for two reasons. The first is that, as I said, it gets me graduated. The second is that I adore the teacher. Not that I don't

like most of the professors that I've taken classes from, but this guy is just so wonderful, that I take him whenever I can. It's not that he's ruggedly handsome, or has the body of a god. He has a great sense of humor, he's really intelligent, and he is so outwardly unassuming, that I just think that's he's wonderful. Now, before you start getting any funny ideas, re-read what I said earlier about men and this book. I believe that you'll find it on page 30, first paragraph. Go on. I'll wait. Remember, there will be no swooning over men in this piece. I am certainly not going to get involved with a professor at this late page number. Affection and admiration do not equal infatuation, after all.

The class itself was an odd mix of teachers, graduate students, and assorted undergrads. Some of them never got what the prof said, and some asked questions that baffled me--although at this point in my college career, that wasn't difficult. Some nights, class, despite the best efforts of the teacher, drags. This was one of those nights. Perhaps it was because I had so much to do, or maybe it was because I had actually tried to read that book beforehand, which I find makes me impatient with the material. In most classes, it's better if I go to the lecture and read later.

I think a good part of my lack of enthusiasm was because the room was so incredibly warm. This was not an uncommon occurrence on campus. The heating system was actually run by small gnomish creatures whose physiognomy differed from that of humans. They seemed to prefer temperatures above ninety or below 40, neither of which quite worked for the

students. If I dressed appropriately for class, I lost digits once I stepped outside. If I dressed appropriately for the weather outside, then I suffered from heatstroke in class. My compromise, and that of most Ohioans--the gnomes have a state contract--is to wear layers. This meant that after all of that work earlier, exercising was wasted because I looked like a penguin anyway. Most men, sane and healthy men, are not attracted to penguins, or penguin-shaped girls. Being anti-relationship was not any fun if there weren't any relationships to be against. Then I was just being bitter. A penguin-esque, stressed, cranky, bitter woman. That's not attractive in any light.

I tuned back into class and realized that the prof was asking a question. I knew the answer to and, after looking around to make sure that I was the only one who was willing to admit that I knew, I raised my hand.

"Uh...uh...uh... yes?" That was my name in this class. The other professor called me "yes, you?" At some point I was going to have find a way to let these poor guys know my name, perhaps introducing myself with some sort of mnemonic. In any case, I answered the question and preened slightly because I got it right. Besides that, I had made my one token comment for the class and could now not be accused of either not being prepared or not paying attention.

I went back to drawing cute little animals whose bodies curled into letters of the alphabet. Someday I was going to write a children's book that would be banned soon after release. It was one of my dreams. I had visions of suburban housewives ranting, raving and burning my book. I would go on

TV and claim that I didn't know what all the fuss was about. Sales would skyrocket and I could buy an island right next to Stephen King's. I'd become a recluse and never write another thing again. Critics years later would speculate about both the symbolism in my only book, and also in the books that I never wrote, which would be far greater.

I was interrupted in my reverie by the teacher saying that we could go. I looked surprised. It was twenty minutes before the class was scheduled to be let out. It was like a little present. Everyone was smiling and we all bolted out the door, except for the few, sad people who always had questions after class. They surrounded the desk, elbowing each other for space and pelted the poor prof for answers that he couldn't give. I was saddened until I remembered that I had twenty extra minutes and that the day was over. I could go to a movie. I could go shopping. I could go to a bar and watch other people drink. I could party. And best of all, I could go home. So I did.

Chapter the Eleventh:

Birds are territorial and will often fight one another if resources are limited.

Or:

The heroine discovers the pleasures of a quiet life

I walked in the door and there was a message on the machine. "Kitty? Are you there, Kitty? This is Meatball. I know you have my red lighter, Kitty, and I want it back. I know you have it, Kitty. I better get that lighter back. You know how much I love that red lighter, Kitty." I get the weirdest messages. I'd be better off if half of them were for me. I had the thought as I erased the message, *who names their child "Meatball"? How do you get that nickname? Why would you tell anyone if you had some how acquired it?* I was baffled.

