

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE DIFFICULTIES OF SELF-PUBLISHING SUCCESS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

ELENA COSTER

Spring 2012

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in English  
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Jeff Nealon  
Professor of English  
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Ruth Sternlieb  
English Advisor  
Honors Adviser

Brian Lennon  
Associate Professor, English  
Second Reader

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## **Abstract**

The main goal of this thesis is to explain why there is still such a large gap between highly lucrative and established writers and fledgling writers who are talented and but remain undiscovered and relatively unknown. The working argument that I have conceptualized and written down here uses both the research of the publishing industry as well as the research of cultural trends – the predominance of supernatural emphases in writing, for example – in order to explain why, in an era of mass production and consumption, certain written commodities are ignored and others are embraced. I see the paper as both research and commentary, combining these two aspects to help find an answer to this disparity.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Myth of Success.....	5
3. Short Story Example 1: Dinner.....	10
4. Making Sales.....	23
5. Short Story Example 2: A Lesson in His Perspective.....	28
6. Essay on A Lesson in His Perspective and Story Submissions.....	47
7. Short Story Example 3: Glass.....	51
8. Essay on Glass and Publishing Factors.....	83
9. Conclusion.....	88
10. Bibliography.....	91

## Introduction

With the advent of digital publishing, many first-time novelists believe that through sites such as Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, they will reach a wider, more accepting audience for their books and will in the manner of months, make profits without having to surrender any of it to a publisher, agent, or marketing department. It is the American Dream on the literary frontier: Publish on Kindle and watch as the book is propelled into the bestseller list. Authors have models like Amanda Hocking, who burst into the self-publishing scene in 2006 and is now worth about 2 million dollars without any of her books seeing a publishing house, to help them maintain and spread the idea that self-publishing is the new way to be noticed as a writer.

However, these authors forget that with self-publishing, the burden of marketing, selling, and generating attention for their books falls on their shoulders. Authors cannot simply publish on the Kindle and expect the book to sell. They also forget that Amazon takes a share of the profits made for itself. For books sold over three dollars, Amazon takes a thirty-five percent royalty and for books sold under two dollars, Amazon takes seventy-five percent of the profit. Some authors may think that selling their books for over three dollars will be a sufficient workaround the publishing fee - a seventy-five percent royalty for a first-time author is excellent - but then they find that charging three dollars for a self-published novel is tantamount to charging three hundred dollars for it. Self-published novels, for authors who have no reader-base or brand, generally do not sell for much more than ninety-nine cents, mostly due to competition among similar authors to keep the prices low in order to entice readers to purchase their novels, coding the prices as a sort of deal for the readers. When these books sell, they only generate thirty-five cents for the author per purchase. To make a profit of one hundred dollars from selling the book at ninety-nine cents, the author needs to sell about three hundred copies of the book. While possible, selling that many copies is next to impossible without an aggressive marketing plan for the book or without the author knowing what audience for whom he or she is writing.

Finding an audience is probably the most important aspect on which a self-publishing author can focus. Many literary critics and professors will argue against that statement; an author should not write for an audience, should not pander to readers, and should always write for him or herself primarily. The audience, to these critics, is always secondary, an afterthought, as if the audience will come to the book after it has been written and published. While that mindset may work with traditional publishing houses, where books are marketed and sent out to critics for reviews before they are released to the general public, in the self-publishing world, where pre-release hype is almost nonexistent, niche writing for an audience is a way to generate interest and notice for the novel. I call it filling a void in the mass. If an author can find an unoccupied space in the genre - Amanda Hocking and her Trylle series, for example, found a niche in the paranormal romance genre - then that author has a better chance of garnering a profit and gaining a reader base. Critics may think that such writing is pandering, but writing with a specific audience in mind is not pandering. It is merely writing smartly. All writers write with

an audience in mind. That audience is what dictates the style of writing, the structure of the argument, and the vocabulary of the writing. For example, I would not write this thesis in colloquial English because I know my audience expects and demands I write in standard English. The same goes for literary genres. With the exception of literary fiction, which can encompass several genres, each genre has certain rules and tropes that audiences expect to read when they pick up a book written in that genre. Young Adult novels will always have a young protagonist, a love triangle, and an some sort of parental or authoritarian antagonist. Paranormal romances, on the other hand, will always be part bodice-ripper and part supernatural. The author who can incorporate all these tropes of his or her chosen genre into his or her writing is the author who will sell the most books in that genre. Furthermore, the author who manages to incorporate those themes and also manages to find a voice in that genre - a different perspective, a new type of hero/heroine - is the one who excels in that genre. It is not pandering. It is researching the genre and following a formula, and in the world of self-publishing, where authors are competing in a market saturated by thousands of other authors, research is key.

Editing is also key. The practice of self-publishing novels has always existed under different, and along with it exists the inevitable stigma that self-published titles receive. Since the days of vanity publishing, self-published authors have fought against that stigma that states that self-published novels are always poorly-written, poorly-edited, unsophisticated tripe, but unfortunately, with the advent of digital self-publishing, that stigma is more often true than not. Many of the self-published books on Amazon Kindle are more like rough drafts of a manuscript than they are a finished product; they are short, badly organized, and most often, unedited. Formatting and grammar mistakes fill the books, and for consumers who buy these books, finding such a mess is aggravating and leads them to believe that these books exemplify all the books in the self-publishing market. Consumers become wary of the ninety-nine cent book with the flashy cover and the name that has never been heard of before, and sales for self-publishing authors decline as readers decide to stay with digital books that are published by traditional publishing houses. While the self-published novel might be a bargain, consumers are more secure with regularly-priced novels than they are with unknown authors.

As such, the self-publishing author must fight through a growing number of obstacles during the publication, marketing, and selling aspects of the process. Further compounding the difficulties is the fact that because digital publishing costs little or nothing at all to the author, thousands of authors are now publishing on Amazon Kindle. The market has become completely saturated and is now experiencing an information overload. Novels incorporating the same ideas and ideals are published by the dozens in every genre, and each voice contributes to a growing clamour of authors demanding attention. There is now a glut in the self-publishing community, where authors battle one another with flashier covers and more titillating product descriptions, and where the quieter, less insistent authors fall to the wayside are forgotten. Though publishing has always been a battle, even in the traditional publishing houses, self-

publishing is actually more difficult. It may seem easier - an author makes an account with Amazon, uploads his or her book, clicks a button, and there, the book is published within twenty-four hours, but the publishing process is more than simply uploading a book to the Kindle. The self-published author takes all the burdens of publishing on his shoulders. He must edit the book or find and pay people who will edit it for him. He must create a cover for it that catches the eye and generates interest. He must write a summary of it that effectively describes his book and the narrative with in it. He must also market it in whatever way he can. He must generate buzz for it. He must manage his promotions and must figure out how to bring an audience to his writing. He has no help.

The information glut hinders him, as it does to most authors in the self-publishing circuit. How can he find a reader base when the reader base is split among hundreds of other authors? Without the reader base, how can he make a profit? At times, self-publishing feels more like an exercise in frustration than anything else. An inexperienced author can fall into any number traps during the process. I will give examples from my own experiences with it.

When I first started self-publishing, I held with the notion that once the story was available on Kindle, the masses would find it and love it, and I would have job security for the next thirty years. I thought that because I was fairly knowledgeable in my genre, I would have a good grasp of the intricacies of the genre and would be able to craft a fascinating and captivating story around the formula without having to be too formulaic. Worst of all, I did not think I would have to market the book. In my mind, people would come to me. I would not have to come to people.

It took five months before I sold one copy, even with the help from the blog I run to promote the story and to connect with other authors. In the following five months, there were no sales. Clearly something was going horribly wrong.

When I examined the results later, I realized that my genre is overstuffed with writers like me who have a basic understanding of the rules of the genre but who do not have a good grasp of marketing or writing in general. Some of the other stories I investigated were poorly written and planned, and many had one-star ratings and negative reviews. Though I had no reviews or stars, I realized that my story was categorized with their stories because we were all self-publishing authors. It was obvious from our covers, mine with its black and white stock photo and size thirty-eight font, and theirs with no writing on their covers at all, only a picture that had not been resized to fit Amazon's guidelines.

It was an embarrassing moment of truth, and it in part led to the creation of this thesis.

Most authors do not seem to realize the enormity of the task that self-publishing becomes. Most go into it thinking they will make a quick profit in a few weeks and that the masses will flock to their book without a second thought. They all seemed blinded to a few fundamental truths, the first one being that self-publishing is a long hard road that has to be undertaken with the knowledge that failure can be imminent at any given point in time. Authors seem to think that subjectivity is absent in the self-publishing world, when in fact, it is stronger than ever. The customers now carry the full brunt of subjectivity, and it is them that the authors need to please because it is them who are going to be judging the book either positively or negatively, and unfortunately, the author can do very little to help sway the vote. He can make sure he has researched his genre and has edited his book to perfection, but if he does not please the crowd - just as if he does not please the editor - then his book is going to fail. If he does not market it, it will fail. If he does not acknowledge the competition around him, he will fail.

The digital era, while creating a boon and an opportunity for relatively new and unknown authors to introduce their work and ideas to the general public, is also their greatest adversary. It might create options for them, but it also creates a community where competition is fierce and unrelenting, and where market saturation creates an atmosphere of constantly changing likes and dislikes governed by the consumer. Known authors are more accepted than new authors, though rhetoric on the digital era states that anyone can now have a spotlight cast on him or her. Talented but unknown authors are almost forced to stay in obscurity, simply because they cannot break through the glass wall between marketed, traditionally published e-books and their own self-published masterpieces. The total glut of voices overwhelms them and drives them into deeper obscurity.

## The Myth of Success

The myth of the overnight, successful, self-published author had to start somewhere, and in my opinion, it started with Amanda Hocking, the 28 year-old self-publishing darling of the Internet and of Amazon. She has written ten books so far, all self-published, though she now has a contract with St. Martin's press worth two million dollars, and has averaged about nine thousand sales per day through Amazon. Her success story is the dream of millions of authors. She started from nothing, was rejected by every agent she contacted, and then found success on Amazon in the form of five books sold on her first day of sales. Her second novel sold thirty-six copies in one day. It is almost unbelievable, but in the face of the ubiquitous American Dream, it is for what we all secretly long.

Her story is certainly inspiring to a generation of self-publishers. If she can make, I can make it. That is the mindset. But what we forget is that Hocking found a recipe for success. She learned what sold and what did not, and modified her writing to portray that. In Strawberry Saroyan's New York Times article about Hocking, for example, Saroyan writes that "Hocking figured out that romance was an evergreen when it came to popularity, but that paranormal elements really helped books take off" (Saroyan, 2011). Further into the article, Hocking herself describes her writing in cynical terms. She says, "I just write books that are silly" (Saroyan, 2011). She is far enough removed, it seems, from her writing to know that what she writes is extremely formulaic and consumable. It does not question, it does not examine, simply provides escape for its readers.

That is not meant to be detraction at all. Popular fiction is often very consumable. Look at Nora Roberts or John Grisham. Do they take a harsh look at social realities and challenge us to change our ways? No. They provide seedy relationship drama and seedy court drama. And we love it. Hocking has managed to do the same with paranormal romances. She writes about love and sex and drama with a supernatural overtone, and her audience laps it up and rewards her for it. Her success comes from her ability to find a niche in the market and claim it. She does not have to be the most talented writer on Kindle. She merely found a way to be noticeable.

We may think our novels are noticeable for the very same reasons as I mentioned above. We think that because we are not afraid to ask the tough questions, that because we grew up studying Faulkner and Steinbeck and Dickens, we will be recognized for our fearlessness and our talent. Hocking thought that way too. As she told Soroyan in her article, Hocking says, "My whole life I would always read things like I write - lighter young-adult stuff. But I would also read stuff that was darker, like Kurt Vonnegut and Chuck Palahniuk, and that the kind of stuff I would try to write. Because I was like, these books are good" (Soroyan, 2011). Those books might be good, might be considered high-brow literature, and might have propelled their authors to fame or at least notoriety, but those books are not bought in the masses that say a John Grisham novel is bought. Mass-produced books tend to be easily digestible, formulaic. For example, let us look at the top-selling Kindle E-books of the day (May 23).

Number one is *The Hunger Games*. Two is *Catching Fire*. Three is *Mockingjay*. It should be noticed that these three books are all part of the *Hunger Games* trilogy and that all are

written by Suzanne Collins. Number four is *Fifty Shades of Grey: Book One of the Fifty Shades Trilogy* by E. L. James. Five is *The Hunger Games Trilogy*.

The evidence is a bit skewed for the fact that *The Hunger Games* movie premier is soon and the books have gained nationwide attention again. But *Fifty Shades of Grey* is an interesting addition to the top five list. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is E. L. James romance/erotica debut, and the novel, based on the synopsis provided by Amazon, is about Anastasia Steele, a very innocent and unworldly literature student who falls in love with the older Christian Grey, a man who has amassed great wealth and great secrets, and a taste for control over everything, including sex. The allure of the novel is its taboo eroticism dealing with sadomasochism and bondage. But at its core, the novel is like a myriad of other romances that came before it. For me, it reminds me of *Jane Eyre*, had *Jane Eyre* been written in a less prudish, less repressed era. In comparing the two, Anastasia is our modern-day Jane, inexperienced but headstrong. Christian Grey is our modern-day Mr. Rochester, dark and brooding and always wanting control. The romance and sexual undertones that pervaded Charlotte Bronte's novel as a shadowy specter are thrust out into the open in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, exploited to give the readers a titillating thrill. James follows an easy formula: Sex sells, and apparently, the sex in *Fifty Shades of Grey* has struck a nerve with her readers. I think part of the reason why this book is so popular is because it feels dirty to read, as if it is inviting us to look behind closed doors and experience something we think about but in which we never partake. It offers readers a fantasy, a dark fantasy, in which to lose themselves for a while without having to compromise their morals and or their standards. The fantasy is okay because it is not us thinking it and it is not us experiencing it. What James has done here is to recreate the *Jane Eyre* fantasy of a dark and brooding man who is dangerous but desirable because of that very dangerousness for a modern-day audience. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the dangerousness that was hinted at in Bronte's novel is spilled out into the open for all to see. The tactfulness and subtle hinting at of Bronte is replaced by forthrightness that as readers we appreciate and at which we ogle. It becomes more of a spectacle than anything else, something at which to gawk and point.

Hocking's novels are not spectacles per se, but they are of the same fantasy ilk from which *Fifty Shades of Grey* was born. Hocking's novels have that allure of forbidden sex with forbidden beings, hence her addition of supernatural aspects to her novels. She was smart enough to figure out how to make her novels sell.

An author might think like I do, that writing something formulaic and ready-made to sell is a degradation of his writing, and that it somehow diminishes him as an author. But does it really? If he is writing to make a profit, and not writing because he has something to say, then writing something easily consumable is actually the smartest approach he can take. That is where he is going to make the most money. He will still be competing in the glut with a thousand other authors with the same idea, but at least he will be competing in a field where he has a better chance of getting noticed, especially if he has an excellent marketing plan and many reviews. If he knows his audience, then he can better hone his novel to their likes and dislikes.

Research is key. Hocking researched her genre; she read Young Adult novels to see what others were writing and also looked through bookstores to see who was popular, and that is what all self-publishing authors need to do. Reading books in his genre will give him an idea of what

is trending, and what styles of writing are popular, and it also helps him to format his plot. Are these books more action oriented? What kind of person is the main character? Is it good versus evil or more ambiguous? Those are the sorts of questions he needs to ask himself when he is reading within his genre. He can also see what ideas have been done to death already and work out ways to do something more innovative with his book. What is missing from the selection? What has been underrepresented? What can he retool to be new and exciting?

These questions apply to all genres. For example, in the crime drama genre, the hypothetical author can read through some books and ask himself, what is missing? Are criminal defense attorneys fairly and accurately represented? If not, how can I do that? What kind of criminals are in these books? How can I make my criminal different? For a horror story, he can ask how do I make my monster scary and believable? What sort of techniques do other writers use for their monsters? Is gory really better? When should the big reveal happen? How long are these books, generally speaking?

By reading others' writing, he will also be able to find out what techniques do and do not work. If he likes something that another author does with his or her work - the way they tend to describe scenery, for example - then he should take note of it and try to incorporate it into his own writing. He can practice using those techniques until he can make it his own, rather than imitating it. If he merely imitates, his novel is not going to be very noticeable, and his book will not sell. It will just be another voice in the pile. Conversely, if he looks at what does not work in the writing, then he can take notes of parts where he feels the narrative falls apart, and can look at what critics have to say about it too. If he sees what worked and did not for them, then he can try to emulate that in his own book.

The digital era makes researching a bit easier, in the sense that anyone can find nearly everything needed online. With Google and Amazon, an author can find reviews of nearly anything he want, and he can also find communities where he can interact with authors in his genre. He might also find communities where you can practice his craft among others who are willing to give him pointers. Blogs can help. Online writer communities can help too. Searching websites such as [www.ereaderiq.com](http://www.ereaderiq.com) can help him find free e-books in whatever genre he wants, some written by new authors and some written by published, known authors who are promoting newly written books. He can use these books as tools, learning which ones are reviewed more favorably or what went wrong with other ones and how to incorporate themes and ideas into his own writing.

However, the digital era is also a bit of a bane to his writing. There is so much available to him and to everyone that even with a formula and a plan, he needs to be sure that he is writing at his very best. It is not like he can simply rush into it with a half-baked idea and pound out a novel in a few months, fully expecting to turn a profit within the first two weeks of sales. Amanda Hocking spent nearly nine years writing before she was able to find a formula that worked for her, and she had a background in reading Young Adult novels before writing them. She also struck gold at exactly the right moment, catching a wave of readers coming down from Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* craze. Luck and ingenuity lent themselves to her success. Her relatively short writing time also helps. Hocking takes about two to four weeks to produce a novel, after she has worked it all out in her mind. This span ensures that whatever is trending at

the moment will still be relevant when she publishes. For this hypothetical author, though, if he takes more than a few months to write a story, what might have been popular when he started has a chance of falling out of favor by the time he publishes his novel.

Aside from these mishaps, there are plenty of other writers who are doing exactly what he is doing, all at the same time. Resources are easily available and free to everyone, and they do not run out, and so more people make use of them. What he is learning from other authors is what his rivals are learning too. So while he might be doing everything right and produce a well-written, formulaic novel that is primed to sell, he might end up beaten out of a profit by someone who wrote it faster or who tweaked ideas a bit differently to sell to a positive crowd. Or the ideas that went into his book might not be popular anymore. If he started writing a novel about vampires a few years ago and finished writing it now, he might find an audience that is jaded and tired of vampires. He missed the wave that *Twilight* started and now audiences are looking for something new. They might not look at his book favorably because to them, it is another *Twilight*, masquerading under the guise of a hot new title.

Quite a bit of writing, I have noticed, is influenced by luck. An author is lucky if his book is accepted by an agent. He is lucky if his book is picked up by a publishing company. He is lucky if he sees some moderate success from it. He is lucky if he finds an audience through self-publishing. There are parts to his success that he simply cannot control very well, no matter what he does or how successful he is at completing them. Even if he does write something that ought to be profitable, any number of reasons can push his book down into anonymity. The glut strikes again. It is an omnipresent entity that always stalks his writing and never relents. If he is unlucky enough to publish a book at the same time as five other authors with similar stories, his audience is going to be divided among the five, and he might have to battle to market his book better. If one author simply has more networks than him, through no fault of his own, he could be the losing author in this battle. Or someone might give his book a negative review because she simply did not like it much and might give the other author a more favorable review because of something completely subjective. It is frustrating, but that is part of what publishing in the digital era entails. There are no guaranteed easy wins.

The ever-changing trends of popularity are also influenced by the digital era. Ideas spread fast over the Internet, though television, and across radios. Stephanie Meyers caused a veritable vampire frenzy with her novels that was picked up by other authors and television executives. Vampires became an almost ubiquitous entity in television shows for a few months before the public decided they had had enough of them. Hocking was smart and found that trolls were an unused trope of the supernatural, but now she presides over that niche, and with her monopoly on that market, trolls are pretty much her domain now. A self-publishing author is probably not going to be able to break into that field. Fairy tales are the newest trend. We have *Mirror, Mirror, The Huntsman, Grimm*, and *Ever After* dominating airwaves on major television networks and movie companies. Right now it might be profitable to write a darker, more adult version of a well-known fairy tale (*Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty*), but who is to say that the trend might not change in the next three months? Besides, adult rewritings of all three of the fairy tales I have mentioned above have been done already. Those tales are stale. An author can try finding a fairy tale that is not as well known - (*Snow White and Rose Red, Godfather Death, The Seven Ravens*) - but then there's no guarantee that people will feel

compelled to look at your story. It is a rewriting of what? What is that? Why should I care? Better yet, why should I spend my money on it?

There is a bit of a catch-22 at play. The best advice I can give is to keep writing, and to keep writing a lot. Authors can fight the glut with a glut of their own. If they keep an eye out for trends and start making skeleton outlines of ideas they might be able to flesh out, then they might be able to write something that will garner them some attention. They can look for patterns in the trends, and see what spikes and when and why. If they complete one novel and while editing it, start another, they will be busy, but will keep producing, and eventually somebody will find them. Then the word of mouth chain starts. Then, hopefully, profits start.

## Short Story Example 1: Dinner

Status: Rejected

### Dinner

They go to her parents' house for Christmas and bring the new baby with them. She says this is a terrible idea, that they should go to his mother's for the holiday and skip her parents' house all together, but he still clings to the idea that there might be a chance for amity between all parties, and so she gives in with a shrug and an ill-feeling in her stomach. They drive in a tense silence, she praying that dinner doesn't end in disaster, he hoping that things will have changed over these past few years, and the baby thinks nothing aside from wet, squishy baby thoughts punctuated by moments of shrill squelching. They have to pull over three times to get him changed, and when they finally end up in New Jersey, they are forty-eight and a half minutes late and the baby is entirely pleased with himself.

The baby looks more like his mother than his father, with browner skin and darker hair, but he's inherited a mix of his parents' eyes, brown from his mother and green from his father mixing to produce a creamy hazel-eyed gaze that stares wonderingly out at a world just out of reach.

She hoists him up on her shoulder, and his pudgy little fingers clench in her hair and pull hard. She takes this as a bad omen, bites her lip, and tries to uncurl his grasp without hurting him in the process. Her husband tries to help by picking up the Christmas gifts. The baby gurgles in her ear.

