

# VOICES

creative expressions from  
the storytelling project



Spring 2014: Volume 2

## ABOUT :

The UMD-Duluth Storytelling Project is a volunteer collaboration between the University of Minnesota Duluth and local nonprofit organizations that support individuals with physical and developmental disabilities. During the spring of 2014, a group of writing students from the University of Minnesota Duluth met weekly with seven writers from TBI, Inc. Through extensive one-on-one conversations, the UMD students and adults from TBI, Inc. have produced the works of memoir and fiction assembled here.

Further information: [z.umn.edu/storytelling](http://z.umn.edu/storytelling)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS :

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# P R E F A C E :

Life on a university campus can be consuming. Undergraduates get caught in classes while developing independence and social selves, and graduate students spend their lives in books and papers. This happens to me – as a graduate student in the English department with up to 3 internships at any one time, I often arrive on campus at 8 a.m. and leave at 11 p.m. only to return home for the sole purpose of sleep. Then I wake up and repeat that cycle.

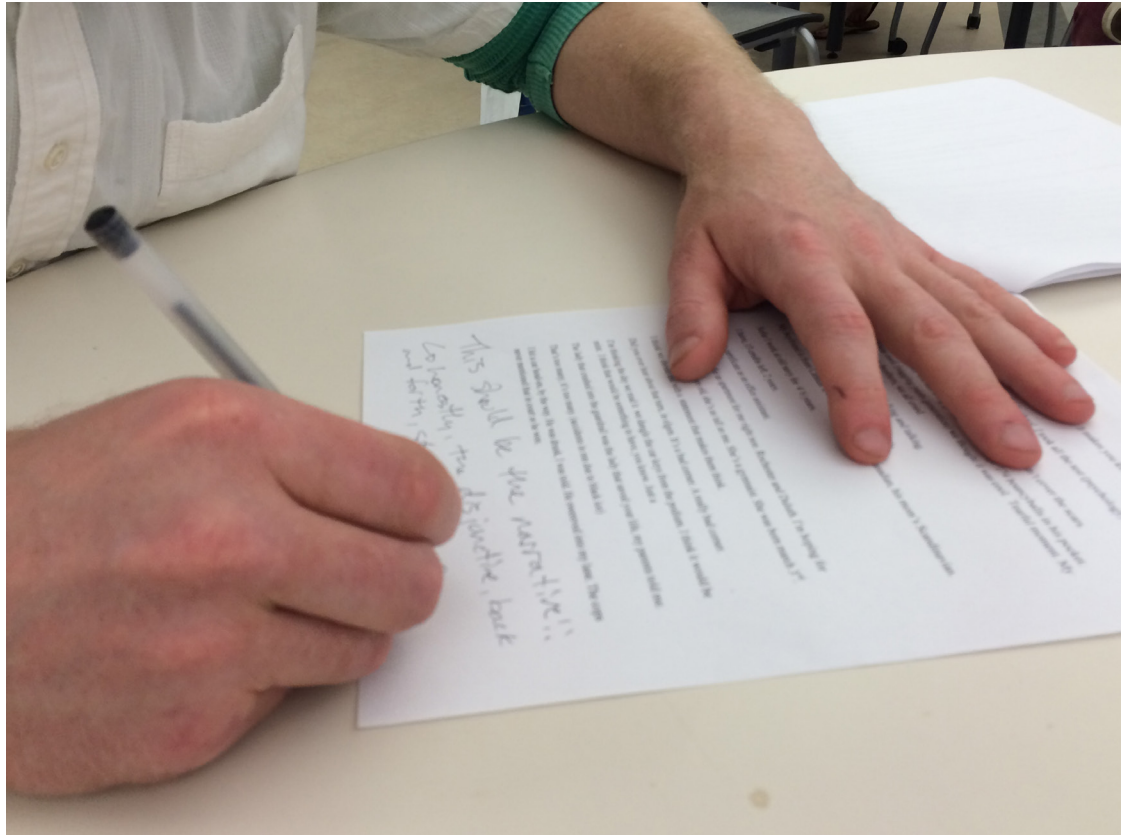
Service learning is meant to break that circular inclusiveness. It gets students out of the campus environment and into the community while reinforcing course content from any disciplinary perspective. But this well intentioned concept can fail when it is made a requirement for graduation or students gain a voyeuristic perspective of the community while focusing on connecting the experience to class readings. What is intended to break inclusiveness becomes an impediment.