I went over to the cupboard and got out a bag of microwave popcorn. I had just put it in the microwave and closed it, my finger a millimeter from the popcorn button when the doorbell rang. *Great.* I looked through my door's peephole and saw Walter. Normally, this is a good thing. Walter and I are fine friends. We are on completely different sides of any issue, but he is an interesting human being, and so we talk. It's funny. For someone who is as openly anti-emotional, misogynistic as he is, I and my feminist, liberal, emotional self am probably his best friend. We both thought that this was highly amusing. We had met through a mutual acquaintance who I didn't talk to anymore. Neither did Walter. Life is like that sometimes.

Lately, Walter had been getting on my nerves. He had just gotten a new job and hadn't quite adjusted to the schedule yet, so when he got off work, he came over. He seemed to think that because I only taught two classes and took two, that I was at least half as busy as he was. This meant, in his mind, that he could stop by at any time and chat, because I obviously didn't have anything else to do. He didn't realize that once I got home that my day was only half over. As my mother is so fond of pointing out, I have lots of stuff to do.

My sense of friendship, politeness, and more importantly, the certain knowledge that I would get caught if I didn't made me open the door. "Hi, Walter."

"What are you doing?"

"Making popcorn."

"Okay." He walked in. "Can I come in?" *Dumb thing to ask when you're already in*, I thought.

"Sure." I closed the door and sighed quietly.

"How was your day?"

"Busy," I said hoping he'd get the hint. "Yours?"

He told me. In excruciating detail. He talked about the computer system, the databases, the manipulation of the data fields, the other trainees, the coffee cups. I stood near the door with my arms folded. He paused in his great oration and looked at me. "What's wrong?"

"Bad day."

“What happened?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“What happened?” He said this as if he were talking to a small recalcitrant child.

I told him about Ken, the insufferable prig.

“Oh. You know what I think?”

“Hmm.”

“I think you’re attracted to him.”

This was one of the reasons that good ol’ Walt and I weren’t getting along. Every single time I mentioned a male, any male, he thought that I was attracted to him. At last count, he thought that I liked three of our mutual friends, two of the male GA’s, including the one who had been in a long term relationship with a person named Larry, a few of my students, and even a couple of the professors. It was ridiculous. Just because he saw the world through the lens of someone who desired every woman he saw, did not mean that I did the same with every male I saw.

“I do not like Ken.”

“Uh-huh. Then why did you get so mad?”

“Because he interrupted my class, challenged my power, implied that I was a horrible teacher and that I was a complete idiot who didn’t even know how to lead a discussion.”

“Uh-huh.” He smiled his best smug smile, the one that said, *I’m right and you’re just not admitting it yet.*

"I am not attracted to him."

"Really?"

"He's ugly, creepy, and my *student*. In what possible world does that sound like my kind of guy?" I took a deep breath. "Can we change the subject? I really don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Sure. I made a girl cry today." *You get what you ask for.*

"How? Better yet, why?"

"We were doing this role-playing exercise. I was the difficult customer." *Imagine that.* "I did what I would do if someone called and I didn't want the product. She ran out of the room crying. Her friend yelled at me for being a 'bastard.' She seemed to be upset that I wouldn't yell back. I wonder why it is that females are like that. When you are being perfectly reasonable and logical, they get so upset. Why is that?"

You arrogant, self-righteous, chauvinist misogynist prick. You think that just because you pretend that you are some kind of emotionless Vulcan, that somehow females are lacking, instead of you being completely off your rocker. I know why she called you a bastard, with your self-satisfied smug little smile.

He was still looking at me, waiting for my reply so that he could pretend that he was superior because he had made two females cry in the space of 24 hours. I refused to give him the satisfaction.

"I'll explain it to you later. Perhaps when I haven't had such a bad day. Now, if you'll excuse me, I do have lots of work that I still have to do."

"Sure. You want to go get dinner tomorrow?"

"I'm going to be really busy. I'll let you know."

"Okay. I'll see you then."

He left and I locked the door behind him. I was seething. I was furious. And before I knew it, I was cleaning. When I came out of my funk and looked around, I found that the floor was vacuumed, the dishes were all in the dishwasher rinsing, the bathroom was spotless, and my bed was made. It was as if I had gone into a fugue state and was just coming out. This was fine with me. If I clean and don't remember doing it, then it's almost like hiring a maid, but without it costing the world. This was a good thing.