"I can't do this," she mumbles, closing her eyes. "I really, really can't do this."

"You can at least try. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Papá will stab you with a steak knife and I'll be a moneyless widow with a child to support."

"I think you're overreacting a little."

Her strained temper snaps a bit and she rounds on him, the baby cooing along for the ride. "You said that when we first started dating. You said that when we got engaged. You said that when we got married. All those times, was I overreacting?"

He shrinks back a little, and in any other situation it would be funny to see a grown man duck away from a woman who doesn't quite clock five foot five, but in this situation, it's just another bad omen. She continues to puff up in righteous indignation, and he rushes in for a hug.

"You weren't, you weren't. But it's gotten better since then." He doesn't see her face twist in skepticism. "I know it has. Honestly." He pulls back to look at her, and she schools her features into neutral support. "We'll get through this together. We always have." She smiles,

and they kiss, and the baby grabs at his hair. He laughs and loops his arm through hers. Together, they head for the stairs.

The concrete steps seem to lead away into a centralized oblivion, focusing into a single point off on the horizon, distant and tiny. She experiences a moment of vertigo, and her mind reels with dizziness. Her hand grasps at the railing, and her husband gently pushes at her back.

She hasn't been home in several years, not since she married and certainly not since she had her baby. Her parents hadn't even come to the christening. She falters.

"I don't want to do this. Let's just go, please."

"We have to do this. We said we'd be here."

"We'll say there's traffic. An accident. The car sprung a leak. The spare was flat. Please, please, let's just go, please."

"Your mom probably already saw us out the window anyway. We're here for better or for worse." He smiles. "Don't worry. It's going to be okay."

No it's not, she thinks. It really isn't going to be.

They make it up the stairs after what seems like an eternity of climbing, stopping, and doubting. She opens the screen door, hesitates, then knocks. She hears sounds from the kitchen, grumbles and scraping chairs, and the doorknob turns beneath her palm. Her feet take an involuntary step back. The baby pulls on her shirt. Her mother answers the door.

Her mother's face is lined with deep wrinkles, especially around her mouth and eyes. She's gotten fatter too, an exploring, gelatinous blob oozing out from under her ratty black shirt. Her hair is dull iron grey, and it's bound back in a loose, brittle ponytail. Her lips are thin and tightly pressed.

Mother and daughter stare at each other from two different sides of the threshold. The daughter tries to smile and fails, and her mother continues to stare emotionless at her. The baby looks at his grandmother and grabs for her with his hands. Her mother's face softens, and she steps back to let her daughter and her husband in. For him, she has a glare and a bitter silence to give him, but refuses to be put down and breaks the ringing silence first.

"Thank you for having us, Pilar," he says. Pilar says nothing, and her eyes turn to sharpened daggers. His smile dims just a bit. "How is everything?" She turns her back on him and starts banging pots and pans around on the stove.

"You are late, Ofelia" she tells them. The baby on Ofelia's shoulder turns its face away from the noise and whines in protest.

"We had to stop a few times, Mamá," Ofelia says. "The baby didn't like the car ride much."

“Was he driving?” Pilar’s head jerks in the husband’s direction.

“Of course, Mamá. I had to keep my hands free for the baby.”

Pilar snorts as if that explains it all and goes on banging pots. The baby’s lower lip begins to tremble and his face to pucker. Ofelia bounces him worriedly and walks deeper into the kitchen.

It’s much like she remembers it, right down to Jesús staring out across the room from above the refrigerator. His placid, almost bovine eyes contemplate them in sad, unhurried judgment. Though she doesn’t really believe much anymore, she crosses herself and murmurs a prayer to the blessed *virgen* for protection and forgiveness. Then she turns her back on Jesús and leans against the refrigerator door.

The tiles are still dirty, the lights still yellow and mute. The room smells of rice and beans, like it always has, and of salty seasonings mixed with chicken breast. She wonders if that’s what her mother is cooking for the big Christmas dinner, a big plate of rice and beans with chicken that will leave them all stuffed for days on end afterwards. Ofelia herself has never been able to recreate the recipe just right. There’s always something off about it when she makes it, something not quite right, as if it’s a cheap McDonald’s knockoff passing off for authentic. Her cooking talents aren’t bad, she knows, or how else would she have been able to keep a cook entranced for all these years, but what she cooks is closer to the conglomeration of cultures known as American cooking than it is to her native one. Ricotta-stuffed chicken breasts with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce is her specialty. Her rice and beans, while still good by her husband’s standards, feel more like a dilettante’s dabbling than a dish she should know how to prepare without having to look up a version of it online.

Ofelia bites her lip and jiggles the baby. He makes a grab for her nose this time and spits up on himself. She sighs, hands him off to her husband, and digs around for a napkin.

Pilar comes to their rescue with a dishtowel, scooping up the baby and scrubbing his face with the thing. Ofelia is fairly sure it’s been used to scrub dishes as well, judging from the baby’s shrieks, but the ordeal is over in seconds, and Pilar balances the baby on her hip, crooning softly to him in Spanish. Ofelia squashes the sudden, instinctual need to grab her baby and run. She plays with her husband’s sleeves instead to keep herself distracted. He pats her head.

“What is his name?”

“You didn’t get the card we sent you, Pilar?”

Stony silence descends.

“Javier, Mamá. We named him Javier.”

Pilar nods and smiles softly at the baby. Javier sneezes at her. She coos and pinches his nose.

“Do you want to sit down?” Ofelia asks her husband. She leads him over to the battered, ancient table and pulls out a chair for him. He sits in it, knees bent up because he’s too tall for the low seat, and looks awkwardly about him, like a giant trapped in a human’s house. He sees Jesús and frowns a bit, but Ofelia glares at him from across the table, and so he shrugs and looks elsewhere, though his eyes keep straying back to Jesús and his melancholy face. There’s something about his big, liquid eyes that attracts and arrests his attention.

Ofelia sighs and rests her head in her palm, rubbing her eyebrows smooth. Pilar stands in a corner with Javier and sings off-pitch to him, rocking on her feet. Her husband watches from his too-small seat and tries to figure out if Pilar’s actually singing or if she’s chanting some sort of protection spell or curse while still glancing now and then at Jesús. The absurdity and painfulness of the situation becomes too much for Ofelia, and she stands, straightening out her skirt.

“Where is Papá?”

“Upstairs with his guitars.” Ofelia makes a move for the stairs. “No, don’t go up there. He wants to be left alone. He’ll come down when he’s ready to face you.” Ofelia wavers at the foot of the stairs, looking up at the landing and the door where she can almost hear the mournful plucking of guitar strings if she strains her ears hard enough. Her husband shifts in his chair and the legs creak ominously, and Pilar glares at him until he stands up sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. She pushes the chair back in forcefully, rattling the glass vases on the table. “You’ve upset him greatly, Ofelia.”

“I know, Mamá. I’m sorry.”

Pilar ignores the apology and says, “If you knew, why did you do it. You knew we didn’t want you to marry while you were still in college. You knew we didn’t want you to marry the first boyfriend you had. You knew we didn’t want you to marry him.” She jerks her head again to the husband. “So why did you do it?”

“Mamá, please understand. I didn’t do it to be spiteful.”

“That is exactly what you’ve done. And now you come to our house, bringing your good-for-nothing husband and his child to present them to us, and you expect us to be happy for you?”

“Pilar,” the husband begins, but Pilar shouts at him in Spanish and the baby starts wailing, and there’s nothing but general confusion for a few minutes. Pilar continues to shout and scream in Spanish, hurling insults left and right at everyone, and Ofelia rushes in to save Javier, prying him from her mother’s grasp and taking him into the living room. She is crying, but she pretends that she’s not, sniffing furiously with her head bowed. Her husband doesn’t know what to do. But he doesn’t want to stay in the kitchen with Pilar, and so follows his wife into the living room. Pilar lobs curses he doesn’t understand at his back.

He finds Ofelia rocking on the moth-eaten couch, clutching her baby to her chest, weeping quietly. He goes to her, tries to wrap his arm about her shoulders, but she shrugs him

off and says, “I told you this would happen. I told you. Why did you make me come? We could have spent the holiday with your mother, and it would have been so much better. Why did you make me come back here?”

“I’m sorry, Ofelia,” he says. “I didn’t know they were still upset. I thought things would have changed by this time.”

“I told you,” she insists. “I told you, I told you, I told you.”

“You did. I’m sorry.”

His apologies infuriate her, and she rounds on him, eyes blazing. “And you! It’s not like you want to be here.” He rears back in surprise. “Don’t lie, I know you’re uncomfortable here. I know what you’re thinking. That we’re a bunch of hyper-religious freaks who don’t understand the principles of science. That we practice Santería and animal sacrifice down in the basement or something. You and your Religious Studies lectures and degrees. You think we’re backwards, that we believe in fake gods, that we’re no better than the Mayans or the Aztecs.”

She leans back in the couch, breathing heavy, feeling ashamed and oddly lighter at the same time. Her legs tremble. Javier bites anxiously down on his fist. Distractedly, while waiting for her husband to form words, she takes his hand out of his mouth and gives him her finger instead. He sucks on it loudly.

“Ofelia, I never meant to insult you. I don’t think that way about you or your family. You know that, Ofelia, don’t you? I respect you and your parents’ beliefs, even if I don’t hold them myself.” He pulls her close. “I still love you, even if you do keep a bull in the basement for sacrifice.”

She finds it’s impossible to stay mad at him, and she gives him a watery smile and a watery kiss. Pilar lurks in the hallways and mutters in Spanish. The two spring apart like guilty teenagers, and Ofelia hides her face behind her hair and her husband twists like a pinned butterfly. Above them, her father shifts around in the bedroom, moving furniture and tromping around like an angry beast looking for food. Or a bull, for that matter.

Pilar leaves the hallway for the kitchen, and Ofelia and her husband trail behind her, chastened, quiet. Javier pulls at Ofelia’s hair and screeches, picking up on the strained atmosphere.

“I’m going back out to the car, okay? I want to make sure we didn’t leave anything we need in there,” the husband says. He moves to kiss Ofelia, hesitates under Pilar’s baleful gaze, and settles for a quick, distant hug. Then he flees, his footsteps echoing off the concrete stairs. Pilar begins to gather ingredients on the counter.

“Come here and help your mother, Ofelia,” she commands. “Get the chicken broth out of the cupboard.” Ofelia sets Javier down in his car seat and automatically begins helping Pilar with the cooking, a learned condition from years of training.

It's strange to hear Spanish again after so long a time away from it though, and Ofelia's brain is a little slow in processing it. She goes to the refrigerator by mistake before she realizes it, freezes, and hears Pilar scoff behind her.

"Mamá, why do you have to be so mean to him?" The chicken broth is hiding behind countless cans of Goya beans, and Ofelia weighs it in her hand as she walks over to the stove. The words taste strange in her mouth, foreign and cumbersome, and her accent is odd to her ears. "He wants you and Papá to like him, that's all."

"We will never like him. You are too good for him."

"Mamá, please."

"No please!" Pilar slams her spoon down on the counter, and Ofelia remembers the sharp sting of the spoon against her knuckles and flinches away. "There is no please here. You deliberately refused to listen to your father and I. You went off with him when you specifically knew we didn't want you to. Do you know how I and your father have suffered because of you? Do you know? We had such high hopes for you, Ofelia. We had such high hopes. And you ruined them all."

"Ruined? What?" Ofelia cries. "What have I ruined, Mamá? Tell me. I still graduated, didn't I? I still graduated with honors, didn't I? I still have a nice house, don't I?"

"If you call a hovel in Pennsylvania nice."

"Mamá! You haven't even seen it!"

"I don't want to see it!" Pilar bangs a pot onto a burner and shouts. "I don't want to see where you live with your good-for-nothing husband! I don't care! I don't care!" Each word is accentuated by a bang of something or other within reach. Javier wriggles in his seat and howls.

"Mamá, you're upsetting Javier, stop!" Ofelia rushes to her son's side and tries to comfort him. He won't be calmed, however, and continues to scream.

Pilar continues to bang the spoon.

Ofelia flees with the hiccuping Javier back into the living room and wonders where her husband has gone. She wishes she could escape like he has, under the guise of checking the car or something, but this is her family, and she has to deal with them. She sits in her father's rocker and gently pats his back while he snuffles unhappily, and thinks about awful her life is now that she's left the familial house.

It'd be nicer if I hadn't left. If I hadn't, my parents wouldn't be so upset, I wouldn't have met my husband, I wouldn't have this child clinging to my shoulder. I should have just gone to a local college so I could have stayed home and taken care of Papá and Mamá. That would have been the right thing to do instead of running away and disobeying them. Papá didn't want me to

go so far. I should have listened and stayed here. Things would be so much better now if I had. I could be living here, happy and with my family intact.

And alone, her inner voice adds. Very, very alone. Unhappy. Wondering what goes on in a world that doesn't deal with what Jesús and your father wants for you, one that doesn't smell eternally of beans and rice and Goya seasonings. One without this new family you've fashioned for yourself.

"Ofelia!" A shiver passes through Ofelia and drags her away from her thoughts. "Come back and help! Stop running away from me!" Pilar shouts from the kitchen. Javier whimpers in her ear. He's learning at an early age to fear his maternal grandmother, and in Ofelia's opinion, that's all right. Let him learn early so he can steel himself better than his mother has. "Ofelia!"

"I'm coming, Mamá!" Then quieter, "I'm coming." She pauses, stretches her aching back. "Come on, Javier. Let's go back into the fray." She wishes she could leave him in the living room, where the noise at least will be lessened, but she's afraid to leave him there by himself, in case something bad or worse happens. That's last thing she needs, an injured baby. Her mother would never let her live it down.

The water and chicken broth for the rice is already simmering by the time she comes back to the kitchen and straps Javier down in his seat. "Get me the seasoning."

Ofelia digs it out and hands it off without word. She watches as Pilar douses the pan with it, spreads it over the cutting board, rubs the chicken into it. Her mother's hands are gnarled with arthritis and age, her skin leathery and cracked, but her fingers work with an efficiency that is still impressive, even to those who know her. These hands are strong, hands that have raised a child and a household most of her life and that have slaved and sacrificed for years to keep these walls up around this family to keep them safe from the rain. They are not hands to cross. They've seen strife and horror and terror and bitter disappointment, and in this moment, Ofelia is sad that she's hurt them to such an extent.

"Mamá, here, let me do that." Ofelia reaches for the chicken, but Pilar shrugs her off, as if her touch will somehow spoil the food. "Please, Mamá?"

"I have it," Pilar snaps. "If you want to be useful, go get me a can of beans and open it."

The can-opener is old and rusty, and to Ofelia, used to modern-day marvels like electric and automatic can openers, the thing is terrifying and confounding. She fumbles with it, manages to rip the paper label off the can instead of the top, mangles the poor thing to an inch of its life, and then Pilar grabs it out of her hands and has it open in three seconds.

Ofelia's fingers are long and graceful, made for pianos and flutes and other once-leisurely qualities. They are strong only in the sense that she has a good grip and nothing else. Desperate battle is something that her hands have never seen. They are too dainty, too flighty for anything like that.

Shoes on the concrete, a knock at the door, and Ofelia unlocks it and ushers her husband in. Javier gurgles and grabs at him from the table.

“Can you take Javier?” Ofelia asks him. “It would help a lot.” Pilar grumbles something in Spanish, and Ofelia stiffens, her shoulders rising. Her husband takes the baby wordlessly and heads for the hallway.

“I do not want him in my house,” Pilar says. Ofelia’s husband stops and stands there in the doorway like a tall, lanky, awkward lump in this tiny, claustrophobic space, holding his baby awkwardly on his waist

Ofelia answers back in heated Spanish, and after a few choice words, the two begin to yell, waving their arms, their faces turning ugly shades of red. Ofelia’s husband retreats to the bathroom and the lock clicks.

The fight doesn’t last long, they never do, though it feels like it goes on for days and weeks and months and years. When Ofelia knocks on the bathroom door to retrieve her husband and her son, she sports a dim crimson stain on her cheek, and it looks as if she’s been crying.

“What happened?” her husband asks, reaching with concern to her face, but she turns her head and ducks behind her hair.

“Mamá and I are going to cook dinner now, okay? Why don’t you and Javier go for a drive somewhere?”

“I don’t want to leave you alone here, Ofelia.”

“I’ll be okay, honestly.”

“Ofelia.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t like this.”

Her strained temper snaps again. “You wanted to come here.”

He lowers his gaze. “I know. I’m sorry.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry too. Look, just take Javier and go to the bookstore or something. The GPS is in the car, right?” He nods. “I’ll text you when we’re going to have dinner, okay?”

“I really don’t like this, Ofelia.”

“It’s what has to happen. Mamá won’t cook if you’re here.”

“So I have to go, is that it? I have to be put out like a dog?”

“I’m sorry.” She doesn’t sound very sorry. She sounds more tired than anything else, tired and bone-weary. “I’m sorry,” she repeats, and her voice is hollow and empty.

“Ofelia,” he warns. “I’m not going to put up with this.”

“You wanted to come here.”

“I didn’t think it would be like this.”

“What did you expect?” Ofelia hisses. “That they would welcome you like some long-lost son? Is that what you expected?”

“Don’t take this out on me. Don’t you take this out on me, Ofelia.”

Ofelia sighs, brushes her fingers across her bruised cheekbone. Her husband watches her with mounting, conflicted concern. She’s told him stories of the violence in her household, but this is the first time he’s ever seen it in person.

“I’m sorry, okay? I don’t want to be angry at you. I don’t want to be angry with you. I’m just trying to make this work out.”

“Having me run away isn’t going to make it work.”

“You staying here isn’t going to make it work.”

He reaches out and tucks her hair behind her ear. She leans into his touch, wincing slightly as his palm glances across the bruise.

“Maybe I can talk to your mother.”

“Mamá won’t talk to you.”

“But if I can sit down and just have her listen to me.”

“She won’t.”

“How do you know that?” Ofelia lets her silence speak mountains for her. Her husband makes a small, agonized, and frustrated noise in the back of his throat, and jiggles Javier distractedly. He tries one last time. “Are you sure I can’t talk to her?”

A shadow falls on the pale light filtering into the bathroom. Pilar looms behind her daughter, her arms crossed, her wrinkled face stormy and dark. She speaks sharply to her daughter in brusque Spanish, then stalks back into her domain. A pot slams onto the stove, and both Ofelia and her husband wince.

“Just go,” Ofelia whispers. “I’ll text you when dinner is ready.”

Her husband looks as though he wants to argue with this decision further, but Javier tugs at his shirt, and the fight goes out of his face all at once, leaving him looking drained and miserable.

“All right, Ofelia,” he says. “If that’s what you want.”

It’s not what she wants, but it’s the best that she can hope to get at this point.

-

Dinner itself is a lesson in catastrophe. Ofelia's husband returns with Javier after about two hours lost to sipping a sickly sweet mocha in the bookstore cafe and driving around in a general bad mood. Pilar ignores him and sets down a steaming dish of beans on the dining room table, and Ofelia barely acknowledges him, rushing around with forks and knives to finish setting the table before her mother is done arranging the food. The two women look eerily similar, with their hair tied back and their faces flushed, jaws set in a bulldog scowl, Ofelia like a younger, prettier version of Pilar.

For now.

He shivers and looks away.

Ofelia brushes past him and gives him a quick peck on the cheek. “Dinner in five minutes,” she whispers, whisking away an errant cooking spoon. “You have chocolate under your nose.” Pilar snorts into the chicken and otherwise continues to ignore him, and he takes a seat in the kitchen and waits.

Upstairs, like a thunderclap, the bed creaks, and Pilar’s husband begins his journey downstairs to dinner. Ofelia’s husband stands to greet him and is forcibly pushed down by his wife, who shakes her head and glares him down into submission. Her father treads heavily down the carpeted steps, one aged, wrinkled, spotted claw clinging to the railing. He is old and frail and short, much shorter than Ofelia’s husband, but what he lacks in size he makes up for in presence. It’s as if some sort of anachronism has wandered into their midst.

He surveys his family the way a king surveys his lands, his eyes passing over Pilar, Ofelia, Javier, and the dinner table. What he sees doesn’t seem to please him because he grunts, sighs, and then saunters over to the table, taking the head seat. Pilar scurries after him, clucking at him in random syllables of Spanish, and then takes a seat next to him, still clucking. Ofelia, her head bowed, chooses the one at his left. Her husband is left to take the seat facing him.

The two men’s gazes meets for a millisecond over the beans. Her father curses at her

husband in curt English and then switches to peremptory Spanish again, ordering his wife and daughter around with agitated gestures and grunts.

For a while, there is no talking, just the slurping sounds of eating. Ofelia and her husband pick at their food. Pilar chews noisily and her husband shovels forkfuls of chicken into his bristling mouth. He finishes before all of them and licks his plate clean while he waits. Ofelia smooths out her eyebrows and grits her teeth.

Animals, she thinks. They're all animals. I must be adopted. I hope I'm adopted.

Pilar speaks first. "I hope you liked it, dear," she says to her husband, smiling. He deigns to look at her and shrugs.

"It was okay," he answers. "Ofelia, what did you think?"

"I thought it was very good, Mamá."

"That's a good girl."

Noticeably, Ofelia's husband is left out.

"Would you like desert, Emilio?"

Emilio frowns and pats his stomach. "I need to lose weight. You keep bringing home sweets and cakes and baking things and making me fatter by the day." His tone is far from gentle teasing.

This starts a small fight between Pilar and Emilio about who is making who fat and why, and it goes on for a few minutes until Ofelia, in desperation, begins clearing away plates. Pilar immediately begins to race her daughter through the task as if not to be left out, and the two disappear into the kitchen, leaving Emilio and Ofelia's husband alone.

The silence settling over them is uncomfortable, sticky, the kind that makes people blab silly things just to get the conversation started and kill the quiet preying on them. Ofelia's husband makes such a mistake.

"You have a lovely home," he says for lack of anything better. Emilio stares at him as if he's uttered some kind of obscenity. "And a lovely wife." Sweat beads pouring down his back. "And daughter."

Emilio's eyes blaze. "You dare brag about my daughter in front of me?" he hisses, and Ofelia's husband rears away, waves of heated anger pouring over his face. "You dare, to my face, tell me I have a lovely daughter?"

"I didn't mean any harm, please."