The Storytelling Project strikes right at the heart of the intent of service learning without coming close to these pitfalls. UMD Student Writers work side-by-side with community members, and personal relationships can't help but develop. Being extracurricular, the demands and threats of course and graduation requirements loom nowhere. The result: an incredible collaborative experience, smiles, and close heartfelt connections. 'Campus and community' disappears, and in its place, people work together to enjoy writing and telling stories.

I'm very proud to have been both a Student Writer and the Graduate Student Coordinator for the UMD Storytelling Project.

Eric King

April, 2014



# V O I C E S : 4

# STRANGER'S MEMORIES

By Brandon Babbitt

*In Collaboration with Hayley Westphal*

Brandon's first memory is red and orange. Brandon's mom remembers the collapsed building. Brandon's dad remembers coming home and everything is gone. They moved up to Minnesota after the fire. Ironically, Brandon and his parents moved to Burnsville, where they lived for three years. Brandon remembers how beautiful it was, how nice the neighbors in Burnsville were, and how fancy and rich everyone was.

All of these things – memories, snapshots – are mine. I am Brandon.

My sister gave me a sick look with her little baby face and her birthday hat on her head – I can't get that look out of my head. I think she got jealous of me because I got more things than she did. She is fourteen years old now. She outgrew the biting and kicking at the same time I did. Well, sometimes she hits me. She needs to work on that. Pinching, too. Other than that, we have our bickering under control.

The blood drawings for my chromosome tests take about four hours. They stick a metal tube in your arm and replace it with a



plastic needle. While it is happening they refresh your blood with another machine.

My cousin Michael got me into video games when I was five years old. He's in the Navy now, and we barely talk. I like video games because they remind me of Michael. "I remember it was just yesterday when we were playing football in our backyard," Michael said one night last week. We played football in Nebraska. We always talk about the past, and how fast we are growing old. Michael is about to turn twenty-three. Talking about the past makes us feel better. We really looked up to each other. He always says, "I miss you li'l bro," and I tell him back, "Miss you, big cuz." Last time I saw him was four years ago, when he was visiting my grandparents' house. That's when my cousin Brandi started dressing in all black. That was weird. She's Michael's older sister. We were surrounded by three tornadoes that day. My parents were at the mall and they were screaming and screaming. I was

in the basement laughing. All you could see outside were white lines hitting the ground. The wall clouds were huge – they made three tornadoes. I was right in between them. I stuck my hand out there to catch some hail. It's pretty risky. Michael and I just said "to hell with it."

We visited Michael in Dallas one Christmas, when I was seven years old. I don't see him often. I saw him again when I was twelve. I'm closer to Michael than I am to any of my others cousins. Cousins are a joy to have around. I am going to have to see Michael more – see if we can get a family reunion set up. We haven't had one since Dallas, which was about eleven years ago. Eleven years of my life have just passed so quickly. Wow. I can't believe it; it makes me feel disturbed. There is so much I still want to do. I'm a teenager, but being in treatment facilities most of my life has made things difficult. I didn't get to experience much.