I started my popcorn and prepared to write. First, I started the computer. Then I noticed that the screen was a little dusty, so I cleaned it off, sustaining a shock in the process. I checked my e-mail and sent one to Walter apologizing for my behavior, while making quite clear that he still was wrong. He would still claim victory, but I was too tired to care. I also sent an e-mail to Dr. Bird to ask him the question that I never got to ask earlier, which is what I should have done in the first place.

I took the popcorn out, filled up a water bottle, found a good cd, popped it in, and then had to label all of the tracks. I chose a good background for the player on the screen. I played one game of solitaire. Then one round of mahjong. Then I decided that the cd wasn't working because it had too many good lyrics, so I put in another. I had already labeled all of the tracks on this one because I had played it the last time I had to write a paper.

I checked out all of the templates for various things like wedding planning and writing a resume. I opened the file that contained my thesis. It was getting to the point when people who weren't even on my committee were asking if I was going to finish it. I started reading it, looking for errors that weren't underlined by the program.

My thesis was not the typical graduate thesis, because, frankly, if I had to write a research paper that lasted 50 or 60 pages, I would throw myself off the highest building in the town, and take one or two people with me. So there was to be no mention of the idiosyncrasies of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, or an analysis of anything by Galway Kinell. Not my cup of tea in the best of times, but certainly not a good idea here.

So instead, I was writing a creative thesis. I'm pretty sure that this is not normal at other universities, but the one that I attended was interested in students actually learning something, so this creative do-hicky was an option. Someone had done a creative thesis a year or two before, and hers was a collection of poems. She had to do research for that, though, and I thought that seemed like a lot of work, so I decided to pull something out of my undergrad classes and write what was called "An Academic Novel." It's a weird genre. My aforementioned friend Walter had said, when I explained it to him, "Oh. It's a novel for eggheads, by eggheads." After clarifying that they were very often funny, I agreed. My thesis was not a novel however (see above for how I feel about things that look like too much work). It was an academic novella--pretty much because I like saying the word "novella." It

sounds like something that a Catholic would light in church. Novella.

In any case, it was going pretty well. I had so far managed to convey graduate school fairly accurately. I had shown the stress, the agony, the little annoyances, the strange power structure, the lack of time to myself, the great people. I worried a lot that people were going to see themselves when I wasn't even thinking of them, or that people were going to think that it was completely autobiographical, when it was only semi-autobiographical. I had put in a scene in the office where a student got lost in the corridors and was never seen again. Things like that are utterly impossible, so how autobiographical could it be? But since it was based on real people, although in composite form, I worried that people would take it the wrong way. I also worried that I had come off as a real bitch. But writing down all of my frustrations and what I would do about them in a perfect world made it less likely to act upon any of the things that I came up with.

I lost myself in my writing for about fifteen pages and, after saving, turned off the computer, satisfied with the night's work. I had ignored two other papers and about 7,000 other things in order to write, but it was important. If nothing else, it would get my mother off my back about it for a while.

I filled the water bottle again, fed my fish, grabbed a P.G. Wodehouse book, and went to bed. I snuggled into my bed, took out my contacts and read for a bit, and ended up drifting asleep with the light on and the book still in my hand.

When it comes right down to it, graduate school is a lot like being a big bird on a thin wire in a windstorm--it's all about balance. Too little home life and splat--degreeless bum pressing burger icons. Too much school and I end up soaring so high that the sun scorches your wings. My balance has to be just right and it wasn't until this last semester that I'd found it. And I could leave you with an image of graduation day, mother crying (and she won't even know that I'm moving back in with her after I get the diploma. Then we shall see real tears). Or, I could end with me with job that leaves an opening for a sequel. But instead, I'll leave with this picture. I sleep, forehead only slightly furrowed and somewhere in my dreams of commando English professors, I wobble halfway across a chasm on a clothesline and for a moment, as a thousand birds of hundreds of species fly overhead, I smile, and find my balance.

The End