"You dare come to my house after you have seduced my daughter, seduced her away from her house, her family, me, her future, and you dare tell me to my face that I have a lovely daughter?" Emilio doesn't wait for an answer. "You are scum." He spits vehemently. "You are scum. A waste. The worst kind of criminal. You have ruined my daughter. You have saddled her with a whelp bearing your blood and name, a soiled baby no one will want. You have taken my daughter, you lecher, and now no other man can have her. She is tainted, by you." Emilio leans forward. "Will you abuse your wretched whelp the same way you have abused mine?"

Ofelia's husband finally breaks out of his stupor with a cry. "Now you wait a damned minute. Abuse? You're going to say I abused your daughter? Are you really going to accuse me of abusing your daughter?"

"She was only a child when you took her, you *cabrón*. A child!"

"Nineteen is hardly a child!"

"A child!" Emilio shouts. "A child! And you took her! Tainted her! Ruined her!"

"I did nothing wrong!" Ofelia's husband shouts back.

"Child abuser!"

"Take a good god-damned look in the mirror before you start calling me a child abuser," Ofelia's husband snarls. "Take a good look and think about what you did to her growing up. I helped her see there was more to life than your damned religion and patriarchal nonsense. I helped her realize that life isn't about what you want, it's about what she wants. You lost your control over her when she was eighteen, but you still haven't realized that she's not your puppet to dance around a stage anymore. She is her own woman, and you better start acting like she is."

"I will not sit here and be insulted by a child abuser! Get out of my house! Out!" Emilio picks up a vase and hurtles it at the wall. Shards of glass rain down on the floor, and Javier begins to scream. Ofelia and Pilar come running, and Ofelia's husband grabs his wife and drags her clawing out into the kitchen.

“Get Javier and your things. We’re leaving,” he snaps, and she, with her eyes wide and glassy, nods mutely. In the dining room, Pilar and Emilio hurl curses at each other and at the couple, and Emilio throws another vase. It explodes into a dozen pieces and spills onto the kitchen floor.

“Ofelia! Ofelia! Don’t you dare go with him! Don’t you dare! Your place is here, with me! Ofelia! We are your family, not him! Not this abuser!” Ofelia stops in the middle of the kitchen and begins to cry noisily, dropping her face into her hands and openly weeping. Emilio stands and makes a clumsy grab for her, but her husband is faster and lither and has her out the door before Emilio is fully into the kitchen, and her sobbing body disappears behind the wall and down the steps.

Her husband throws what can be thrown into the trunk, straps the wailing and distraught Javier into the backseat, and shoves Ofelia into the front passenger seat, slamming the door in his fury and rush. Ofelia flinches and sobs harder, fumbling blindly for her seat belt, feeling useless and used and used up. Her husband begins to drive. In the rear view mirror, he sees Emilio stumble out onto the porch to howl at them, and he flips him the bird.

Then the whole unhappy scene fades into the distance, and he lets out a sigh of relief. Ofelia keeps crying until she falls asleep against the window, her face puffy and red. When they reach their home, he gently wakes her and together, they settle Javier into his crib and settle themselves into their bed. They don’t talk. It’s early yet, but both are exhausted and wrung dry, and neither want to do anything that requires thinking. He puts on the television, and she brings out a book, and still, they don’t talk. There’s not much to say. Too much has already been said.

She thinks she ought to touch him with an elbow or a foot, a friendly, intimate gesture they have both shared and enjoyed on numerous occasions, but it also feels wrong now, dirty, spoiled, and a blight crawls across her skin and down her spine. No, there will be no touching tonight. She is glad that she has long, bulky pajamas on. She doesn’t want him to see her naked or in any kind of compromising way. She can’t believe she has let him see her naked. Wrong, all wrong. Sin creeps around her belly, cold and hard. She turns on her side and cries into her pillow.

## Making Sales

How do I know so much about publishing on the Kindle? I self-publish there. I see what happens on there, which authors make money, which do not, details like that. I blog as well under a pen-name, and I talk to other authors there about how their sales are going and how their book deals are coming along. It is the same story for most of them: the book deal is not coming along and the sales are meager at best.

But why? Why are the sales on Kindle and Smashbooks so low? Why are there no reviews?

It is because of the glut. There are simply too many people writing and posting for any one author to hold an audience's attention for long, especially if this author happens to be a first-time novelist. No one wants to take a chance on a first-time novelist. Look at it this way: Would anyone pay twenty dollars for a blender advertised on television late at night, regardless of how well it promises to work, when anyone could pay the same price on a blender made by a company that is known and trusted? It is the same concept for a novel. An author's novel might be just as good as Stephen King's novel, but no one is going to buy that novel when they can buy a Stephen King one. They know Stephen King. He has delivered the goods before, and he will continue to deliver them. He can be trusted.

A new author, however, cannot.

New authors do not have backings. It doesn't matter if they have taken creative writing courses or if they have an MFA in creative writing or if they are amazing writers. They still do not have a backing. The idea that their book is good enough to pass through an editor's hand, a publisher's hand, and an entire process of proof-reading, rewriting, and reworking, is powerful. Maybe customers do not think about it consciously, but subconsciously, they look for that seal of approval and gravitate towards books that fulfill that need for security. It is how people shop.

Debut books also need reviews to make sales. The more reviews they have, the more security they have with a customer because people have taken the time to voice their opinions on these books. The more stars they have as well, influences a customer's view of them. Reviews and stars mean that the story is worthwhile enough for people to return to it with either praise or criticism, and though criticism might carry negative connotations, even critical reviews are important to have attached to the story. Regardless of critique or praise, reviews give customers a sense of comfort. Not all of the reviews need to be written by professionals either; customers will also weigh in with their opinions. So how do you find some of these reviews for yourself?

Again, authors need to look to social media. If a debut author runs a blog as I do, and have followers with whom he or she has made friends, he or she can send them free copies of his or her novel or story and ask them to write a review of it at some point. It is best if reviews are contacted first with a plan rather than simply sent random samples of writing. An author can also offer to review something of theirs, or to host them on the blog so that they can be introduced to a new reading audience. This act of give and take fosters relationships and allows

authors to build a network of fellow authors and readers who know the author and the author's writing.

If an author frequently buys self-published novels and stories on Amazon as well, then he or she should review them. Chances are, those authors will look up reviewers and return the favor. Debut, self-published authors cannot wait for an audience to find them. They need to create an audience for themselves.

If they do not, their story will probably never see that many reviews, if any at all. My own stories have been available for about a year now, but out of the five available, only two have reviews, one of which was written by a fellow author I knew from my blog and whom I asked for a review. The other review came from a stranger who purchased my story during the five day sale when it was available for free. A year, five stories, and only two reviews. It might be better statistics than a few other stories available on Kindle, but it certainly is not garnering me any sales.

One of the reasons why finding reviews is so difficult is because of the ease with which people can purchase digital books. One-click purchase is exactly what it sounds like. A customer clicks, buys the book, and the book is delivered to his or her Kindle in seconds. It is great for customers, but not exactly conducive for authors. So many books can be bought in so little time, and it wouldn't be surprising if a debut author's book manages to become lost in the tide of purchases, especially considering how the Kindle sorts books in its library. The Kindle sorts books by author name, title, or recently viewed, which is the default sorter. It is very easy for a book to simply disappear in the midst of the masses, unless an author is lucky enough to have a name that sorts the book closer to the beginning of the list or have a title that does the same. If not, the book or story might not be seen for a while, if at all.

So while self-publishing is an innovative way to expose people to new work, it is not a way to build a lasting reader base or even make much money. Too much of the burden is on the author to market the book, to champion it, to find reviewers for it, and to find an audience for it. If an author is not prepared for that struggle, self-publishing will be more of a lesson in frustration than anything else.

I did not go in prepared. I went in thinking that once I posted the first short story of the series on which I was working, I would become half famous overnight. Give it a month, I thought, and I would be rolling in profits. I was naive. After a few weeks of nothing, I began to realize that self-publishing was not a magical panacea and that it is not a roundabout way to make money without having to spend money on an agent or publisher. In fact, it is quite a chore, managing a blog, answering reviews, thinking about new posts, and writing, always writing something new to sell on Kindle. It is a harsh reality.

Too many people rush into self-publishing without researching their facts and contribute their mess of a story to the glut, all expecting fame and glory in return. But all they achieve is turning readers away from self-published books. Too many mistakes, too many typos, too many recycled, bad plots make readers wary of self-published authors and their writing, and these customers tend to stay away from those sorts of books. All self-published works suddenly find themselves stained with an imagined stigma of being poorly-written, sloppy, underprepared,

immature ventures into the publishing world. It is like the old adage: One bad apple spoils the bunch. One bad self-published novel ruins the bunch. As such, aspiring novelists fail to reach an audience through self-publishing because of myriad obstacles.

The stigma on self-published novels is old, however. Vanity publishing, where the author pays to have copies of his or her book made and distributed, is looked down upon by nearly everyone in the profession. It is seen as an act of desperation and, well, vanity. If the writing is good, why does it need to be vanity published? Why, if it is so good, was it not sent to a publishing house? Vanity publishing, in its non-digital form, is rarely ever successful. Not enough books are distributed to stores and those that are do not find a lot of attention because there is no marketing campaign bolstering them. The costs of vanity publishing often exceed the profits made. The book may be out there, but it is suffering, and the author is suffering with it.

Steve Weber offers advice on getting self-published books noticed in his book *Plug Your Book! Online Book Marketing for Authors*. He writes,

Sounds good, right? But debut authors have no control over it. Book recommendations cannot really influence an author's recommendation rank unless you find a posse of your friends who have no qualms about buying your book to boost its sales. Plenty of authors do that often, but it is a morally ambiguous practice. Some new authors might have a personal problem with asking for fake reviews.

Another problem arises from using recommendations as a self-published author's primary source of marketing. If an author is writing fiction, for example people use Amazon recommendations to purchase fiction books only two percent of the time, meaning that book recommendations do not really affects sales. Weber explains, "Recommendations from family members or personal friends were much more effective for fiction and religious books than online recommendations..." (Weber, p. 28). Even in the digital era, word of mouth is an author's best friend. What is the best way to start a word of mouth chain? Blogs.

Blogs can be useful in an author's quest. They are a great way to network and find authors in similar genres and positions, and building connections with them allows self-publishers to find people who will champion their book for them to new readers, provided the debut authors do the same for their peers. Blogging, especially for self-published authors, is a game of give and take. Authors find blogs that they like, then begin to comment on posts, to follow the blogs, and finally, to create links to them on the blog's front page. If authors are social with the other bloggers, they will be social with the author in question, and he or she will start to see traffic come to his or her site. Authors can also promote books on their blog. Create a page that has links to the book on Amazon. Give a little synopsis of the book underneath the link, and have it contain all the pertinent information, like price, genre, and length. Authors can put up samples of writing on the blog, to give people a taste of how they write and what they write. The people that they follow might not buy your book, but they will be familiar with the writing and might give pointers on how to make it better. Better yet, if self-published authors become friends with other bloggers, self-published authors can offer to host them on the blog or offer them an online interview so that these can be introduced to a new audience. Generally speaking, the other blogger will offer a spot or interview as well on their blogs as well, as a way

to show politeness and friendship. In this way, new authors can reach a different audience and hopefully find a few new readers for their blog.

Twitter is also a valuable tool in the quest to up the book's recommendation levels. On Twitter, authors can send out alerts when the blog is updated, and authors can send shoutouts to other bloggers and promote their posts as well. The more social debut authors are with others, the more social they will be with the new author. Retweeting their alerts will also serve to win self-published authors points with them.

We tend to think of writing as a very solitary act, but it really is not. We can shut ourselves away in an attic and pound out a novel, but what good is that if no one knows and no one sees it? With digital help, we can find similar authors from all over the country and the globe, and in them, find mentors and friends, people who are willing to take a few minutes to give us pointers on how to make self-published author's writing better and people are able to give those word of mouth recommendations so desperately need.

However, in looking to increase rank and sales, new authors need to watch out for potential pitfalls in the form of get-rich-quick schemes. Weber points out one such example. "One short cut many new authors are trying these days is 'Amazon Bestseller Campaigns.' And who can blame them: What author doesn't want to have a No. 1 book and millions of loyal readers?" (Weber, p. 31). In these campaigns, authors pay a marketing consultant 2,700 dollars in order for their book to be "'guaranteed' bestseller within '38 days'" (Weber, p. 31). Sound fishy? It is.

Shortcuts such as this one are nothing more than traps that take advantage of inexperience and impatient new writers. Paying 2,700 dollars to make a book a bestseller is not going to work, plainly put. The marketing consultants do not care about the book; it can be good or it can be bad, but somehow, it will still be a bestseller. And it might. It might be a bestseller for a week, but once people realize that the book is poorly written, it will not be a bestseller for much longer. Being a bestseller is not a permanent thing in the long run. Books fall and rise on that list all the time, and though a self-published author might be able to say that he or she did write a best-selling book, his or her writing will speak louder than the boasting.

Furthermore, the way the Amazon Bestseller Campaign works is through email. The marketing consultants send subscribers dozens of emails telling them to buy the book so that they can then receive free bonuses, such as audiobooks in return. These bonuses are only available on the day of the campaign. Authors might see a spike in sales on that particular day, but overall, the book sales will be weak. Weber states, "Sales can deteriorate badly for books marketed with special gimmicks" (Weber, p. 34). Word of mouth sales, on the other hand, "can sell strongly year after year" (Weber, p. 34). To be truly successful, authors cannot rely on quick fixes and gimmicks. Their writing needs to stand on its own and speak for itself, without help from free bonuses and thousands of pestering emails. So they must use the blog, use the network of friends, and pass on the information without resorting to tricks and gags.

Weber agrees. He writes, "Authors who ignite real word of out using techniques described in this book can draw a real audience who buys and recommends their book. But do

not expect to hit the jackpot next month, if ever. Nothing in publishing is simple, easy and guaranteed" (Weber, p 37). Writing is difficult work, and publishing is even more so.

Weber also brings up reviews in his books, as I have earlier in this essay. His advice is to seek out Top Reviewers on Amazon who have reviewed books similar in topic to the debut author's book and send them a copy of the manuscript for reviewing purposes. "A soft-sell approach works best when approaching Top Reviews," he states. "Offer a complimentary book in return for their considering to review it, no obligation" (Weber, p. 43). The trick is to not demand they read the book and review it, but rather, to ask them to consider reviewing it, and to never always expect excellent reviews. Some of these reviewers might not like the novel, or might find issue with something inside it. Authors have to accept the fact that not everyone will like their book.

Authors can also not dismiss negative reviews and ignore them. They need to look at them, to read them, and to inure themselves to the negative ones. Look at the criticism and learn from it. They should ask themselves how they can do better, how they can fix these mistakes, and what it was exactly the reviewer found troubling. They should keep the knowledge in mind for the next book, so that they know where they run into trouble and how they can fix it. Best of all, they should not be discouraged. They have to keep asking for reviews. Other reviewers might like the novel and rate it positively, taking the sting off the negative one.

Reviews are an excellent way to fight the glut and to bring attention to the debut novel. However, to ensure that an author does not bring negative attention to it, authors need to make sure that the novel is as perfect as it can be before it is sent out. The Top Reviewers receive dozens of messages every day from publishers, not just from self-publishing authors, and the book needs to compete with all of those before it is going to be read. An author might not find a reviewer after all that work, even if his or her book is at its best, simply because he or she is competing in a heavily occupied field and his or her voice is not loud enough to be heard. So while the digital era gives self-published authors many opportunities to succeed, it also gives that same opportunity to everyone else.

Exhibit B: A Lesson in His Perspective  
Submitted to Penn State writing contest  
Rejected

### A Lesson in His Perspective

A drink too many in the desert night. His friend's voice hot in his ear. "Dude, check out the rack on her." A tangle of sleeves. A body that's not his girlfriend's. The hissing accusation of the hotel key card. A forgotten text on the phone that makes him sick in the bathroom with regret. A hangover the next morning, his tongue like an old, unwashed sock in his mouth. This is the Vegas trip, and it's exactly as not fun as he said it would be.

-

When the first bump shows up, he thinks it's a zit, ignores it, and then proceeds to sleep with his girlfriend so he can at least show some attempt at redemption. She's new, only two month's old, and he's still finding out new things about her and her body. There's a freckle on her shoulder he's never seen before. Her arms curl around his shoulders and her fingers write meaningless patterns on his back. She mumbles something softly into his ear that he can't hear over the sound of his own breath.

They're safe in his bedroom under the harsh light of the lamp, but the scent of Vegas-sin still clings to his skin, and the memory of a pitch-black boudoir made out of a coatroom rots in his brain. He loses it almost immediately. His hips sputter to a standstill, and her eyes pop open to devour his face in their autumn-grass green gaze. An apology dies on his lips because in that stare that moves from his eyes to his lips to his cheek back to his eyes again knows exactly what's happened, and he can only be grateful for the complete lack of pity he finds there. Other than that though, he squirms under her stare.

She doesn't say anything, just pulls him down so his head rests in the warm crook between her shoulder and her neck as her fingers continue to make patterns across his shoulder blades. His hands clench in her hair. He should tell her, he knows, confess his transgression and await whatever punishment she wants to mete out. He shivers. There's no reason to tell her though. He didn't like the girl, didn't find her very attractive aside from the fact that his friend did. He'd been drunk, complete, utterly, totally stone-faced drunk, and it'd been a bad decision. But there'd been no real attraction there. He hadn't and still doesn't want to be with her. He doesn't wish she were his girlfriend. It was a transgression, a by-product of potent alcohol made stronger by the desert sun, and it's the epitome of what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. She doesn't need to know. She doesn't ever need to find out. It'd only hurt her in the long run.

He shivers again. He doesn't want to lose her.

She strokes his hair back and kisses the corner of his mouth. "Are you okay?" she murmurs. "Well, I know you're not okay, but...you know what I mean."

She's asking what happened in her roundabout way. Tell her, his conscience says. Tell her.

'Fess up. Be a man. But he remembers the pride he felt when it stayed up despite the fact that his blood probably resembled the consistency of sangria at the time, and the fierce, masculine sense of domination he felt upon finishing, and the shame wallops him in the stomach, kills the words bubbling in his throat. No, he's not going to tell her. He sighs into her skin.

"It's not me, is it?" she asks, and it kills him quietly inside to think that she could blame herself for his own problems, his own stupidity.

"God no, it's not you. Why would it be you?" She pauses, and he intercepts. "And don't say it's because you're not attractive. Don't say it."

"There's no other reason for it?"

He tears himself out of her embrace, annoyed and upset, and fumbles for his jeans. He's aware of her movement, of her sitting up and crossing her legs, shameless in her nudity, her eyes slanted down to the pillows. That and her jealousy are the only two things that annoy him about her. Other than that, she's amazing. Sure, she's a little small all the way around, but her proportions are good, and her face is good too. Her intelligence scares him a bit, but it's nothing that he can't handle. It's only her lack of any confidence whatsoever that drives him insane.

No matter what he says, she doesn't believe him. He can say she's pretty until he's blue in the face, and that will never change the fact that she thinks she's hideous and belongs under a rock. She's stupid like that. Why would he be dating her if he didn't find her attractive? He's not blind. He's not desperate. He doesn't need to date beneath him to get laid; he can take care of that on his own, thank you very much.

He glares at the mess in the corner and breathes tightly through his nose. It's a surprising amount of anger he feels, and he wonders if maybe, part of it might be magnified because of the guilt he's been carrying around these past two weeks. And this is the sixth time he's lost it in that same period. He knows why. He thinks she might be getting the idea, and that in itself is terrifying.

The bed shifts, and her hand is warm on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry?" That's how she apologizes when she doesn't know what's wrong. He slumps, touches her hand.

"It's not your fault," he says, and it's true. It's not her fault. She has nothing to do with it. She's collateral damage in the war zone that's become his life.

"But what's wrong?" She slips off the bed and dresses, and he mourns that loss quietly in his head. Her eyes stray from the floor to his face to her shirt. "There's something wrong."

Tell her, his conscience commands. Tell her and be done with it. Tell her and grovel at her feet. He bristles. There's no reason for him to grovel at her feet. If she doesn't want to be forgiving, then that's her problem. Let her walk away. See if he cares. Because he won't. He

can do fine without her always being there. There's always someone else just waiting around the corner to strike.

Never mind that he waited nearly two years for her. Never mind it all. He doesn't need her, doesn't need to want her. It's not a problem if she decides to go.

But. His mind stutters. But.

He doesn't want her to go.

Please. Please stay with me.

He doesn't like this growing dependence, and the dislike blossoms into a burst of white anger in his core, into a need to blame everyone else but himself for everything that's been going wrong. It's oh so easy to just play it off, to just absolve himself of everything, no blame here, no blame at all. He's innocent of any wrongdoing that he might be accused of. Part of him knows it's wrong, but the more vocal and controlling part doesn't care. He won't be responsible for this. He refuses to be.

Drunken debauchery, that's all that was. It wasn't him. She can't blame him for that.

She sits down next to him and leans against his shoulder. "Why won't you tell me what's wrong?" she mumbles. "I just want to help."

You can't help me, he thinks. Not with this. You don't know the half of it.

Aloud, he says, "I'm just stressed." Ah yes, the usual fallback. Just inane enough to be true. "Stressed and upset." Well, truer than other things he's said, at least.

"About what?"

Damn her and damn her questions. He can't be next to her. Her questions make him anxious, nervous. He gets up and hunts down his own clothes, fixes his hair. She watches from the bed with sad eyes, he thinks. Sometimes it's really hard to tell. And he still doesn't know too much about her, aside from her quiet that can be good or bad depending on what he's done.

It bothers him. Why must she always be the victim? He sighs, and pulls on his jeans. She watches, marks his movements. He feels like prey, and it offends his senses.

"It's nothing, okay?" he snaps, and she blinks and lowers her eyes, twisting the sapphire – he has no idea if it's real or not – on her pinky. A vast silence stretches out across them, and because he doesn't like hurting her even though that's all he seems to do lately, he softens the blow with, "It's because of class. I told you about it already."

But he's too late. She's pulling away into herself, he can tell, folding up her thoughts and boxing them away into places where he can't find them. Her face, so open what, five minutes

before, is closed off, shuttered, carefully passive so that she looks more like a posed mannequin than an actual human being. He says her name, and the only response he gets is a slight head tilt and a small, expressionless smile.

The fight goes out of him in seconds, leaving him drained and breathless. All the little connector bones in his body sag, and he feels very old right now, far older than the two decades that rattle around inside of him like loose teeth in a jar. A heavy weariness pushes down on his eyebrows.

He sits down next to her and takes her hand. It's limp and boneless, a puppet's hand, and she won't look at him again. He rubs his thumbs across her palms, tracing the lines that crisscross her skin.

"I have awkward palm-lines," she says.

"What?"

"Palm reading. My lines are all off whack."

"How do you know?"

She takes her hand back, flips it palm up, and traces the curved crease above her thumb, all without looking at him. "This one is either my life-line or my love-line, depending on who you ask. Either way, look how faint it is. That's bad luck, means nothing good. And see how it breaks? That means there'll be a time when I have to start over again. Something catastrophic will happen, and I'll have to rebuild." Despite the flippancy of her tone, and the half-smile that cuts across her cheek, he has a premonition of sorts that she's just said something of great importance to both of them, but how does that make any sense? He puts no faith in the mild superstitions she exhibits at odd times, and he tells her as much.

"You really don't believe that, do you?"

She shrugs, goes back to twisting the sapphire. "It's something to keep in mind," she says finally, and that's not an answer at all.

"It's something for you to worry about until you make yourself sick." She does that a lot, maybe not until she's sick, but until she's worried herself into a frenzy over the smallest things. "I know you. I know how you are."

That's a bold-faced lie, and to cover for it, he pulls her into an impromptu hug. She tenses as if mildly repulsed, but gradually, thankfully, she relaxes, and her fingers begin to run up and down the veins in his arms, tracing his blood-paths with a lazy proficiency, her nails biting lightly into his skin, leaving behind a tingling trail that's both pleasant and bothersome at the same time. He breathes in the smell of her hair: Pantene, sex, and the trace of the perfume she dabs behind her ears for him. It's a bittersweet combination, or maybe it's the situation that's made it that way, and he just breathes it in, drowns himself with it, tries to use it to wash away

his sins. Pantene and sex. Clean and dirty. It's an oddly fitting contradiction.

She presses her cheek to his collarbone, and her fingers work their way up his sleeve, draw circles on his shoulders. Her body moves against his subtly. Her hips roll against his thigh. He knows what she's doing, and he also knows it won't work. He's done for the night, for the week too, probably, and no amount of coaxing will bring it back out or up for that matter. But she can't know.

"You don't have to worry with me," he whispers into her hair.

She pauses, deflates, and backs away enough inches to let him know that she got his hint. Her disappointment is palpable, and he knows full well this is another notch in the bedpost against him, but she says, "I know. I trust you."

The irony of the statement isn't lost to him, and she couldn't have hurt him any worse than if she had come outright and accused him.

-

Two days later, they sit on his couch while he plays video games and she alternates between watching, reading, and curling up against his arm. Her movements make him nervous, and he can't stop himself from glancing over at her in between taking shots at zombies' heads. Her face is neutral, not smiling, not frowning, just neutral and unreadable. Sometimes she'll half-smile at a particularly good burst of gore, and sometimes she just closes her eyes and leans back, her hands folded under her breasts.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and she turns slowly towards him with lidded-eyes.

"Yeah? Why wouldn't I be?" She smiles and nods towards his game. "You're about to get eaten. Start shooting."

He fumbles with his controls, saves his character's life with barely a minute to spare, and then asks four minutes later, "Are you okay?"

She looks at him fully this time and smiles again. "Yes, I'm good. Why do you keep asking?"

"I just want to make sure you're having fun."

"I am. Don't worry about it. I like watching people play video games." She looks back towards the screen. "You're on fire," she says as a matter of fact.

Her answers annoy him, and he presses the issue. "I just want to make sure you're not bored."

"But I'm not! Seriously. I like watching video games." She emphasizes the like, and puts down her book. "Please, don't worry about it."

He's good for another six minutes, but the next time he looks over and sees her neutral face,

all he can see is the ex-girlfriend before her, and the heavy frown she always wore when she was forced to sit through another one of his video game binges, and it awakens a minor panic within him. He had lost that one back last year, had lost her long before they broke up, and he doesn't want to lost this one either. He doesn't want this one to leave him as well.

He puts down the controller and turns to her. "You look upset."

"I'm not." And now there's a hint of subtle annoyance in her voice. "Why do you keep thinking that? I keep telling you I'm not."

The twisting snake in his belly coils around some vital thing and squeezes, and he blurts out, "She never liked when I played video games."

Her eyes do something strange, and it stops him, arrests the fumbling explanation bouncing around inside his mouth. Her expression never changes, but there's a certain brightening in her eyes, a flash of something hot and angry, and then a darkening, as if a veil has dropped onto a lamp and muted its glow. All this in the space of seconds.

"I'm not your ex," she says tightly. "Stop treating me like I were."

"I don't treat you - " Her eyes flash again, and he shuts his mouth, staring at her.

"Stop lumping me in with them then."

"I don't..."

"I," she snaps, and there's such a force behind that "I" that it sounds like an explosion or a rapport from a gun, "I like watching you play video games, okay?"

"You look so upset though."

"I'm upset now because you keep thinking I'm upset!" Her shoulders rise, and she sighs and looks down at the floor, then back up at him, then to the floor again, her eyes still sparking behind the veil.

He wants to put his arms around her, wants to pull her close and hold her to his chest, wants to kiss her and apologize and reassure her that she is all he sees, all he wants, but what he hears coming from his mouth is not any of that, is not any of that at all. All that comes out is, "Now you're mad at me," in a child's petulant and sulky voice. She closes her eyes, passes a hand over the bridge of her nose, and pinches it hard.

"I'm sorry," she finally says, touching his shoulder. "I'm sorry I looked upset."

That touch is a signal for him to touch her back, he knows, and he doesn't do it. He wants to, but he doesn't do it. Some damaged mechanism inside him ticks in the wrong direction, and he can't spare the time or effort to dig it out and get it fixed. She retreats, and a piece of him cries

out at the loss, but he can't bring himself to fully care.

All he can tell is that this relationship is slowly slipping through his fingers.

He pauses.

He still can't bring himself to care.

She shifts, frowns, then drapes herself over the arm rest, leaning heavily away from him. He shrugs and goes back to his game. If she wants to be like that, let her.

-

He doesn't really know what to say to her anymore, five days into this weird limbo where he still wants her but doesn't want to deal with her specifically any longer. They're not even having sex anymore. His interest wanes minutes into it, and there's no salvaging it after that, no matter what freaky thing she tries. She's also finally gotten the idea and has stopped asking for it, and that's fine with him. He doesn't want it, not if he's going to smell the acrid heat of a desert and diesel night, not if he's going to keep tasting the alcohol in the back of his throat and the margarita salt on her smeared lips. He's not going to have to deal with that guilt during what should be the ultimate play of pleasure. He's not going to have it ruined by something as stupid as that.

Sometimes he regrets kissing her, his girlfriend that is, that first time. If he hadn't, then the guilt wouldn't be crushing him right now. He would have been a free man, and then the only remorse he would be feeling right now would be that special kind of sex remorse that hits after doing something incredibly stupid you wish no one would remember come morning. It wouldn't be this kind of gnawing regret, this kind of sense of having done something incredibly stupid that's managed to ruin what is quite possibly one of the best things in his life so far.

Is that unfair? He doesn't think so. Vegas had been a long time in coming, a long time in fantasizing, and who is she to think she can insert herself into the picture after it's been played out so many times in his head? She should have known better than to expect total fidelity in this sort of case. He'd been surrounded by booze, friends, and beautiful women. What did she want from him?

He watches her eat across the table, picking lightly at her burrito bowl, not looking at him. She's been very remote lately, distant, and it irks him to no end to see it.

"Enjoying your food?" he asks, and it comes out more sarcastic than it should have. She raises her head slowly, insolently it seems to him, and that makes it worse.

"It's okay."

"Just okay?" She tilts her head, and he thinks, How stupid do you think I am? If you have something to say, say it. Don't pretend like I don't know you know. Because she knows, he's sure of it. She's known since it happened. She probably knew it the moment it happened. She

probably woke up in the middle of the night and said to the darkness of her apartment, “It’s happened.” And now she’s making him suffer for it so she can feel vindicated.

“What?” Her pretend not-knowing makes red bloom behind his eyes.

“If you didn’t want it, you should have said something.”

“I, what? I like the food!” she insists.

He doesn’t buy it because he knows it’s not true. She’s just trying to trick him, to lull him into a false sense of security so that she can spring the trap later. “You don’t want it.”

“What on earth?”

“Just say you don’t want it. Don’t pretend for my sake.” A nasty, sour taste develops on the back of his tongue, the taste of night-old beer dried on masticated gums.

“What?” Her voice rises to the squeaky pitch that pierces his ears and grates on his brain.

“Just tell me!” he yells, and head turns, and she rears back, her eyes wide.

“Tell you what?” she hisses. “What do you want me to say, huh? What do you want from me?”

“I want you to tell me!”

“Tell you what?”

Tell me what I want to hear. Tell me that you know. Tell me so that I don’t have to lie and hedge and avoid any longer. Tell me so that I don’t have to live with this secret. Tell me, scream it at me, yell it at me, throw the burrito into my face, but please, please, please, just tell me so I can go back to living.

“Just tell me!”

“I don’t have anything to tell you!” she yells, and her palms slam down on the table with a harsh slap. “I have absolutely nothing to tell you! What do you have to tell me?”

Oh how quickly the tables turn. Unprepared, he falters, gawps at her, and she hones in for the kill, aiming right for his exposed jugular.

“What do you have to tell me?” she asks in a dangerous whisper. “You have something you’re not telling me.”

“I’m completely innocent.” His voice wavers, betrays his guilt.

“I saw the lipstick on your collar. Look, it’s right there.” She reaches over and fingers the starched, limp, smoke-smelling collar of his shirt that peeps out underneath his suit. “It didn’t wash out. It’ll never wash out. It’s there. And it’s down there too. I saw it. I tasted it.” She runs her tongue over her lips, and his pelvis tightens, jumps. “Was she good? Did you like it? Did you actually manage to finish this time, you pathetic excuse for a man? Did you throw your head back and howl at the moon when you were done? Are you proud of yourself?” She reaches under the table and digs her nails into the soft flesh of his thighs. Her eyes glow in the half-light of the restaurant, yellow and demonic. “Did you have fun? Was the thrill back?” She smiles a smile full of pointed teeth, and he shudders and tries to pull away, and her nails rip into his dress pants, bite into his skin. Bumps well up underneath her fingers and burn. “Is this thrill enough for you, honey?”

He sucks in air down the wrong tube and wakes up in class, his face mashed into the heel of his palm. He touches his shirt, finds it the same cotton T he put on this morning, touches his thighs, find them encased in jeans that are getting a tad too small for his weight now. It’s almost eleven, almost time for the ritual lunch, and he knows exactly where they’re not going to eat.

-

When the bumps don’t go away after a week and a half he starts to get worried. He feels dirty, unclean, tainted, and if it’s what he thinks it is, well, he might as well just throw in the towel because that’s the end of him. Bumps. Perfect.

His first thought isn’t a thought at all, but is anger and fury, white-hot fury directed at that stupid chick in Vegas, how dare she do this to him, followed closely by terror at being marked in such an intimate and telling way. The only way it’d be more obvious is if the bumps spelled out ‘cheater’ in disease-ridden glory. But the panic and the anger doesn’t last very long, and he drowns

A sick, cold feeling twists up under his diaphragm, and he swallows convulsively to try and keep the shakes down. Idiot, his mind screams at him. Idiot, idiot, idiot. You screw up.

He sits on his bed, chilled and burning, and his brain just turns off, blanks itself out in a moment of self-preservation until all he hears is the greenness of his bedspread and the whiteness of the papers spread across his floor. He pokes at one with a disaffected foot, and it crinkles like a gunshot, loud in the quiet of his room. Thoughts, black thoughts, bleak thoughts, morbid thoughts, swirl behind the veil of white noise, but they’re oddly far away and disconnected, and even if he wanted to reach them – which he doesn’t – he doesn’t think he’d be able to grasp them.

His phone sits like a lump in his pocket, weighing him down until getting up off this stupid, diseased bed is an impossibility even Atlas wouldn’t want to take. Everything, time, heartbeat, breath, they all slow down until this minute of scared revelation, of a mistake grown out of proportion and just now coming home to bowl him over and remind him of his stupidity, stretches out into an endless expanse of immobility and suspended actions that focuses into a pinpoint directly between his eyes. He has the curious sensation of floating away, of wanting to waft out the window and rise up in a beam of chilly sunlight far away from this mess he’s

created. But it's only for a moment, for a fraction of five seconds. Then he's back in his room, sitting on his bed, hands clasped and sweaty over his groin where the bumps prickle psychosomatically against his boxers.

There's no getting around telling her, he realizes. He can't just ignore it now. He can't pretend that everything's okay, that nothing's happened, that she's the only one he wants. His hand moves towards his pocket, stops, curls up in a ball.

He can't tell her. He can't. She'd be gone faster than his ammo in a sudden death wave in two-player mode. His addled brain catches onto that thought, stares at it, asks really? He has to laugh at it because if he doesn't laugh, he'll cry, and he's not going to cry, damn it all, he's not going to cry. But still, even in the midst of the worst moment in his life, he still manages to make a reference to a video game. Is he pathetic or what?

He bows his head. Tell her. Tell her. But to lose another one in so short of a time, to lose this one in particular, would be too much. So don't tell her. Don't tell her.

But what if she has it?

He goes again for his phone and nearly comes out of his skin when it buzzes at him in anticipation, sending shockwaves all up and down his leg, and his heart doesn't leap into his throat so much as it rockets into the fleshy padding of his mouth and lodges itself up in there. It buzzes again, angry and insistent, and his hands come alive with water and salt again and leave damp patches against his hoodie. It buzzes one final time, almost like a death rattle, and then it goes placid, quiet, like an alligator under the water. He eyes his pocket, then slowly pulls the phone out and holds it a minute, weighing it in his hand.

It's not a message from her, thank God. It's from his friend, which is worse, the very same one who egged him on in Vegas, the very same one who slapped him on the back the next morning and made stars explode behind his tired, hung-over eyes. It just has to be him. His fingertips go white on the screen.

"Hey," the text reads. "We should hang out again and hit up town. Still with that stupid -" He stops reading and wings the phone across the room. It hits the wall with a crack and leaves a dent in the plaster. Adrenaline makes him dizzy with rage, and before he's fully cognizant of what he's doing, he's trashing the room, throwing clothes and books and sneakers and stupid figurines from Comic-con and other cons, all of these stupid petty things he once loved and now is indifferent to smashed on the floor, scattered across his bed, pieces raining down from the walls like bizarre raindrops of plastic and cloth. A boxed something or other is unmercifully hurled at the blinds, and the entire mess of cardboard and plastic comes crashing down off the window, flopping over itself. A spider crawls away from the wreckage, picks its way over the bare mattress, and disappears down the wall.

That spider is what finally stops him, or rather, the smattering of fear that the sight of the spider provides. Just like that, the fight instinct switches to flight instinct, and he finds himself in a feral half-crouch, knees bent, ready to run and grab the vacuum. But it's enough to stop

disperse the cloud of unseeing rage, enough to make him survey the disaster that his room's turned into, enough to make him crumple with regret. Plastic bites into his knees and palms, the remains of most of his things reminding him that he's an idiot, but he crawls about the floor anyway, hunting for his phone, pushing aside lumps of destruction and despair until he uncovers it half-hidden by the dresser. Its screen is cracked, and the plastic is chipped, but it still works, and he can still text her the question that will begin his admission of guilt. He doesn't know how to word it gently, or even gracefully, and the end result, he thinks, is vulgar and crude, a child's attempt at playing grown-up.

"Hey," it reads, "do you have any bumps, you know, down there?"

He hits send before misgivings can turn it stillborn.

She doesn't respond back right away, and he almost forgets that he sends it, since making the appointment with student health services takes all of ten minutes and straight after that, his friend pesters him to play multi-player online. He's in the middle of shooting down enemy lines, his friend's voice panting in his ear over the headset, when the phone skitters across the table, its buzzer broken.

"What the hell?" it asks. "What have you done?"

He resents her automatic assumption that it's his fault.

-

For the three days he has before the doctor's appointment, she is cold and short and suspicious, and they argue a lot more than they used to. Before they had started dating, and even during the beginning months of sweat and bliss, he'd never seen her angry side, and now that he's exposed to it full force, he's ill prepared for it and can't handle the verbal barbs she throws at him on a daily basis. She's surprising good at it. She knows exactly where to hit for maximum damage, and knows how to hit so that it takes him a minute to realize that she's just insulted him and quite possibly his mother.

Last night had been her at her worst, a sarcastic little beast in pretty little wrappings, and it wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't managed to completely emasculate him in front of his brother.

They'd been watching some show or another, and there had been a sex scene at the beginning to start it off properly, and he's just known it wasn't going to end well. He could tell from the sudden darkening of her face, her sudden sharp, needle-edged glance at him and then down to his crotch with a twisted half-smirk, that she was going to make some comment or another, and he had steeled himself against her attack by repeating to himself that none of this is his fault, that she's not being understanding enough, that it's probably nothing more than a case of infected zits.

But the attack had been too sneaky, too hard-hitting, too utterly ego-cutting to let him get away unscathed.

His brother had started it with one of his off-color remarks. "She must have really supple hips for her to get into that position without having to start over," he had said.

"Don't you know?" she had replied. "She has ball-bearings for hips." The two had laughed, and in a moment of possessive jealousy, he asserted his claim on her and her body.

"You have ball bearings for hips!" he had tried to joke, and without missing a beat, without even a pause for thought, she'd let this beauty rip.

"Well you wouldn't know, would you?"

The fact that she could even say something like that without any sort of embarrassment or remorse is bad enough, but to combine it with saying it in front of his brother, loud enough for his brother to hear, and in the tone of voice that suggests the statement is entirely true, which it is, is entirely too much for one man to bear. It wasn't right of her to spit something like that out in front of his brother. It's private information, and no one else needs to know.

After he had taken her home, as soon as he had stepped through the damn door, his brother had ambushed him.

"Really, dude? Really?" He hadn't justified it with an answer, but his brother had kept it going, had refused to let it die. "What's wrong with you?"

"If you like her so much," he had said hotly, "then you sleep with her."

"Maybe I will."

He'd almost turned around and socked his brother straight in the face for that, but once he spun, playground fistfight stance at the ready, fingers curled, thumbs protected, he realized two things. The first was that he was too tired to fight for his girlfriend's - is she even his girlfriend anymore - honor, and the second was that somewhere in his brother's face, beneath the stubble, beneath the thin veneer of sweat, there was a certain aura of knowing, of knowing something secret and forbidden, he'll go so far as to say foreboding even, as if his brother knows exactly what lies beyond that frontier and wants it.

But there'd been no time to figure it out last night. Once he'd slammed himself into the relative sanctuary of his room and shook off the bed sheets, he'd passed out, and today, as he sits in the sterile waiting room of the health and waits and hopes that it's not what he thinks it is so that he can go back to being normal so that maybe she won't leave like he knows she's going to do, he doesn't let himself chew on it too much. Let him think he knows something. It doesn't matter either way.

He keeps his head down, eyes on his feet, feeling disembodied eyes surveying his body, wondering what's got him in here, what's wrong with him, what does he have that brings him to this place of disease. He keeps his face down as he walks, hidden behind a book as he waits in a

stiff-backed chair, his body obscured by a fake potted fern, but there's no escaping the inevitable. The nurse calls out his name twelve minutes after he props open his literary anthology textbook, and heads swivel in his direction.

“What are you in for?” their eyes seem to ask. “Why are you here with us? What makes us all kin? What makes us the same?”

Nothing, he thinks. There is nothing wrong with me. I've done nothing wrong.

Oh, but you have, his mind tells him. You have, and what's worse, you won't own up to it. You won't own up to anything. You sit around and pretend you're the innocent so that you can blame everyone else. You're a lump.

I am not. I've done nothing wrong. I was drunk. I didn't know what I was doing. I was drunk. It was Vegas. It's what you do in Vegas. You pretend that you're single, and you go out and you have fun. That's what I did. That's all. She can't hold that against me.

But did you? His inner voice is relentless. You didn't, and you know it. You hated Vegas, and you hated yourself the entire time. And that is exactly why you cheated on your girlfriend. You hate yourself so much that you went into sabotage mood, got yourself good and hammered, and then went after the first thing on two legs that was vaguely feminine and vaguely interested. You did it, you did it, you did it, and you deserve to be diseased and alone and miserable.

He imagines taking a gun to his conscious' head and pulling the trigger, splattering the walls of his skull with guilt and self-recriminations. Actually, he imagines himself as his latest favorite video game character, all gruff and dirty and wanted by every woman he meets, pulling the trigger. It's a good feeling, makes him feel powerful and important. If he looked like that, acted like that, he wouldn't need a girlfriend. Girls would be throwing their panties at him as he walked down the hall. And who needs a girlfriend when you can have your pick of the litter. There'd be no settling, no arguing, no nothing but lots of sex when he wants, where he wants, how he wants, and none of that nonsense pillow talk afterwards. If he fell asleep, she'd leave and be grateful that he deigned to take her through the gates of pleasure at all.

He's so wrapped up in this fantasy that the doctor has to ask him three times what he's in for before he snaps back to attention and fumbles for an explanation.

“Just describe it to me slow,” the doctor says, smiling. “What are the symptoms, do you have any pain, fever, swelling, anything?”

“I have bumps,” he answers stupidly. “I thought they were zits.”

The doctor frowns and leans forward. “On your genitals?”

“Yes.”

The doctor stands, gestures to the examination bed. “I'll need to see them.”

“What?” No. No, you will not see my junk, thank you very much.

“They could be any number of things. I need to run tests on them.”

“But.” No, not my junk. You leave my junk alone.

The doctor misunderstands his hesitation. “I see things like this all the time. Trust me, you won’t shock me.”

There’s no way of getting out of it, and silently, sullenly, he drops his pants and pulls down his boxers enough to let the doctor see what they look like. He’s uncomfortable with the doctor’s head so close to him, peering, touching one analytically with one sterile, gloved finger, and he’s relieve when the doctor straightens, and snaps his gloves off.

“Well, it’s not Herpes, at least, but it’s still an STD.”

His heart stops, goes crashing down into his stomach where his gastric juices go to work on it.

“Have you had any sexual contact recently?”

He hasn’t had any sexual contact in over two weeks, but he says, “Just with my girlfriend.”

“Do she have any symptoms that you know of?”

“No, no she doesn’t. She’s clean.” The doctor looks at him sharply, accusingly, he thinks.

“Have you had any other sort of sexual contact with anyone else?”

The moment of truth.

“No.” But even to his ears, it sounds false. The doctor tilts his head, sits at the computer and types something up, and then looks back, his face professionally passive, nonjudgmental, emotionless, expressionless.

“Tell her to come in to get looked at, okay? You are contagious, and if you’ve had sex with her while you’re symptomatic, you could have spread it to her. Luckily, it’s curable. I can take care of it right now, actually.”

“Really?” There’s some saving grace in this at least. He’s not marked forever.

“I just need to drop some acid on the bumps, and then you’re good. It’s a bacterial infection on the surface of your skin.”

“Acid?” What? No. No acid in the pubic region. No acid whatsoever.

“It won’t hurt. The acid will kill the skin infection. You won’t be able to have sex for another four or five days, but after that, you won’t be contagious anymore.” The doctor stops, taps his chin, and then says, “If you know the other girl’s phone number, you should give her a ring and tell her to get herself to a doctor. She needs to get looked at.”

“There was no other girl.” His voice is flat, unrepentant. “I don’t know how I got it.”

“All right.” The doctor stands, puts his hand on the door. “I’ll be right back to take care of it, okay?”

“Whatever.”

-

She’s waiting for him outside like she said he would, and he wants to throw a book at her, yell at her, tell her to get the hell away from him.

“What?” he snaps as he brushes by. “What?”

“How’d it go?” she asks quietly.

“How do you think it went?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asking you.”

“Oh, it went great. I had a doctor pocking around my junk with a toothpick covered in acid for ten minutes. That’s what I really want. Some dude I don’t know poking at my junk with acid. That was real fun. I want to go do it again.”

Then he realizes what he’s just said and stops and flails for a recovery, but at this point, it’s too late. She’s already stopped six steps behind him and isn’t moving.

“What?” he asks again.

“So it was an STD then,” she says. “It was.”

“I don’t know how I got it,” he says belligerently, but she’s not listening to him. She’s miles off, her eyes staring at the moody horizon beyond him.

“I looked it up online, the symptoms, I mean. Once you told me more about it. It’s an STD.” She blinks, and her eyes brush over him, and he doesn’t think she’s really seeing him. She’s seeing something past him, beyond him, seeing something off into the past. His skin prickles.

“You can’t believe everything you read on the Internet.”

“It has an incubation period of two to seven weeks.”

“I’ve been with you for more than that, so maybe you should get yourself looked at.”

A visible shudder runs through her body, brings her back to the here and now, and the look she skewers him with is enough to kill lesser and greater men.

“Me? Me? I’m clean. I have no bumps. I have nothing.”

“You said yourself there’s an incubation period.”

“Vegas was two weeks ago,” she hisses, and her face goes ugly, horrid, and evil. “Vegas. We all know what happens in Vegas.”

“I didn’t do anything I wasn’t supposed to.”

“And what weren’t you supposed to do?”

“I,” and he fails at the words, and in her eyes, there’s a mean kind of triumph, the kind of winning that you don’t really want to win.

“I never thought you would do it.”

“I didn’t do anything!” He’s yelling now, out here in the open, on the sidewalk, with car rushing past on the street. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Why can’t you just admit it!” she yells back, throwing her bag to the ground and rushing up to him. “Why can’t you admit it! Why can’t you just tell me to my face! Why do you have to lie to me!”

“What do I have to admit! I did nothing wrong! It wasn’t my fault!”

She’s so much shorter than him, her head barely coming past his chin, but her anger and her hurt and the violence in her eyes makes her loom before him like a malevolent witch trying to cast a spell on him. “An STD isn’t your fault!”

“I didn’t know! I was drunk! It was Vegas! What the hell do you want from me! I can’t go

off and have fun! I can't actually enjoy the one trip I've been fantasizing about! I can't act like a guy for once! I was drunk! You can't blame me for that!"

She wavers, shrinks, stares at him with autumn-grass green eyes. "I can't..."

"No, you can't! That was my trip! Mine! You weren't involved in it! It was mine, and mine alone, and mine to enjoy! I wanted to do what I wanted to do! You were never supposed to be a part of it! You had no business being involved with it! If I wanted to go out and bang some random chick at Vegas, that is my right! That trip was two years in the making, and I'm not sorry for anything I did!"

He stops, pants, feels great, feels on top of the world, feels like the man, and it's wonderful, liberating, freeing, and then he flies too close to the sun and his wings melt, and he falls, plummets, and shatters against the ground. Her face swims before him, surprised, shocked, dismayed, confused, and he reaches out to touch her, to feel that she's real, to marvel at her intensity, her prettiness, her everything. Why has he never noticed that before? She's beautiful. She's wonderful. She's everything he's ever wanted.

Her hand knocks his away, hard and biting, and she takes a half-step back, her eyes chilled to Arctic-ice green.

"You, you," she sputters, and the color rises up her neck into her cheeks, spreading onto her forehead. She reminds him of a volcano, stunning and destructive.

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" She begins to laugh, a cold, ugly cackle from her throat. "You're sorry? What do you have to be sorry about?" She laughs again, and he goes cold, oh so cold. "You're the man, aren't you? You're the big man on campus, that's what you are. The man doesn't need to be sorry. The man does what he wants, and everyone else can go scratch, right?"

"I..."

"Did you enjoy it?" she asks suddenly, obscenely. "Was it good for you? Did you actually get it up?" He flinches as if hit, and he is hit, hit by her words, hit by her tone, by the cruelty in her voice. "Did you keep it up long enough to finish? I'm shocked. You can't keep it up for me. Was she hot? Was she banging. Did your little friends tell you you're the man once you were done? Or were they there with you? You have a video? Do you watch it at night so you can remember the one time you got it up long enough to bang a girl?"

He can't even say anything. There's nothing to say.

"But hey, you're the man."

"I'm not the man," he says.

She pauses, considers him, cocks her mouth into a half-smirk that has no warmth or anything in it, just an ugly half-smirk that twists her face up into a mess of wrinkles and folds. "No, you're not," she says. "But you didn't need to bang some stripper in Vegas to figure that out. I could have told you that."

"I don't know who she was."

"I could have told you," she continues. "I could have told you you're just an impotent, flaccid, pathetic excuse for a sack of skin. I could have told you that back in September. We didn't need to wait this long."

"I'm sorry."

"Doesn't change the fact that you're flaccid and getting fat. You are, you know. All that beer. It's making you fat."

"Please stop?"

"Stop what? I'm not allowed to be upset? I'm not allowed to tear you down some? You've done it to me. You've been doing it to me."

"Just stop." He closes his eyes. "I don't want to hear it."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. The poor, little baby doesn't want to hear it." She coos at him. "What do you want to hear? You want to hear that I'll take you back? That I forgive you? That it's okay you don't have any self-restraint?"

"You don't have to be vindictive about it. I'm already paying for it."

"You think that having an STD means you don't need to feel bad about it?"

"You're going to break up with me, aren't you?"

"I thought that was pretty self-explanatory."

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“You should have thought of that while you were in Vegas.”

“Vegas was my trip. I didn’t need to have thought about you. It was my trip, for me, for me alone.”

His eyes are still closed, and that’s probably the only reason why she manages to get away with what she’s about to do. He doesn’t see her body tense, or the explosion of something far beyond anger and frustration in her eyes. All he sees is the neon lights, the picture shows, the hourglass figures back-lit by a million bulbs, the amber liquid that burns so good down his throat, the smeared lips of a woman he doesn’t know or want to know or care to know traveling down his neck. With his eyes closed, he lives in that moment, breathes it in, breathes in the smoke and booze and the cheap perfumes that aren’t really cheap, the smell of money and poker chips, the smell of sex and exhaust. He wraps it around himself like insulation and numbs his senses with the hot air of a desert night. And so he doesn’t see her round on him, doesn’t see her pull her arm back, doesn’t see the wildness in her eyes, the fury in her hair, the abandon in the way her body twists its small store of power into something useful. He doesn’t see it.

He doesn’t even feel her fist when it hits, when it cuts into his lips, smashes into his teeth. He doesn’t really feel her knuckles catch on a canine, feel both of their skin shredding into bloody ribbons. He’s gone off, retreated inside of himself where wants and needs are melded together into unrecognizable bodies, where responsibility is one drink from nonexistence, where he’s just moving along and alone in alcohol-fueled dream of life. He likes that. He likes that a lot. Vaguely, in the distance three time-zones away, he hears her storm off, crying, wailing, dragging her bag with her.

He pauses.

He can’t really bring himself to care.

## Essay on a Lesson in His Perspective and Story Submissions

I wrote “A Lesson in His Perspective” after a particularly traumatic experience with an ex-boyfriend. I did not write it for anyone. I wrote it for myself and happened to notice that a contest was going on at the time. I edited the story and threw it to a few people to get second and third opinions on it, and then sent it in at the end of January. I did not place in the contest.

It is not surprising. I did not write the story specifically for the contest. I did no research on the contest. I did not take into account that the contest was run by Penn State and therefore would be judged by professors from the college. I simply had something written that I thought might be good. That, right there, is a mistake.

When authors write, regardless of if it is for a contest or for publication, they need to research. They need to look at the who, the what, the when, and the where of the people to whom they are submitting and of the places to which they are submitting. In some cases that is very easy. An author does not submit a horror story to a poetry magazine, or submit a story about human relationships to a publishing house that deals mostly with dystopian robotics. But in other cases, the distinctions are more difficult. What kind of story does an author submit to a college writing contest? Is sex allowable? How much cursing can be in the story? How gritty can it be? The author does not know the professors who are going to be judging the story. There is not a real list of criteria. It is an open writing contest. An author might think he or she can submit whatever he or she wants.

That is not true. An author can submit what he or she wants, but he or she is probably not going to win that way. I certainly did not.

I took no account of who would be reading my short story and how it would represent Penn State as a whole. If I had, I probably would not have sent “A Lesson in His Perspective” to that contest. How did I represent the student body? I represented them as a petty, lying, cheating, unhappy, miserable, sex-crazy community, based on the two main characters. Is that how Penn State wants their students represented? No. So why should I win? Because my characters are so-called real? Because my writing is good? Because my writing is realistic? No. Authors do not win for that. Authors win for giving people what they want. I did not. And so I did not win.

The same goes for publishing. A debut author can write a beautiful, amazing, wonderful story, but if it is not relevant to popular trends, then he or she is not going to succeed. Sure, he or she might be published if he or she is lucky. He or she might even make sales. But this author will not become the next Stephanie Meyer, or the next Amanda Hocking, or the next Susan Harper.

All three of these aforementioned authors found a niche in which to write. They filled a hole. They gave people what they wanted. Stephanie Meyer's vampires hit a nerve with tween audiences with all their angst and destructive teenage love. Amanda Hocking did the same in the self-publishing world with her vampire novel. And Susan Harper brought violence and love

triangles to teens and validated their 'me against the world' mindset in the form of a deadly game. Their success came not from their personal talent, but from their ability to find an audience and give that audience what it wants.

Had I known, or at least listened to this advice when it was given to me, I would have sent in something different. I would have tried harder to mold a story around Penn State ideals without being too obvious. It would have had to have been a realistic story, but not as dismal, not as biting, not as so completely dour and hopeless as this one was. The sex would have had to have been downplayed, if not excised entirely from the story as either non-essential or something to be hinted at and not spoken of outright. The story as it was might have been powerful and hard-hitting, but powerful and hard-hitting doesn't win prizes in the short term. It can win an author critical acclaim and attention, but he or she will probably not find a very good paycheck in it. And in the sense of a contest, while the author might be critically appealing, someone else is going to be more appealing to audiences, and that is the story that is going to win.

If an author wants to write to win, he or she need to keep in mind the audience that will be reading the story, and that is one of the things that self-publishers forget. With the option to post whatever they want for however much they want to sell it at, people forget that their story is a commodity, that it is a product, and that it needs to appeal to audiences for it to be bought. An author can write his mind and rail against society, but if he offends too many readers, he is not going to make a sale. Remember, most of the books that became legends did not start out as such. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* was panned by critics when it first came out and was considered a piece of trash. It is only centuries later that we fully appreciate it. So if an author wants to be the voice of a generation, he need to be prepared to sit in veritable anonymity until a few decades after his death.

Unfortunately, with the advent of digital self-publishing, it is easier now for every writer to believe that he or she is the next voice of the generation. The market becomes clogged with the next Hemingway, the next Poe, the next J. D. Salinger, so on and so forth. The same happened to me with this particular short story and the contest. I thought I had a minor masterpiece on my hands and I wanted recognition for its creation. But no, what I had on my hands was a story I felt was gripping but was ultimately not what the judges wanted.

Writing for contests, sometimes, is more difficult than writing for a publication. Publications generally tell authors what they are looking for, what they are not looking for, and research can tell interested authors what sort of materials they accept. Authors can also perform a quick Google search on Penguin, Random House, or Harper Collins and find out all the information they need to know about when these companies are accepting, if they accept unsolicited manuscripts, and to whom authors should address the manuscripts. With writing contests, things are bit muddier. Some contests will give specifics. They will say they manuscript has to be so many pages long and in what genre the author should be writing, but sometimes, as was the case with the contest for which I applied, the rules were simple. It had to be a piece of creative writing. It couldn't be a poem, but a short story, creatively written. That is not a lot on which to go.

For contests, authors need to learn how to make judgment calls. They need to look at who is sponsoring the contest and to also look at previous winners. Googling the contest is best. Authors should try and find as much information about it as they can, and then write something that fits the bill for them, something engaging and engrossing that pertains to their ideals and wants. Authors cannot simply fly in with blind hope. They could get lucky and win, but realistically, they will not place for the most part.

So what else did I do wrong with “A Lesson in His Perspective?” The storyline is not original, to being with that. A guy and girl are in an unhappy relationship. He cheats on her. She finds out. They fight. End of story. How many times has that been done? In nearly every romantic comedy in existence. The only difference is my story has no uplifting ending or comedic moments to lighten the narrative. It is like a dark storm cloud perpetually overhead. No one can escape the melodrama. It is also not edited properly. The readers I had for it read only for plot, not for grammar. There are typos in it, somewhere, ones that I did not catch but that will stand out to readers, especially judges. Authors simply cannot send unedited work to contests. The judges expect perfection, and authors need to deliver it, just like this thesis demands perfection. If an author hands in a flawed work, then she already has marks against her. She needs to edit her story up until the last five minutes before she hands it over to the judges. She needs to find people who will run through her writing with a fine-toothed comb, untangling complicated sentence structures and fixing anything else that might be wrong.

What else, what else?

Length. This story is long and slogs itself down in the middle with verbose passages on the human condition and life in general. If the story followed a more action-driven plot, with moments of reflection cut for brevity, the story would be much cleaner, much more streamlined. It digresses too much, wants to be something that it is not, and it becomes bloated, unmanageable. After a while, readers’ eyes skim the page. Such a long, dense story is not good for a contest. The judges have dozens upon dozens of entries to read. If an author story starts to drag, it will be tossed aside. It is nothing personal against the author or her story. There is just not enough time to read through all of them. Even if her story starts off engrossing and captivating, if it begins to drag at the middle, then she is showcasing a major flaw in her writing. She is showing that she does not have the technical skill to weave a story together without the stitches falling apart somewhere. As I mentioned before, contests demand perfection. If an author cannot give them perfection, they are not going to give her their valuable time of day.

I also think that my narrative style played a part in my dismissal from the contest. I chose to write in present tense, which is slowly becoming more popular, but is still somewhat of an avant-garde technique. Past tense is much more common and acceptable. I am not saying to always follow convention, or that departure from convention is a terrible thing, but perhaps it is better to depart from convention after an author has already established herself. When she is first showing herself off and broadcasting herself, she can be creative, but has to be creative within boundaries. For example, I wrote another short story for a micro-fiction contest on a friend's blog. There were four entries. I placed third. Here is the short story (originally published under the pen name Marlena Cassidy):

## *Candied Ginger*

*The heatwave stretches on, turning weeds to golden brown and sun kissed decks into faded glories. The heatwave stretches on, and they lie in bed with their clothes all gone, spread out in sweaty skin and rumped sheets, the distant hum of the air conditioning reverberating through their bones. Inside this little oasis of cool, manufactured air, they are safe from the heat rising off the ground in a million little shivers, mirages of reflecting pools dotting the melting asphalt like sunny puddles after a long, hard rain. The heatwave will not touch them in here.*

*But it does in lots of little ways, tanned skin and bathing suit lines suddenly becoming something magnificent and sultry, something to be touched and revered and loved and worshipped, and her skin tastes of cinnamon and vanilla depending on where he puts his mouth. The swell of her breasts are mix of three, of vanilla and cinnamon and if he wants to be trite, maybe a cherry, but it is really not that. Maybe it is chocolate or a piece of candied ginger that he tastes. Yes, that's it. Candied ginger. He enjoys it as it melts over his tongue, spicy and sweet.*

*Inside, the heatwave roils between them, hungry and insistent. Outside, the sun hangs swollen on the horizon and another day of the heatwave ends for the rest of the world. For them though, it is just beginning.*

Again, though the theme of the contest was the keyword 'heatwave,' the story failed for its intense sexuality and its present-tense narrative. The writing and the imagery might be powerful, but it is too powerful and too different to be acceptable, especially when the keyword can be interpreted in numerous ways. The present-tense narrative might be immersive, but it is also disjuncting for readers who are used to past-tense narratives and might turn them away from the story. I, as the creator, might think that writing in such a way is creative and avant-garde, but in reality, it is only different and not very appreciated as of yet. I could argue that James Joyce, for example, did not follow conventions either, but James Joyce was a well-respected artist and novelist when he wrote *Ulysses*. He was allowed to play with conventions and bend and twist them to fit his needs to his writing. He had already proved himself. I, on the other hand, have not, and as such, I need to operate within the conventions before I can play with them.

### Short Story Example 3: Glass

Status: Unpublished

A story told through email.

May 25, 2012

Hi Beth.

I just got the pictures you sent of the house, and I have to say, what were you thinking? Why on earth would you want to buy such a rundown, ugly, old, saggy-looking thing? I understand that you and Tim are looking for something authentic, but really, you couldn't do authentic with something a bit more updated? I mean really. That house must smell like mold and mothballs. And rot. So much rot. I don't think I could stand it.

I noticed there's furniture in it. Does it come with the furniture? Please, please tell me you're going to throw it all out. I sincerely hope you're not thinking about keeping it. Just look at that couch! It's disgusting! It probably has mildew all over it. And you're going to let your kids live there? I can't believe it. I would fumigate that entire house before I let Danny set one foot in there.

I hope you come to your senses soon, Beth, and realize you've bought cockroach central. Country-living is one thing, but that house is entirely another. It's not even rustic. It's just rundown. You would be better off tearing it down and building a new one in its place. Have you thought about that, Beth? I can give you the name of a great contractor; he renovated my apartment, and it looks just beautiful. I wish you could have seen it before you moved.

Anyway, I'll let you go so you can realize that a dirty shack is what you and Tim have bought.

Love,

Joanne.

May 27, 2012

Beth -

Yes, I am a city girl at heart, and no, I probably will never understand the call of the wild (you stole that from a book, by the way), but I do understand disgusting houses when I see them, and you've bought a disgusting house. I bet it has termites. You know what doesn't have termites? My lovely apartment. It has carpets, walk-in closets, and a wonderful bathroom. Unlike your

house of horrors. Does it even have running water? Is the water brown?

And I disagree with you that it's beautiful. It's beautiful in the way that a Pollock painting is beautiful; that is to say, it's not. If it were newer, with better trim and not wood shingle everywhere, then I would upgrade it to a Picasso. And if it were stately and not saggy and not in the middle of nowhere, I would say it's comparable to a Renaissance painting. But it's a Pollock. And you can't change that. Not by much.

As for the yardage, you can't buy a house because of the yardage. I know you want John and Elizabeth to grow up with a backyard, but do they really need thirty-six acres? It's just silly. Danny is doing fine with the local park and his videogames. In fact, I just let him purchase a new one. He absolutely loves it. I think it's called Struggleopolis or something. He's playing it now, actually. You should see his little face, all puckered up in concentration. I wish I understood videogames better, but this one doesn't seem very violent, and it keeps him happy and entertained. I can't ask for much more.

As for me, I'm doing all right. The museum is quiet, as always, but we're working on acquiring a few new pieces. We might be able to borrow a Botticelli in a few months if all goes well. Or at least garner a few lesser-known artists' pieces for our exhibits. You should come and visit. I'll give you a free tour.

You can send more pictures if you must, but honestly, it's not going to win me over to the house's side. It's beastly. A monstrosity. As Danny would put it, gross.

Affectionately,  
Joanne.

May 28, 2012

Dear Beth,

Oh, we're going to argue this forever, aren't we? You've made up your mind, and I've made up mine, but please, let's not sling mud at each other too much, okay? I just got my hair fixed.

I'm looking over the latest batch of pictures. What on earth is that portrait doing in the master bedroom? (If it is a master bedroom; it looks so small!) What frightful looking thing! It's definitely not done by any master painter I know, I can tell you that much. It looks like it was done sometime in the 1800s, maybe the 1860s or 1870s, judging the clothing. But that face! It's vile! Why would you want something like that staring at you while you while you sleep? I couldn't bear it. I'd be afraid it would come alive at night and try to kill me or drag me into the

canvass. Could you imagine?

Perhaps I should pitch the idea to some horror movie director. I'm sure someone could work it into a decent plot.

Danny is not addicted to videogames, thank you very much. He goes out and plays like any normal child. Just because he enjoys tinkering around with the TV and his controller does not mean he has a problem. He only plays when I'm working on the computer, like now. We do other things together all the time. I read him to sleep last night and he enjoyed it immensely, if his snores are any indication. Besides, I think the videogame is good for his mind. It keeps his brain cells active. Though his eyesight might be affected. He's been looking a bit glassy-eyed. Hopefully it'll pass. Might be all those images flying by.

I hope John and Elizabeth enjoy the backyard, though, especially since you're living in horror-house to get it for them. Are they having fun? Digging holes? Catching frogs? Climbing trees? I know Tim mentioned he wanted to get them ATVs. They're a bit young for ATVs, aren't they? They might hurt themselves.

Oh. We didn't get the Botticelli. Too much money. We're going to have to scramble for something else. I'll keep you updated.

Love,  
Joanne.

May 30, 2012

Beth, Beth, Beth, Beth,

Your excitement about all the old paintings you've found is, unfortunately, not contagious. I can guarantee you that they won't be worth anything more than a few dollars. Unknown artists, especially of the quality you're showing me, aren't interesting to the art world. I'm sorry.

I'm glad you're not letting Tim buy the kids ATVs. You need to put your foot down about something, but don't put it down too hard. Your foot might go right through the floors.

I told you it probably has termites, so I'm not surprised at all that you're hearing all sorts of creaks and moans at all hours of day. The integrity of the entire structure has probably been compromised; have someone check your foundation. It might be crumbling. The whole house might come down around your ears if you're not careful. As for the scratching in the walls? Mice. Rats. All sorts of nasty rodents. Bugs. Ghosts.

It's probably ghosts warning you to leave while you still can. Or maybe they want your soul and you'll be doomed to haunt the house forever. The paintings come alive at night and traipse all over the house, looking for lost loves and whatever else ghosts look for. If this were a movie, I'd be warning you to get out now.

But you don't listen to me, even if this were a movie, so best I can say is call an exterminator and hope the bill isn't too high.

Danny is, well, I wish I could say he is all right, but he had a nightmare last night and refused to sleep alone. He said there were monsters in his closet and under his bed, and he was so frightened, I let him sleep in my room. Now, I know what you're going to say. It's the videogames. But I caught him watching *The Ring* last night when he was supposed to be in bed, so I bet that's what caused it. As soon as he crawled into my bed, he slept like a little baby. He is, of course, punished for watching movies I specifically told him not to watch, so he's not allowed near videogames for a week. It doesn't seem to bother him. He's on the couch right now, reading *Harry Potter*. See? He's not a vegetable.

I've printed out the photos of the paintings, and I'll show them to the curator. Like I said, I doubt they will be worth anything, and I doubt we'll ever know the name of the painter if he hasn't signed any of them. But I will give you all the information I can get.

Yours,  
Joanne.

June 3, 2012

Dear Beth,

Good news and bad news! The curator has looked over the photos, and he says that they're definitely 1870s work, but by whom he can't say. He thinks the painter might have been trained a bit, not by a master, but by someone who had decent experience painting and might have been a local portrait-maker. He also says the work is a bit juvenile and unsophisticated. So, as I said, they're not worth anything other than sentimental value, but you might be able to fetch twenty or so dollars if you sell them at a yard sale.

With love,  
Joanne.

June 4, 2012

Beth -

Sorry for the short email earlier. Work called and I had to run out and take care of a tour of fifty hungry, cranky, sticky-fingered children running all over my museum. It was hell, I tell you. Hell.

Anyway, I hope you're not upset about the paintings. It would have been nice if you had uncovered some previously unknown works of art, but when does that ever happen in real life? I quite like the landscapes, but the portraits...are you really going to hang them up? They make me feel...uncomfortable. There's something off about them. It's like when you look at the Mona Lisa. You get the feeling there's something else going on, but you can't quite put your finger on it. I have the same feeling with these, but it's more of a chilly feeling than anything else. They're almost malignant in a way. If they were mine, I'd get them out of the house in seconds.

How are the kids? Danny is doing better now, thanks. He hasn't had any more of those nightmares, thank goodness, and he's really enjoying *Harry Potter*. Maybe as a present I'll get him one of the movies. I liked the books better though, didn't you? Daniel Radcliffe is cute, but he's not my Harry Potter.

I wish you were here so you could taste the dinner I made tonight. Polenta with stuffed chicken and sauteed vegetables. I've been wanting to try this recipe for ages! When you come and visit me (if you survive the paintings), I'll make it for you and Tim. Danny can't wait to see Elizabeth and John. He keeps asking when they're coming back.

Affectionately,  
Joanne.

June 10, 2012

Beth,

Oh my God, I'm so sorry about Elizabeth's arm! Is she going to be okay? What happened? Call me!

June 12, 2012

Dear Beth,

I'm glad the doctors say she'll make a full recovery. Are you going to get that tree inspected?

You should. It might be rotten on the inside. That's the only reason I can think of for a branch that big to suddenly snap off like that. Thank God she was only a few feet off the ground instead of all the way up it. I couldn't even begin to imagine.

She has a pink cast? How cute! I'm sure Tim and John are doodling all over it. Send me a picture, okay? And tell her I wish her the best and a speedy recovery. Do you know how long she'll be in a cast? Give me your address so I can mail her something special. Maybe I'll mail you some cookies while I'm at it. You need them.

Danny sends his love as well. When I told him Elizabeth had broken her arm, he was all concerned and wanted me to drive all the way out to New York to see you guys. I wish I could have. But with work...well, you know how it is, Beth. Maybe in a few weeks I can take some vacation time and drive down to visit you. But you have to put those paintings away. I absolutely refuse to be in the same room as them. I don't want their eyes following me around.

Firmly, but with love,  
Joanne

June 28, 2012

Oh Beth,

I know you love those paintings, and I don't mean to upset you, but I really, really don't like them. Can we please stop talking about them?

Did the exterminator come? If he did, and you're still hearing that scratching at night, find a new one. He obviously didn't do a good job if there's still mice in the walls. And the floors smell now? What have you gotten yourself into?

I can only think that there's some sort of moisture getting into the seams and spreading. It would explain why parts of the floor are saggy and smelly and why other parts aren't. It might be coming in from the foundation; if the walls aren't properly sealed runoff will seep in and wreak havoc with everything. If you're not careful, your wiring might go crazy next. Please call a contractor or somebody? At least an inspection agent?

I'm sorry if I'm terse. It's Danny. He's been talking in his sleep. Normally I wouldn't be too worried, but the things is, I don't know what he's saying. It's not English. At least, it doesn't sound like English. It doesn't sound like any language. It's gibberish. He's just mumbling the same nonsense phrase, over and over again. It sets my teeth on edge. I asked him today what he was dreaming about, but he says he can't remember, that all he remembers is lying down and

then waking up. I'm half tempted to record him. Do you think I should tell Kent? Or am I overreacting? It's just...Danny is all I have left. When I think of anything happening to him...

What do you think, Beth? Be honest.

Love,

Joanne.

July 3, 2012

Dear Beth,

You really are an amazing friend. And you're right. He's just going through a stage. He slept-talked a bit more a few nights ago, but now he's fine. A bit quiet, but fine. After all, he is thirteen, and thirteen year-olds are all sorts of crazy. I remember when I was thirteen, vaguely. I used to sit around the house and sigh at everything, and whenever anyone would ask what was wrong, I would say nothing and sigh some more. It was all very dramatic and stupid. Hopefully Danny won't be as much a diva as I was.

Is it good that Elizabeth wants to go back to climbing trees? It's brave of her, but is it safe? She might injure herself again. How is her arm? I know you told me the cast came off, but has her arm healed entirely?

So the exterminator found mice nests all behind the stove? Disgusting. I hope that ends the scratching at night. Or you can get a cat. Just be wary of finding dead mice in your shoes.

That's how they say they love you, apparently. I don't know, it sounds a bit sketchy if you ask me. A dead mouse isn't how I want my pets showing me affection. Wagging tails, happy faces, can you tell I'm a dog girl? I would get one for here, but I'm never home enough to take care of one.

I used to have dogs as a kid. I wish Danny could have grown up with them like I did. But it's difficult being a single-mother, living in the city. Dogs need to be walked, need attention. I know Danny would love to take care of one, but I can't have him walking a dog all around the city. It's too unsafe. He could get hit by a car or something, you know?

I'm making this email about me. I'm sorry.

How is the rest of the house coming? Is the landscaping coming along well? Send me the plans so I can see what you guys are planning!

With much love,  
Joanne

July 8, 2012

My dear Beth,

The landscape plans look terrific. I love the little waterfall pond you've incorporated near the back porch. It'll look amazing when it's done, I can just see it.

Do you really think I'm too protective? I just want what's best for Danny. I'm so worried that I'll do something wrong, that I'll slip up somehow...I'm all he has for a role model and a provider. You know how Kent is.

I think I've slipped with that videogame, Struggleopolis. He's playing it more and more. Do you know I found him playing it at three in the morning two nights ago? Three in the morning. It took me five minutes to get his attention. He was just sitting there, on the floor, staring at the TV like he was hypnotized. I don't think he was blinking. At all. Remember that one time I told you about his eyes getting glassy? They were almost reflective this time. I could see the game reflected in his eyes.

It worries me, Beth. I've read about kids who play too many videogames. What if I've damaged him somehow?

I'm just going to end this right now. It's too depressing.

-Joanne

July 9, 2012

Beth -

The landscapers found what in your backyard? They found what? A skeleton! What! Call me. Call me as soon as you get this email!

Joanne

July 11, 2012

Bethanne Campbell -

You get yourself out of that house right now. I don't care if it's the house of your dreams or the First Lady or whatever. Get out of it. That house is toxic. I'm not one to be superstitious or anything, but there's something wrong with that house. Just leave it. Come stay with me. Stay in a hotel. But leave that house.

For God's sake, Beth, you found a skeleton buried in the backyard! What more do you need to tell you that house is bad news? Do you even know why there was a skeleton in the backyard? Or how old it is? What if someone murdered a poor soul and left him buried in your backyard! Good God!

You're still hearing scratching in the walls too? Beth, please, please, please, a million times please leave that house. If it makes you feel better, I'd be running away from that house with my tail between my legs. I would have run the first night I heard the scratching. This is just the icing on the cake.

I don't know why you sound so intrigued by all this. I hope you don't think it's exciting. Because it's not. It's terrifying. It's utterly terrifying, especially when you look at it in light of everything else. The scratching in the walls, the creaking, the smelly floors, the damp spots, the portraits (don't get me started on the portraits), and now the skeleton? It's all the makings of a haunted house. I might not believe in ghosts and nonsense like that, but I do believe in malevolence, and there's something malevolent in that house. I can just imagine you shaking your head at me Beth, but you know I'm right. I know I'm right. That house oozes malevolence, and I'm not even living there. Please tell me you're getting a hotel. I'm begging you to get a hotel. Please, please, please, please.

Please,  
Joanne.

July 12, 2012

Dear misguided Beth,

I am not, I repeat not, looking into murders for you! I don't care! I'm not doing it! I had no idea you were so ghoulish, Beth! Ugh, what has gotten into you? Why are you so curious about that awful skeleton? And that house? It's like you're possessed! Or you've taken leave of your sense, at the very least.

I'm not even sure how I could help you. Even with the information you've given, newspaper records only go back so far, and I don't know if your county would be covered here in the city.

If it made national news, maybe, but if it made national news, why would the skeleton have gone so long without anyone finding it? I doubt that you're going to learn anything.

Does Tim know what you're doing? Does he approve of it? I hope he doesn't, just to get you to stop. And do the kids know their mother is a secret ghoul? Speaking of, how are they? I know Elizabeth's arm is good, but I haven't heard much about John. How is he? I hope you're not neglecting them to solve decades' old murders.

Affectionately but firmly,  
Joanne

July 13, 2012

Dear Beth,

Fine. Fine. You've worn me down. I'll head down to the library tomorrow to look up your skeletal friend. You're sure it's a he? And that he died sometime during the 1920s? You better be right, Beth, or else you're going to get stale cookies in the mail.

Is it safe for John to be exploring the woods by himself? He's only fourteen. And send me pictures of the arrowheads he's found! I'd love to see them. We have a collection here at the museum, and quite a few in storage that we can't show because they're either damaged or not museum worthy. I'm sure I could pull a few strings and send him a few of them, if he wants them for his collection. Run it by him and see what he says? And is there anything Elizabeth would like? I know she loved the bear I sent, but I'd love to get her something from the gift shop...a necklace maybe? A bracelet? I remember her not being overly girly. Maybe arrowheads for her too?

Danny is doing better now. I sat him down and talked to him about how videogames will rot his mind (white lie, white lie, but I'm allowed), and I think I got through to him. He's reading more now, and he's talking about trying out for the soccer team when school starts again. I think it'll do him good. Keep him active and such. We're going to the park later today, actually. Get us both active. We've been staring at screens far too long.

But I guess what I'll be doing all day tomorrow? Staring at a screen! For you Beth, all for you. This just shows how much I love you.

With so much love,  
Joanne

July 14, 2012

Dear Beth,

I've attached scanned copies of what I found in case I've missed anything. But from what I can see, your skeleton friend is Jonathon McRae, a rum-runner from New York City. He was reported missing by his wife on January 18, 1923 after he failed to return home after a late-night run from Canada. Authorities officially reported that he ran off with the alcohol, since they never recovered a body or the alcohol, but his wife was convinced that Antonio Borgnino (I swear, I am not making any of this up) set up a hit on Jonathon because Jonathon ran rum for a whole bunch of speakeasies, not just Antonio's, including several rival joints. No one could prove anything though, since there was no CSI back in the 1920s, and also because Borgnino was a fairly important name around those parts. Not even the authorities wanted to mess with that family.

I bet you five dollars that your house was owned by the Borgninos. I couldn't find any deeds for it (I wonder why), but if the police were staying away from the Borgninos, then what better place to bury him but in their backyard? No one would dare try to dig up their backyard, and I guess no one else did as extensive yardwork as you and Tim did.

Borgnino's method of dispatching people he didn't like also fits your skeleton to the T. He apparently had a habit of shooting his victims in the knees before offing them with a single shot to the head, and from what you've told me of your skeleton, his injuries fit the M.O. (I can't believe you had someone examine the horrid thing).

So there you have it. Your house has seen creepy painters, mice, cockroaches, and murder. If I were you, I'd be packing up everything before you could blink. I think you're just waiting for the ectoplasm to start oozing down the walls.

Tiredly,  
Joanne

July 20, 2012

Hello Beth,

I'm glad the arrowheads made it okay and even more glad Elizabeth and John approve of them! And the cookies aren't stale? Good! I hope you all gobble them right up!

Oh! I saw the article in the paper about Jonathon, but thanks for sending it along. It's nice that

you payed for a proper burial for him. God only knows he deserved it, after being forgotten about for so many years. Were you able to locate any of his remaining family? Maybe now your house will calm down so you can enjoy it! Just think! No more sagging floorboards, no more scratching in the walls, no more unidentified creaks and moans. If only you would get rid of those paintings. Or at least the portraits. I told you, there's something off about them.

Danny just told me to say hi to you and the kids. He banged himself up good at the park the other day - fell off the monkey bars while he was trying to hang by his knees. He's got gashes all up and down his arm now, and keeps asking me if I think it'll scar. He seems to think they're some kind of war wound. I told him that he'd look like G.I Joe and that made him happy. I nearly had to tape his Band-aids down so that he wouldn't peel them back to look at the scrapes. Boys. I will never understand them. But I did make him promise me that he wouldn't hang upside down on the bars again. I doubt he'll be able to help himself though. He's at the age where playground equipment is only fun when you're using it wrong.

You would be proud of me. I didn't tell Kent about that time I found Danny half comatose in front of the TV. I thought about it, and almost called him, but then I realized it would just make me sound like a crazy mother, and I don't think Kent would listen, let alone take me seriously. He'd just tell me I was behaving irrationally and to leave it at that. Besides, it's not like Kent's been around a lot for Danny, you know? You're lucky, Beth, that you have Tim, that you have someone willing to stand by you forever. I wish I had been so lucky.

But! I have Danny, and that's all that matters. I'm thinking of getting him one of those Nintendo DS things or whatever they're called now for his birthday. At least with those he can take them outside and play out in the schoolyard. The consoles tether you to the couch and the TV. I don't think I could do it. Maybe I'm getting old.

In other news, a bird has made its nest outside my window, on the ledge just above me. I can hear her chirping, and saw her and her mate carrying bits of straw and such yesterday. I hope her babies are happy there! Can't wait until they're born. It'll be so nice to have a little family so close.

Good luck with the house!

Love,  
Joanne.

July 22, 2012

Hi Beth.

It's the strangest thing. That little nest I was telling you about? It's gone. It's just vanished. I looked on the sidewalk beneath us, but it's not there at all. Do you think the cleaners took it away? Maybe the birds will build a new nest.

Danny's mad at me for some reason. He broke his glass this morning at breakfast, threw it on the ground because I asked him why I hear him moving around his room at three in the morning. It was so strange, Beth. He was so calm about it, so composed. He just looked at me, picked up the glass, and smashed it. Then, as cool as a cucumber, he got up and walked off. I was so shocked and shaken that I stood there for five minutes staring at the shards before I remembered to punish him! He's grounded for two weeks, no TV, Internet, or videogames. Usually he gets so upset when he's in trouble, will argue with me and plead and beg for a lesser sentence, but this time he just stared at me with these awful expressionless eyes. It was like looking at a statue. But worse. Maybe it was more like looking at a wax figure. Only you're not sure if it's actually a wax figure.

It frightened me, Beth. I've seen him angry plenty of times, don't get me wrong, but I've never seen that...lack of anything. He just sat there on his bed, looking at me, like he was waiting for me to leave, like I didn't mean anything to him at all. It was chilling. I can't even explain it.

Ugh, I don't want to think about it anymore. How are the renovations going? Are they almost done? I can't believe you had to replace the entire electric system. But at least you won't be hearing anymore scratching! It looks like I'll have to eat my words. That house might just be great. And like the graceful person I am, I bow down and throw in my towel in defeat. You were right and I was wrong.

Except for those paintings. They're nasty. I looked them over again, like you challenged me too, and you know what I noticed? In the scans you've sent me, when I blow them up, there's a slight discoloration on the faces of the portraits. The skin is paler on their cheeks and darker around the eyes. It's so finely done that you don't really see it if you're not trying to find it, but when you do...they look like skulls with faces superimposed on them. I told you there was something I didn't like about them.

I've seen paintings like this before, though, where there are images hidden within the painting. Someone brought in a painting once that was absolutely covered in naked bodies disguised as cats. It was quite amusing when our intern spotted them. So it's not that uncommon for artists to sneak things in. Can you send me the landscapes? There might be something hidden in them as well.

I guess Danny doesn't understand what grounded means. He's blaring some horrible music now.

I know I didn't say no music, but you know what? You're not supposed to enjoy being grounded. I'll have to go tell him to turn it off. I don't even know where he got this CD from. I certainly never bought it for him. It sounds like a bunch of screaming. Boys!

Well, I better end this now and take care of my son. Would you like to trade?

With much love,  
Joanne

July 23, 2012

Dear Beth,

Danny broke a dish today. He threw it against the wall. There's a hole now in the plaster. I have no idea what's gotten into him. I don't even know what set him off. It was like something clicked off in him. One second he was telling me about this thing called parkour and how he wanted to try it, and then the next he simply stopped, like a computer freezing or shutting down. The light went out of his eyes, his face stilled, and that awful calm came over him again. I spoke his name, he looked at me, looked past me, and then hurled the dish at the wall. I nearly screamed. And he was so calm about it. I don't understand it. He's in his room now, reading. I think. He doesn't remember breaking the dish.

I'm worried. It might be some sort of displaced anger issue that's showing now that his hormone's are kicking in. Do you think the divorce did something to him? I thought he was too young to remember it.

The birds haven't come back either. I wonder if the cat next door got them. I hope not.

Anyway, I looked over the landscapes. Apparently your artist was a morbid little fellow. I've found approximately too many skeletons painted into rocks, clouds, trees, you name it, it has a skeleton in it. There're also devils, if you want to know that. I found one peeping out at me from behind a tree. Lovely. There's a jackal too, eating a lizard. The jackal's badly proportioned; I doubt the artist ever saw one. He probably worked off an image he found lying around somewhere.

The hidden images tell me a bit about this artist. He was psychologically repressed, felt like he was bound by social conventions and couldn't express himself freely. So he used his paintings to subvert what would have been his modern-day conventions. He turned portraits of his friends and family into death-heads, turned landscapes into nightmares. He would have been something of a sore thumb probably in his community, and was probably high on laudanum a lot of the

time. It's not uncommon, and it's really too bad. If he had lived in a different century, people would have loved his paintings, if he worked on them a bit. He has the makings of a great artists. I just don't think he was able fully utilize his talent.

Danny's moving around upstairs again. It's so unlike him. He's walking heavy, like he's dragging his feet. I don't know what he's doing. Part of me doesn't want to know what he's doing. Is that bad, Beth? I think he just dropped something. I heard a crash. I have to go.

Love,  
Joanne

July 24, 2012

Beth,

I'm sorry I haven't been answering calls lately. It's Danny. He's getting worse. The sleep-talking has started again. I've decided to record him, so I can replay it and see if I can't figure out what he's saying.

I went up to his room a few days ago. It's absolutely filthy. I don't know what he's been doing up there, but it smells like something died. I'm going to have to clean it. I bet he's left food everywhere, but he's never done that before.

I hear him at night too, moving around his room and in the hallways when he's not sleep-talking. I'm going to stay up tonight, Beth, and see what he's doing. I can't live like this anymore. I really can't. He doesn't even talk to me now. He's always silent, brooding, with hooded eyes. It's creepy. I never thought I would say my child is creepy. But he is. The other kids stay away from him at the park. He doesn't want to play on the monkey-bars anymore. He sits on the swings, staring at the other kids. I have no idea what's going on. I have no idea how to help him.

I am at my wit's end, Beth. I feel like this is all my fault, that he's getting back at me for divorcing Kent. Do you think I was wrong? Should I have tried harder to make it work? God Beth, I'm so scared. I don't know what to do. Can you tell me? Do you have any answers Beth? Please, please share them with me.

Worried,  
Joanne

July 25, 2012

Dear Beth,

I fell asleep on the couch last night. I haven't done that since I was with Kent. But wait, it gets worse.

I know you think that I'm overreacting a bit, but wait until I tell you what I found. You won't believe me. But maybe now you'll see why I'm worried. I don't think you understand how bad it is over here. I'm sure your house is lovely, but please listen to me now. I need you to listen to me and tell me if I'm going crazy.

I cleaned Danny's room yesterday. Beth, I found the neighbor's cat. Dead. Stuffed in a cardboard box under his bed.

What the hell, Beth. What the hell.

It was absolutely covered in dried blood. I don't what happened to it, what Danny did to it, but it was violent. I can tell you that much. I think it might have been stabbed. Or bludgeoned.

Jesus Beth, what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to sit him down and talk to him about how it's bad to kill things? None of the parenting books I've read have any of the answers I need. I don't even know who to talk to. There's you, of course, but am I supposed to call Kent? What if Kent thinks he's dangerous? What if I think he's dangerous? Should I put him in therapy? A psychiatric ward? I don't know! I just don't know!

I threw the cat out. I couldn't stand to look at it. I haven't told the neighbors either. I didn't even know their cat was missing.

I'm afraid to take him out. What if he gets a hold of something in the park and kills that too? What am I supposed to do then? Am I supposed to apologize to the other parents and hope their children aren't scarred for life?

I miss my Danny, Beth. I miss my happy, smiling child. I want to know what caused this. When did he become this little monster that kills cats?

Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe he found the cat like that and wanted to give it a proper burial. Maybe he hid it under his bed so that I wouldn't find it because he didn't want to scare me. It's possible, right? I mean, if he found it in the back alley, he might not have wanted to leave it there, and put it in a box to keep it safe. Kids do that, right?

I should call Kent. Danny's his son too. Kent should know, right? Oh, I don't know what to do.

I didn't find anything else when I cleaned his room. Everything else was fine, just messy. His clothes were everywhere. And he's hung up a sheet over his headboard. I didn't want to take it down because I don't want him to think I'm poking around his stuff and I thought maybe he was just trying to be creative or something. (This was before I found the cat.) But I'm thinking it's about time I started exercising my right as a mother. While he's playing his videogame, I'll sneak in and look around some more. I need to know what's going on here.

You don't think that's bad, right? Have you snuck around your kids' rooms, looking for things? I thought that was only for mothers whose kids were crack addicts or something. I never thought I'd have to do it.

I hate this, Beth. I seriously hate this.

I feel like this is all my fault. I've done something. Or I haven't done something I was supposed to do. I spend too much time at work. I don't spend enough time with him. I didn't bond properly with him and now he's acting out in a cry for attention.

How can I send him back to school like this? What if the neighbors find out what happened to their cat? Can they press charges? Is that even possible? Could Danny be sent to juvie? What if they subpoena my email records? Will I be charged too? My stomach is churning. I think I'm going to be sick. God, what am I going to do? Beth, what am I supposed to do. I'm so sorry.

Joanne

July 26, 2012

Beth,

I need help. I'm not equipped to handle this sort of thing.

So I took the sheet down while he was playing, and his headboard is completely covered in...something. It's the same line of symbols, repeated over and over again, scratched in with a nail or something. I don't even know how to describe it. Let me see if I can find them in the computer symbols.

□ □ □ □ □ ?????????????????? □ □ □ □

Do you understand that, Beth? I don't. I have no idea what that's supposed to mean. I've

strained my eyes staring at these things, trying to understand them, and I'm at a loss. I have never seen anything like them before in my life, not in a Renaissance, not in a Pollock, not in an anything. There's no discernible meaning to them, no context or anything. It's just nonsense...

Where do you think he learned it, Beth? Do you think he's doing drugs? Hallucinogens or something? I heard about people doing crazy things while on drugs. Do you think he might have gotten his hands on some and drew all that while on a trip? It could be acid. Or PVC. Did you read that article about the man that killed a mountain lion while on PVC? Danny might have killed that cat while on PVC. How does a thirteen year old get a hold of PVC? This is supposed to be a nice neighborhood! Are there drug dealers I don't know about?

I think I'm having a heart attack. I feel pain in my chest. Or a panic attack. Or something. I need to do some research on these symbols I think. Maybe they're some sort of code for drug deals. Meeting corners or something. The latitude and the longitude could be represented by different symbols, and he's trying to memorize them by writing them down constantly.

I'm going to look through his room again and see if I can't find some drug paraphernalia in there. I kind of want him to be on drugs - that I can fix. If it's a mental problem...I don't know what I would do. If it's just drugs, therapy, rehab, counselors, they can all help. But with mental problems, what can you do? You can try to fix it, but I don't want him to be medicated all the time, having to down anti-psychotics to pretend to be normal. And medication only helps so much. If he ever goes off them...I can't believe I'm praying my thirteen year old is on drugs. What did I do to deserve this? How did I become such a horrible mother?

I'm sorry I keep unloading on you, Beth. I should stop, shouldn't I?

Scared,  
Joanne

July 27, 2012

Beth,

Damn it, that's not what the symbols looked like when I typed them in! Damn it! I don't know what happened! But the line you got is definitely not what I saw or typed! Damn it!

I asked Danny right out if he was doing drugs. He barely even looked at me. No emotion whatsoever. He's got shadows under his eyes like he's not sleeping. I checked his arms for needle marks, but I didn't see anything suspicious. I have a home drug test hidden in the closet so I can make sure. (Yes, I know now it's not PVC, it's PCP, excuse me.) And I'm taking him

to Dr. Barry tomorrow, like you suggested. I have an appointment set up with a therapist as well.

Kent says I'm making matters worse. I called him like you said (I'm sorry I spammed you with emails, by the way), and Kent told me that I'm making mountains out of molehills. He wants to know what proof I have that there's something wrong with Danny. I told him to come here and look at his son, but Kent is off in L.A. and won't leave his business meeting to take care of Danny. I tried explaining about the cat, but Kent told me unless I can prove that Danny did it, he doesn't care. He accused me of theatrics.

Beth, do you think I'm being theatrical? Is that why you haven't been answering back often? Tell me the honest truth, Beth. I need it right now.

Thanks,  
Joanne

July 28, 2012

Beth -

Well, if I had known I was bothering you, I wouldn't have sent you any emails. Thank you very much. Now that I know you agree with my jerk ex-husband, I won't trouble you any more with the nonsense that has become my life.

I hope your house is going well. I hope the renovations are going well. I hope those stupid portraits come alive and eat the walls.

Just so you know, Danny passed the drug test and Dr. Barry can't find anything physically wrong with him. That just leaves the therapist. I guess I'll see how that goes.

I hope you don't have to deal with this sort of craziness with Elizabeth and John. And I hope that if you do, you have friends who are willing to stick by you through your hardship.

- Joanne

July 29, 2012

Bethanne -

Don't bother apologizing. You were quite succinct in your last email. I get the hint. Don't worry.

And since you're curious, the therapist told me that Danny might be suffering some form of depression. He gave me the number of a psychiatrist and a recommendation to have Danny put on Lexapro. I guess that fixes everything.

- Joanne

Saved in Drafts on August 7, 2012

I guess I keep writing these emails to stay sane.

The Lexapro isn't working. Danny might be able to fool the psychiatrist, but I know my son better than she does, and the Lexapro isn't doing a damn thing. I'm going to wait up tonight and see what he's doing. I know he doesn't sleep. I hear him rustling around every night. And I'm going to figure out what's going on, even if I have to do it on my own. I've survived without support before.

I asked the psychiatrist why he's been so...psychopathic lately...and was lectured at for forty minutes about how psychopathy is completely different from depression. But I know depression. I've been there. I saw my mother there. And I can firmly say with all my heart that Danny is not depressed. Depression is when you sit in bed all day in your pajamas or when you sit in front of the TV all day in your pajamas and watch a marathon of *America's Next Top Designer* while eating Cheeze-its. Depression is when you don't want to do anything. Depression is when you realize you've spent six hours staring at the window thinking about absolutely nothing.

Depression is not killing the neighbors' cat. Depression is not scratching weird symbols into the headboard. Depression is not systematically destroying all the glassware in the apartment. I opened up the cabinet this morning and shards of glass rained down all over the counter. All of the wine glasses, the crystal, everything was destroyed. It looked like Danny had ground them down with a stone or something. I mentioned it to the psychiatrist, and she asked me if those pieces had been given to me by Kent. Some of them were from our wedding day, and she said maybe Danny broke them because he was upset at our divorce. Then she asked me about the divorce and how acrimonious it had been.

Even if all this *is* my fault, I don't think it has anything to do with the divorce. Danny and I have talked about the divorce before, and I explained to him very carefully and very thoroughly that the divorce had nothing to do with him and more to do with the fact that Kent and I got married too early before we realized that we were two very different people with very different goals. I was also careful to keep the fighting to a minimum and away from Danny for the most part.

He never had a problem with it before. I don't see why it has to be a problem now. I know I thought it before, but now I'm not so sure.

It's those symbols. They're part of the equation. And I'm going to figure out how they're involved.

Updated six hours later

It's that damn videogame! He stays up all night playing it! Or something. I'm not sure if he's actually playing it, now that I think about it. His fingers weren't moving, and he was doing that glassy-eyed thing I saw a while back, just staring at the screen, his mouth open.

I wonder...

Saved in Drafts on August 9, 2012

I asked the IT guys if they would look at the symbol line for me, and they confirmed what I thought. It's a snippet of coding, they told me, but they can't tell me what it's for unless I give them the entire code. One of them, Chris, asked me where I found it, so I told him I got it from a videogame, and he seemed really interested in it. He wants to know if I can get him a copy of it, but I don't think I can. I'm pretty sure Danny downloaded it from the online store directly. I told Chris that, and he wants me to get him the name of the game so he can look it up. He said the code is interesting in that he's never seen anything like it before, and he does a lot of programming for us and for his own use, so I'm sure he knows what he's talking about. I hope he can help.

I'm trying to decide if I want to let the psychiatrist know what's going on. I didn't mention to Chris or the other IT guy about my suspicions about the coding because even to me it sounds crazy and I'm the one who thought it up, and the psychiatrist is completely convinced that I'm the main cause of the problem. If I run in and start spouting off about codes and brain malfunctions, she'll probably put *me* on medication. I need to be careful about this. Beth didn't believe me. The psychiatrist probably won't believe me, not that I don't blame either of them. What I'm thinking is crazy.

But...

I did some research online, and there's a lot of talk about how videogames affect children's minds, especially young and pubescent children. Some say it's the violence in them, some think it's a neurological thing, and there's a small minority who think there's a conspiracy going on with the companies. I spent almost all last night reading articles about how some theorists

conjecture that programmers slip codes into the programs they write that will subliminally affect children's minds so that the kids become addicted to the games. But with some kids, these codes trigger side effects, like rage and antisocial behavior.

And there's my answer.

Is it crazy? Yes. Would I ever believe it if I wasn't experiencing it first hand? No. But it's happening and I can't stop it and all I can do is try to fix it. And if that means that I have to believe a bunch of crazy online theorists, then so be it.

I don't expect anyone to understand. It really is crazy. I can barely believe what I'm writing, what I'm saying. It's utterly insane.

But I can see Danny out of the corner of my eye. I'm letting him do what he wants right now because, honestly, I'm a bit afraid of him. Some of the urban legends are terrifying - stories about kids killing themselves, killing their parents, things like that. I looked up the names in the stories - none of them check out. But urban legends are based on truths, and I don't want to see how far they go. So I'm letting him have the run of the house. Mostly he just plays that damn videogame or stays shut up in his room. I check him at night while he sleeps to make sure he's not self-harming. So far I can't find anything abnormal, but his elbow looks bad. The scrape he got from falling off the monkeybars has scarred over much worse than I thought it would. He might have picked at it or done something to it so that it never healed properly. It's all red and raw and flaky, and there are hard bumps all under his skin. I'm trying to look at it right now while he's distracted. It almost looks like there are pellets under his skin, like the silica balls you get in purses.

I don't want him to know that I'm investigating his game. He's shown violence toward me before, and I don't want him thinking I'm suspicious. It's difficult. He watches me when he thinks I'm not paying attention. I was cooking yesterday and when I turned around, there he was, standing in the kitchen, watching me with those dark little eyes of his. I nearly dropped rice all over me. I didn't even hear him come into the room.

It remind me in a way of a cat stalking its prey. Careful, precise, and deadly. I need to be careful.

He's watching me right now. I tried to smile at him, but it's so hard. He didn't smile back, just watched me without blinking. I feel like I'm losing the ability to love him.

Saved in Drafts on August 12, 2012

My mouth is burning, but the bleeding has stopped, thankfully. I think there were shards of glass in my toothbrush. All I know for sure is that I was brushing my teeth and all of a sudden I started spitting out blood. There are scratches all over my gums and cheeks. I'm not sure if I got all the glass out, if it was glass. I rinsed my mouth out as best I could, but I can't be sure.

Danny did it. It's the only possible explanation. He was watching me this morning as breakfast. I could barely eat, was almost crying. He seemed curious, like he was studying me. He didn't ask if I was okay or what was wrong or anything. He knew. He knew exactly why I was in pain. I think he enjoyed it.

I'm bleeding again. I need to get a tissue.

Anyway, I gave Chris the name of Struggleopolis, and he promised me he'll look into it. I asked him specifically to look at the coding and to let me know if he finds anything interesting in it.

We'll see what happens. I feel bad involving him, but I do need his help, even if he has no idea what I'm getting him into. I hope that nothing happens to him. I worry that maybe the code snippet will mess with him somehow, but I've studied the code a lot now, and I don't feel any worse or different for it. I'm probably too old for it to affect me, but Chris is only thirty-one.

Hopefully that's old enough. I don't want him to get hurt.

There's a piece of glass poking me just under my tooth. I need to see if I can get this out. And I need to call the dentist to make an appointment as soon as possible. Damn it. I feel like prisoner in my apartment, held hostage by my own son. What did I do to deserve this? What did Danny do?

I almost wish Kent was here, so I could have someone to lean on. But who am I kidding? Kent was never around for me to lean on, even when things were good. He'd probably think I rubbed my toothbrush in glass just to start drama or get attention. He hasn't called back since I talked to him last. Damn him. Why on earth did I ever marry him in the first place?

August 15, 2012

Dear Chris,

Can you explain what you mean by redundancies? I'm not sure I quite understand what you're talking about. Type slower and run it by me again, bit by bit?

Thanks,  
Joanne

August 15, 2012

Dear Chris,

So basically, the snippet I showed you is a garbage code? That means it has no relevance to the actual game play, right? If it's not relevant, then why does it appear so often in the coding? And can you isolate the image it represents in the game, if it does represent something?

Could it be a cheat code? I remember Danny talking about them. (Danny is my son.) Could it be a leftover cheat code the programmers use when they play test the game? Like the Comanee Code, or something, right?

Thanks again,  
Joanne

August 16, 2012

Dear Chris,

Oh! Konami Code! That's how you spell it!

So cheat codes have a different form and signature than this one. Interesting. Does this snippet have a signature that you recognize?

And be careful when you run the game. Just...be careful, okay? Please? You probably think I'm being a worrywart. Showing off my age, right?

Can you also tell me a little bit about the company that developed the game? All I need is the name of the company and the developers. I can look up the rest on my own. But if you know anything about them, please, let me know. Thanks in advance!

Yours,  
Joanne

August 17, 2012

Chris -

So you've never heard of Etiam Quis Velit? Thanks, anyway. I'm sure I can find them online. I was just curious about them because Danny loves this game so much and I wanted to see if I

could find some other games for him that were done by the same company. I guess they're relatively new.

And thank you for including a screenshot of the image. It was the same every time you saw it? Just a little box of static in the corner? You say it flickers. Does it flicker in any set pattern, or is it just a random occurrence? Could you possibly include a .GIF of it?

It's strange, isn't it, that the code snippet doesn't follow any signature that you've seen. I wonder if it's just broken, like if someone didn't finish coding it. That would explain the static, right? Or am I being naive about it?

You feel okay, don't you? Getting enough sleep at night, that sort of thing? Sorry for harping. I suppose it's the mother in me.

Sincerely,  
Joanne

August 19, 2012

Dear Chris,

Oh, don't worry about me. I'm fine. I broke a glass last night and apparently didn't clean up all the shards properly. I cut up my feet this morning making coffee barefoot. That's why I'm limping. I should be fine in a few days or so.

Thanks again for the .GIF. It's a bit hard on the eyes, isn't it? I got a headache after watching it twice. Anyway, I hope you're doing well and that you're not staying up all night playing that game, no matter how addictive you say it is. Forgive me for sounding old and crotchety, but I don't understand how you kids (and you are a kid to me, I don't care how old you think you are) can play those games day in and day out. Your brains are going to dribble out of your ears and then where will the IT department be? Have you thought about the IT department, Chris? You should. What about the rest of the museum? What would we do without you?

Probably crash and burn.

Yours,  
Joanne

August 25, 2012

Hey Chris.

I hope you're okay. I haven't seen you at work in days. I don't know if we just haven't run into one another or if you're out sick. Please respond back.

Saved in Drafts on September 1, 2012

Chris hasn't been to work in a week. I'm worried about him. I wish I knew what was going on, but I have this horrible feeling in my stomach that something's happened and that it has something to do with that game. I shouldn't have involved him. Oh, I hope he's just sick or something. I wish he would answer me back.

Danny's elbow is worse. The bumps I noticed before are now ringed in red scabs. It looks infected. I hauled him into the bathroom and poured hydrogen peroxide all over them and then slathered on some Neosporin just to be safe. Danny didn't seem to care much either way. No flinching, no cringing, no hissing, nothing. He sat on the toilet and watched his toes.

I don't like this. But at least my feet are healing. I need to be more careful, but who expects there to be ground up glass in their slippers? I guess I need to expect it.

I haven't mentioned any of those incidents to the psychiatrist. I feel like I should, but I'm afraid she'll put Danny on more medication or she'll want to put him away somewhere. If she even does that. She's disinterested in him, I can tell. Their appointments only last about ten to fifteen minutes at most. It's like she other things to worry about.

If we get through this intact, I'll have a lot to say about her on her Yahoo page.

Some days I think I'm being stupid, taking on this all by myself. I should email Beth again. Or something. I'm so confused. I want to lie down and just sleep forever, sleep this whole mess away and wake up again when nothing is wrong and I can go back to my old life. I wish I had never gotten Danny that console. I wish I hadn't let him buy that game. If I could go back in time and fix all the wrong, I would, in a heartbeat. I would give anything right now to have my son back.

Why us? What did we do wrong?

Saved in Drafts on September 6, 2012

Oh God, Chris is dead. The police came and asked me how long it's been since I've spoken to or seen him. They wanted to know why I was so interested in Sturggleopolis. Oh God. What if

they suspect me? They wouldn't give me any information on how he died or when. I think I'm going to be sick.

Saved in Drafts on September 10, 2012

The police finally released an official statement on Chris' death today. They say he killed himself by hanging, but I know better. It's the game. The game made him do it.

I'm officially cleared. I had to go down to the station and answer a few questions; I think they thought I was having an affair with him or something. Who knows. They were curious about my preoccupation with finding information about the game, so I told them the same thing I told Chris. What was I supposed to tell them? That I think there's something in the game that turns kids into crazy psychopaths and drives young men to suicide? They would have held me in a heartbeat.

I'm lucky they didn't subpoena my email records, or else they would have found all of this and thought I was completely out of my mind. The only reason they called me down in the first place was because I was the last person to contact him before he died. They thought I might have seen him or something. It would be funny if this whole thing wasn't so insane. Could you imagine me having an affair with Chris? But I suppose it's easier to suspect the divorced, stressed, mother of one of foul play than anyone else.

That they suspected me at all makes me believe there's something not right with his death. If it were just a simple suicide, they wouldn't have investigated so hard. No, there was something off about it, something wrong that they noticed. Maybe signs of a struggle, marks on his body, anything. Brains all over the floor. I'll never know. But I can assume from what I've seen with Danny.

Poor Chris. If I had known...I thought he would be safe. I need to find out more about this company. No more waiting around, putting it off. It needs to be done today, right now.

Updated three hours later

It's surprising how much you can find out about somebody with a few basic facts and a good search engine. I've got everything saved on my hard drive, protected by password where Danny can't find it.

Eugene Wilkinson...it's no coincidence that you double majored in psychology and computer sciences, now is it? Nor is it coincidence that your thesis is all about the manipulation of neurons in relation to behavior. I think you took your theories and decided to run a little

experiment. You bastard.

I want to see how many other lives you've ruined with this game.

Updated fifty-three minutes later

Either no one else has played this game or had a reaction to it, or Wilkinson is very good at cleaning up his online history. I can't find a single damn thing mentioning adverse reactions to his game. But I'm willing to bet he's monitoring it very carefully. Even if I caused a stir, I'm sure it would be covered up in a matter of hours, if not minutes.

I did find something though, however small it is. Apparently there's a website called CreepyPasta, or something, that's dedicated to finding disturbing or scary stories and archiving them for whatever reasons the owners may have. When I searched the name of Wilkinson's game with the phrase "psychotic reactions," I found a link to a CreepyPasta story about a girl who had come from college to visit her family, only to find that her little brother had been put into therapy for trying to burn himself with a pot of boiling oil. Boiling oil. Good God. She'd done some research on her own about what he had been doing before he'd tried to cook himself, and what she'd found from his friends, her parents, and the therapist was that he had started to act weird about two weeks after he had downloaded Struggleopolis and had gotten worse the more he played it. When his parents had tried to take it away from him, he had gotten violent and bit his mother on the arm hard enough to break the skin. The oil came five days after that.

It's not a well-written story, and I would write it off as a bad attempt at attention if I wasn't living through something similar right now. And it's very different from the other stories logged under the game's title. The other ones talk about seeing disturbing images in the game, or about how they accidentally bought a 'hacked' version of the game and are now haunted by Slenderman or Zalgo, whatever the hell that is. They're obviously fakes, but the girl's...I think hers is real, or at least parts of it are real. She mentioned in her author's notes that she can't find any information about the game or Wilkinson online aside from what I've found, and that any attempts to post questions about it in things like Yahoo Answers either get buried or deleted. I want to email her, but I'm afraid that she wrote it as a joke and will think I'm crazy. I don't know. They all go by usernames on there, and I'm not sure if I can access her email.

I should try...

Saved in Drafts on September 11, 2012

I'm all cut up inside, and I think I'm dying, and there's nothing I can do about it. Danny is cooking dinner. He says he wants to be a good boy now. He says he's sorry for hurting me. He

says from now on he'll be a good son and will take care of me. We'll go back to how things were. Watch and see. Danny will be a good boy.

I found my computer on this morning, emails opened to drafts. I didn't leave it on last night. So I know he knows. Maybe that's why he's doing this.

There was glass in the bathmat when I went to take a shower. I've learned to check everything before I step or sit on it. I rolled it up and put it in the trashcan, thinking I could take it out later. I don't think I will. I checked the tub too before I stepped in, but it was clean and so were the knobs and the faucet.

It was in the shampoo. I should have realized how smart he is. But I didn't think he would manage to put glass in my shampoo. How diabolical can one thirteen year old boy be? My fingers still have glass in them. It's hard to type. Some of the shards have gotten in under my nails.

Where does he get all this glass from?

There are bloodstains all over the apartment, in the bathroom, in the kitchen, on my keyboard, on my desk, on my skin, everywhere. My scalp still stings.

I need a doctor, but it's too late. I've come to accept that. If I had done something earlier...

He put glass in my slippers too. I was expecting something like that ever since he did it to me the first time. So I didn't put them on, left them out in the hallway. He outsmarted me. He spread glass all over my bedroom floor while I was picking the glass out of my head and hands. There was no way for me to avoid it. It was either put the slippers on and get the glass in my feet that way on or walk across the floor and get the glass anyway. About halfway into the room is where the blood begins. My feet are slivers of skin at this point.

There was glass all over my bed. No respite. I couldn't escape it. It was just glass, glass, glass, glass everywhere. Clear glass so I can't see it. Should I be proud at how smart he is?

At least he didn't put glass in my clothes. There was that, at least.

I went downstairs and sat in the bathroom and cried. I was in so much pain. I used tweezers to get the pieces I could see out of my feet, then soaked them in hot water and soap to clean them. God, I thought childbirth was bad. This was much worse. I wrapped them in gauze so I could walk and pretend to be normal for Danny. I didn't expect him to notice me. He hardly does at all anymore. I'm like a piece of furniture to him that happens to move around the apartment at

times. I figured today wouldn't be any different, even if he had read my emails. I thought I still had time.

No time.

He was in the kitchen and came running to me when I came out of the bathroom. He looked like his old self when he did that. He grabbed my arm and led me gently into the kitchen, wanted me to sit down and relax. He told me he had made me breakfast.

God, I wanted to believe the nightmare was over. I thought...I felt like I had woken up from a terrible deep sleep, like it was the end of hibernation. I let myself hope he was okay, that it was done, that somehow he had cured himself or that the medication had finally taken effect.

Anything. Anything.

Breakfast turned out to be instant oatmeal with cinnamon sprinkled into it. Paltry if your husband makes it for you, but wonderful when your kid does. But I still hesitated. All the glass...

I was right. He sat there and watched me for a minute, head cocked, waiting for me to eat. He seemed so excited, so happy, so proud of himself for making a good breakfast for his mother.

Where does glass fit in on the food pyramid?

I couldn't eat it. Even with him watching, I couldn't eat it. I didn't care if it made him angry or suspicious or violent, I wasn't going to put it in my mouth and swallow it and smile at him. No.

He asked if I was hungry, if I was upset at him, and I started crying all over again, sobbing into my glass oatmeal, because he sounded so much like my old Danny, my little Danny, but I knew it wasn't him. It wasn't him. Danny's been gone a long time now.

He got up, went to the microwave, brought back another bowl. He sat down in front of it and smiled at me, said that he made breakfast for himself too. I went cold. All I could think of was please God, no, don't let him do this.

He started to eat. I could hear the glass crunching between his teeth.

Oh God.

I don't know how much longer I can type. He's cooking something in the kitchen.

He just kept eating, kept bringing the spoon up to his mouth even though his lips were starting to

drip blood. I knew I should have stopped him, wanted to stop him, but I couldn't. I just sat there, watching him eat glass, tears running down my cheeks. He's not my son anymore. I don't know what he is. And so I let him eat the glass and wondered if this is how it's going to end.

About halfway through he looked up at me and smiled, his teeth red and his gums cut almost to the bone. There was so much blood. He asked me why I wasn't eating. He called me Mama.

He hasn't called me Mama in years.

*So I ate the oatmeal with him.*

I'm just a mother, and a mother doesn't sit and watch her baby kill himself without doing something about it, even if she doesn't recognize him anymore. In my case, I'm following him. If this is what it takes to make the nightmare stop. Congratulations Wilkinson, you win. I hope you rot in hell.

Glass doesn't taste like anything, but blood tastes like copper and life. Somehow though, I don't think copper-flavored oatmeal will become a hit with Quaker Oats.

I ate fast to get it over with, but it burned all the way down. My throat is raw. My stomach is roiling. I threw up once, and the vomit made the cuts in my mouth explode with fire and pain. I'm probably bleeding out from a thousand little wounds in my body. If I call an ambulance, they might be able to save us. But what happens afterward? You don't see that in the movies. The nightmare will just continue. They'll take him away from me, lock me up in jail or an asylum or worse. They'll think I'm crazy, that I've done this to myself and my son because of some malfunction in my brain.

I don't want to go on living like this. Neither does he.

I think I understand why Chris killed himself. It's really the only escape from this, isn't it? You can't undo the damage to your brain once it's been done. And we've all been damaged.

He made us sandwiches for lunch. Turkey, salami, mustard, lettuce, and glass. I ate it without question or hesitation. He did too. We're in this together. We always have been. I just didn't notice.

I can smell meat cooking. Hotdogs maybe? Sausage? Maybe he's toasting the glass as well.

I would prefer to be killed outright so I wouldn't have to be in so much pain. It's worse to die slow than to die fast. When you die fast, you don't know what's happening. I know what's

happening. My body rebels against it, even if my brain welcomes it. I feel sick and nauseous and tired and in so much pain, so much pain. I can barely concentrate on the computer screen, on willing my fingers to dance around on the keyboard. I would rather lie down and wait than do this. But someone needs to know, right? When the police come and find us here, dead, glass everywhere, they need to know what happened. Will they believe it? I don't know. But I need to try. It needs to get out. Wilkinson needs to answer for what he's done to us, to Chris, to everyone else who's played his stupid game. Even if this just gets archived on CreepyPasta, at least it's somewhere for people to read. More people will post their horror stories. Soon Wilkinson won't be able to keep it under wraps. It'll get out. It has to. I need to believe that it will get out.

The thing that used to be my Danny is here, watching me, smiling at me. Dinner is ready. I have to go.

-Joanne Larson, 45

## Essay on Glass and Publishing Factors

I wrote Glass, which is still under a working title, over a three week period. I noticed that one common trope from the Internet was the idea of a haunted or somehow altered videogame that would affect children in horrific ways. I did a bit of research on from where this myth originated, and I found the website CreepyPasta, which inventories strange and morbid stories about videogames. The basic setup for a CreepyPasta story is to take an innocuous, child's videogames, like Pokemon, and then write something disturbing about it, such as certain tonal variances in the background music that causes children to go insane or about finding secret places on the map that held zombies and other horrific, gory things meant to shock and scare. There are two value systems at work with CreepyPasta: shock value and believability. The more believable the story is, the more attention it receives. The same is true for its shock value. If the story is gory or involves the death of minors, then the story is also considered a success by the CreepyPasta population. Those stories that are able to combine the two are most well-received and are the ones most likely to be quoted throughout the Internet.

I took the basic idea of Glass from these two tenants. I wanted to write a story that was both believable and shocking, and I wanted to see if I could do that in the style of a CreepyPasta story. And so the idea for Glass was born. At first it was very straightforward: The protagonist orders a videogame from Ebay and goes crazy while trying to figure out why the game contains random pieces of broken coding. I wrote a few paragraphs for this story and then put it aside, bored with it. I felt like the story would be too predictable, especially for an audience who was familiar with CreepyPasta. Over a break, I visited it again and changed the protagonist from a teenager to a forty-five year-old, single mother. The idea behind that switch was to see if I could tell a horror story from a point of view other than that of the character who was most affected, who in this case would be her son. I also wanted the focus of the story to be on the suspense of it, not the horror aspect of it. So instead of starting with the idea of a killer videogame, I started with the idea of a friend's haunted house and kept that as the focus for half of the story. There were a few hints about the videogame and how it might be affecting her son, but I let them reside in the background, only obvious once the narrative switched to the big reveal.

I chose the format of a one-sided email log to simulate believability. Had I posted it on CreepyPasta, it would have carried the subtitle "Copy of Email records." Quite a few of the stories on CreepyPasta carry some sort of badge of authenticity, whether it takes the form of fabricated news articles or of eye witness accounts. My theory was that a one-sided log of emails obtained from a police record or something similar would be a better substitute for first-hand testimony, and also that it was vague enough that it could possibly have been true. I noticed that the stories which were quoted most in other forums of the Internet tended to employ more official markers of authenticity. Audiences were more likely to believe or at least give more credence to stories that quoted newspaper articles, even if the source was a fake or was based in a different country. And unlike most of my other short stories, I wrote Glass in the common past-tense narrative style.

Those who read it responded more warmly to this one than any of my other short stories. People seemed genuinely intrigued by the notion of using glass as a weapon, and they enjoyed

the twist that came in the middle of the narrative, where the focus shifts from Joanne's friend and her house to Joanne's son Danny and his strange behavior. One reader found that the pacing was excellent, going from a slow build-up to a fast-paced unraveling of secrets to a final conclusion. For these reasons, I consider *Glass* to be one of my better successes in writing.

Part of its success is its accessibility. *Glass* is nothing more than an entertaining tale. It has nothing to do with character studies or social commentaries or anything else I usually include in my normal writing. It is, simply put, mindless fun. Yes, it makes readers think a little in the sense that there are clues sprinkled throughout the narrative that hint at what might be happening, but none of them are absolutely essential to the plot of the story, and readers do not need to recognize them as such to enjoy the narrative. There are also fewer moments where the narrative breaks and digresses into an extended description of the characters' emotions and thoughts. Instead, the plot is carried by a first-person narrative that captures the tone of a dialogue without using much of it, and there are no breaks to account for descriptions of setting or characters. Much of the characterizations present in "*Glass*" are up to the reader, who is free to interpret the actions and thoughts of Joanne, for example, in any way he or she wants. To some, Joanne might be paranoid and to others, she might simply be a concerned mother trying to make ends meet and take care of her son.

*Glass* is also an easier read than say *Dinner*. *Dinner* is uncomfortable, and captures an uncomfortable event between closed-minded parents and their grown child. *Glass* spans a few months of terror and anxiety without any moralizing or challenging undertones. Some of the scenes in *Glass* are disturbing - almost all of the scenes involving glass shards are somewhat visceral and chilling - but they do not make readers feel uncomfortable in their own skin, the way *Dinner* might make them feel. *Dinner*'s brutal representation of a broken, mismanaged family is powerful in its own right, but it also alienates a reader who might find it too melodramatic or too heavy handed. *Glass*, on the other hand, is pure horror. Will *Glass* change a generation? No. Will it ever be seen a work of great literature? Certainly not. But it is entertaining and people that read through it liked it.

I learned something about myself writing *Glass*. I learned that I have more fun with writing when I do not feel pressured to produce something that might be considered monumental or game-changing. Once I took those pressures off of myself, I found that I was able to write easier and that I actually looked forward to sitting down for an hour and a half and devoting myself entirely to writing. I produced more. I found myself less distracted by the Internet than during other occasions. I could talk about *Glass* to other people without having to worry about them finding it strange or silly. *Glass* was nothing I had to defend. I merely had to write it and show it to people.

There were times when I stressed writing it though. I had to go back and delete entire sections and rewrite them before I was satisfied with the result, but it felt more productive than when I would go back to passages in other stories and try to rewrite them. I always felt like I was moving forward, progressing, rather than stalling and stagnating in one spot. Writing *Glass* helped me move away from writing for recognition and more towards writing for both my entertainment and that of my audience. There was less of a need for me to prove myself as a

serious writer. I was content with writing a fun and terrifying story of a murderous little boy and using my talents to bring him to life.

The main problem with Glass is its length. It exists somewhere between a short story and a novella, and that makes it difficult to sell to any sort of magazine or publishing company. Glass is too short to make it worthwhile for a publishing company to invest in it time and money, but it is too long for a privately run magazine to want to publish. Magazines, or Zines as they are sometimes called, usually have a cut-off at about eight thousand words at maximum. Glass is about thirteen thousand. Novellas, at their shortest, are about twenty to twenty-five thousand words. So Glass occupies that awkward in-between state where it is not quite a short story but cannot be considered a novella. Production costs outweigh any kind of profit for the company or the Zine, and because of that, very few companies, privately run or not, are not willing to take a risk with it.

For example, when I looked for publishing magazines that were looking for submissions, I found Dark Moon Digest, which is currently looking for horror story submissions. However, they only accept stories between one thousand and four thousand words. Cutting Glass down to four thousand words entails cutting out the entire first half of the story, which in turn means that the 'shocking twist' that comes in the middle would be gone. Instead of building suspense, the story would start completely in *media res*, with no buildup to the action. I have a feeling that the story would suffer without the gradual buildup of suspense; Glass's uniqueness lies in its ability to trick and then reveal. Without that, it becomes a run of the mill, regular horror story, without any differentiating qualities. From what I have been told from my readers, the story succeeds because of its ability to lead them astray so convincingly. Without the entire opening, the story falls flat.

Extending the story meets with the same problem. What else is there to say in the narrative? There is not much room in the story to extend any scenes, and again, the fast pace of the story lends itself to its success. Boggling it down with anything extraneous would only slow the pace, which would ultimately hurt the story. Adding more mayhem, like adding more of the bloodier scenes, I feel would cheapen the effect of the original scenes. Because the actual graphic horror scenes are so few and far between, their existence adds weight to the story. They are genuinely scary. Adding more of them would only lessen the shock of them, and readers would find themselves used to the gore. Instead of adding atmosphere, it would only be comical. Take for instance a movie like *Event Horizon*, directed by Paul Anderson. Critic John J. Puccio described it as an "absurd gore-a-thon" (Puccio, 2008). His main complaint was that the gruesome aspects of the movie occurred too often. In his official review, he writes, "After [the first fifteen minutes], the screenwriter, Philip Eisner, seems to have run out of fresh ideas and resorts to standard blood-and-guts" (Puccio, 2008). He also writes, "The movie is bloody, nonsensical, and largely unmoving" (Puccio, 2008). The main reason why this movie failed so badly is because the idea, while promising, was executed poorly and tossed aside in favor of the shock value of increasingly gruesome death scenes. The artistry of the movie was lost to the excessive and overplayed gore.

Another movie, *Jason X*, has been panned by nearly every critic and nearly every person who has seen it. Part of that reason is because the idea of Jason killing everyone in the movie

has been so overdone for years, but the other reason it failed is because of the total glut of gore. Critic Michael O'Sullivan wrote in his review of the movie that it contains a "protracted and only sporadically imaginative menu of ways to be murdered" (O'Sullivan, 2002). Audiences become tired and bored with seeing too much murder and blood and gore. It stops being shocking and simply becomes tiresome. No one wants to see death over and over again. No one wants to see bodies mangled over and over again. Brains become numb to it. Emotions shut off. Audiences stop feeling empathetic to the victims and start laughing at them because everything is so ludicrous.

Glass would suffer from the same problem. The use of glass as a weapon is shocking only because it is a surprise when it comes. No one is not expecting it, and so it shocks and horrifies when it hits. Without that element of surprise, the horror of the story falls flat and feels insignificant. What ought to be shocking is not. So extending the horror scenes would not work. Glass works at the length at which it exists now; it simply does not lend itself to publication very well.

I might sell it on Amazon with a strategic marketing plan of fake news reports and some CreepyPasta shorts, to build buzz for it before it becomes available. That way, the story is somewhat known before it can be bought, and word of mouth will spread among people. I can also utilize my blog and spread more information about it, further spreading word of mouth as Weber suggests. If I can build a relatively noticeable marketing campaign, then perhaps sales will reflect a small modicum of success, despite having to compete in glut of horror writers, some of whom are very talented and well-known. Weber's advice can only go so far, and once the story is published online, I will not have any control over it.

Another tactic that I might utilize is Amazon's built-in marketing campaign, where if authors enroll in KDP Select, and if they publish solely on Amazon's website and allow the book to be borrowed for free by Amazon Prime members, then they have up to five days of free promotion for their novels. During those five days, authors promote their books by offering them for free. The books then show up on sites like ereaderiq.com, which alerts people to what books are free on any given day. I would probably not promote Glass for free for more than a day, maybe two, only long enough to make a few sales and generate more of word of mouth, and maybe receive a few reviews on it.

However, the problems with publishing Glass, which follows the rules of writing a formulaic, easily digestible piece of writing, further highlights the problems surrounding self-publishing. Self-publishing it becomes my only option to sell the story because its length prohibits it from being desirable by publishing companies. But by publishing it on Kindle, I must now work out a marketing strategy for it to see if I can reach an audience that is receptive. Further compounding my problems is the fact that my blog is not suited for a horror story, and my network of readers would not be interested in buying a copy of it. The downside of running a blog is that genre crossing or genre switching is difficult; a blog pigeonholes authors into a certain genre, and readers become used to that author being in that genre. If he or she switches, he or she risks alienating the readers that have already been amassed. Creating another blog for this new genre is time-consuming, and would also have to be up kept, even after the story has been marketed. And because the blog would not work in this case, word of mouth chains would

not work either, unless they were created by consumers. It would seem as though self-publishing authors may need to stay with one genre, rather than experimenting with others, if only to keep reader bases happy and content. Genre-crossing is a difficult venture if the author is not a branded name.

## Conclusion

All publishing, whether it is self-publishing or traditional publishing, is a battle to be noticed among other authors. Before the advent of self-publishing, the struggle merely took place behind closed doors, where it was not as broadcasted as it is today. In the digital era, however, the publishing process is more open to scrutiny, and authors and customers alike can see where the process breaks down into subjectivity and where it breaks down on the part of the author. The ease with which people can publish nowadays lends itself to a creation of a sort of critical mass, where authors clamber over one another in an attempt to find and keep recognition. Self-publication becomes a struggle in which similar ideas and poor writing convene to create an atmosphere of contempt around self-published novels, and though a few voices in the glut might be worthwhile voices to read, the majority of the glut consists of poorly-executed and edited ideas, and overwhelms all other voices. As an added annoyance, because e-books are profitable and can be produced without much cost, traditional publishing houses make new and old titles available at slashed prices, which means that not only are self-publishing authors fighting other authors for attention, they are also fighting already-established authors carry with them an avid fan-base. These authors have the help of marketing agencies as well, who have ready-made strategies designed to give author's optimal publicity. The self-published author, on the other hand, must create a market strategy on his or her own. Unfortunately, even with help of books such Weber's and others, these marking strategies might fall short of actually working. The sheer mass of people publishing in the last year outweighs strategies designed five or ten years ago. Word of mouth chains, while facilitated by online media like blogs and social networks, are still unreliable due to the fact that these networks must previously exist for the self-published author before he or she can use them. Even with preexisting networks in place, because they are usually occupied by other authors and writers, a self-publishing author might find an audience more interested in how the book was written rather than reading the reading the finished copy.

Trying to find reviewers is also problematic due to the sheer size of the publishing community. Preference is given by reviewers to manuscripts sent by publishing companies, and even contacting a reviewer to ask them a few basic questions is difficult as some do not allow unsolicited authors to email them. Contact over a hundred reviewers might result in only ten or

twelve agreeing to read to a self-published author's manuscript, never mind actually reviewing it or reviewing it positively. One negative review from a Top Reviewer on Amazon can spell disaster to a self-published novel; customers give more weight and credence to a negative review than they do a positive one, and if a Top Reviewer is the author of a negative comment, then the novel's reputation is for the most part irrevocably damaged as customers will base their opinions on the novel by that review. However, finding reviews for self-published manuscripts is essential for self-publishing authors. Without reviews, the self-published novels do not sell, and these reviews need to be professional or objective, not reviews from friends or family. For authors using a publishing company, the burden of collecting reviews falls upon the publishers and agents to send the manuscript out to critics for review. The self-publishing author does not have that kind of help, and is forced to fend for his or herself.

Because the Internet accessibly provides so much information, consumers have too many options available to them to make self-publishing a profitable venture for an inexperienced self-published author. Though authors can fall back on formulaic, specifically-designed narratives in order to try to make a small profit, there are so many other self-publishing authors attempting the same thing that the market becomes saturated with similarly executed novels, and in return, consumers make up for this saturation by constantly cycling through trends, dropping overdone topics in favor of newer, less stale ones. These shifting trends create another problem for self-publishing authors, as they must now keep a sharp watch on the market and be prepared for the shifts. Novels now have to be written and edited quickly in order for authors to meet the demands of the consumer, and as such, poorly constructed and edited novels flood the market and choke out the entire competition. The age-old stigma against self-published novels carries on into the twenty-first century. Consumers do not want to take risks with self-published novels because the general idea of them being poorly-written, worthless novels is made true by these quickly written and published ventures for profit. Though some self-published novels are just as well-written as a traditionally published novel, these voices are drowned by the sheer volume of poorly written ventures.

Based on my own experiences and on the experiences of professional self-publishers like Amanda Hocking, my theory surrounding self-publishing states that while it is difficult for a

self-publishing author to find and maintain an audience in the digital era, he or she can do so by continuing to write and publish, and to try to employ as many marketing strategies as possible. Networking with other authors is key, as well as building a review base by reviewing as many other self-published novels as possible. Research is also important; an author must research his or her genre before embarking on the publishing journey. Failure to do so will only lead to frustration. However, by constantly writing, adjusting, learning, and researching, a self-publishing author might be able to build a modest following among Kindle users and might begin to see a small profit grow from his or her efforts. Digital publishing will probably never yield large profits as traditional publishing houses can – Amanda Hocking is more of a fluke than the rule of self-publishing – and as such, self-publishing authors need to realize that self-publishing is a useful gateway into more traditional publishing, but is not a way to make a quick profit with minimal effort.

## Bibliography

- Rich, Jason. *Self-publishing for Dummies*. Hoboken, N.J: Wiley Pub., 2006. Print.
- Soroyan, Strawberry. "Amanda Hocking, Storyseller." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 June 2011. Web. 3 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/>>.
- Tallent, Joshua. *Kindle Formatting: The Complete Guide to Formatting Books for the Amazon Kindle*. [S.l.]: EBook Architects, 2009. Print.
- Weber, Steve. *Plug Your Book!: Online Book Marketing for Authors : Book Publicity Through Social Networking*. Falls Church, VA: Weber, 2007. Print.
- Tallent, Joshua. "Kindle Formatting." Web log post. *Kindle Formatting*. EBook Architects, 14 Jan. 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <<http://kindleformatting.com/>>.

## Academic Vita of Elena Coster

Elena Coster

131 Sowers St. Apt. E-6  
State College, PA, 16801  
elena.coster@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Arts in English, Penn State University

Honors in English

Thesis Title: The Difficulties of Self-Publishing Success in the Digital Era

Thesis Supervisor: Lisa Ruth Sternleib

Related Experience:

Published author on Amazon Kindle

Internship with Vendome Group, LLC

Supervisor: Anita Rospeka

Summer 2010

Awards:

National Honor Society

Phi Beta Kappa

Dean's List

Presentations/Activities:

Vice-President of The Penn State Writers Club