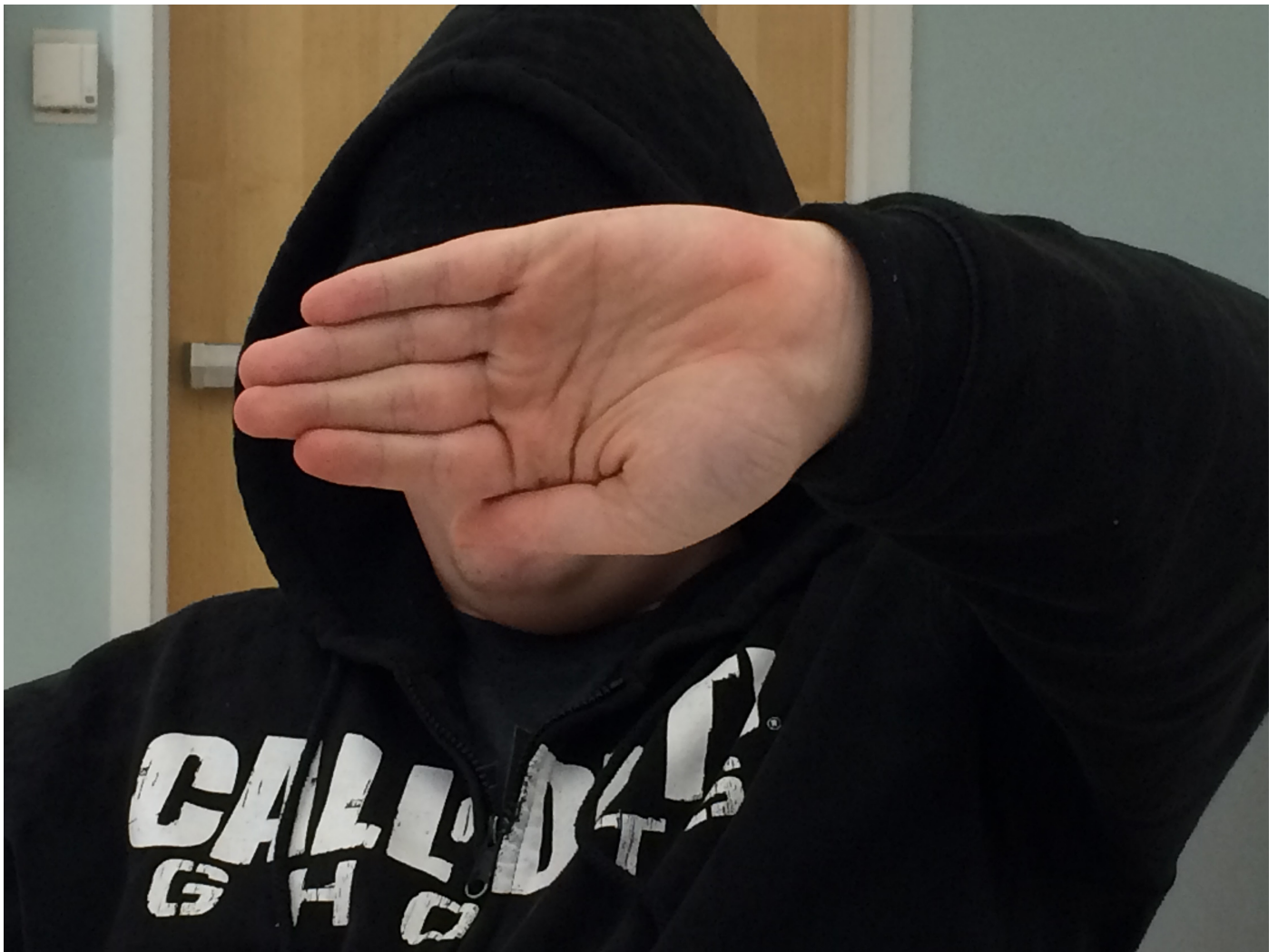
I can't wait to experience freedom. I cannot wait to get cable in my room. I will hang out with friends and I will not have to be stuck inside all day. I'm a candidate for independent living, and next year

I could be free. I was about seven when I first went into a treatment facility. It was that terrible school in Rosemount. Then it was Fairview hospital. I was in room A15, on the non-restricted floor. My mom always visited me with Subway in hand. I am happy now because I barely get my blood drawn, but in Fairview I got it all the time. I get blood drawn for my chromosome and that takes four hours. Normally it would make people nervous but I don't mind. Why? Because they set me up with video games.

When I get my blood drawn, I can't have any food in the morning, or take my medications. I go to a clinic. It doesn't scare me to go, it just means no breakfast.

When people hear my story about my chromosomes, they freak out. I feel normal, but I have some anger issues. Little stuff – like being told what to do – frustrates me. When I first came up here I was ten years old and I couldn't control it. I would be biting and kicking and punching and screaming. It was a choice to become better. I decided

when I was twelve that I did not want to be difficult anymore. There are better things to do. There are words. My parents learned about the chromosome about three months after I was born. They could not tell it was different until I was about two years old. Testing showed that it was retranslocated – that the 3rd and 16th chromosomes were upside down. No one else in my family has that genetic makeup. It is in me, it is my DNA. The inside isn't the same as everyone else, but I'm still me.



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Sometimes I miss high school. Don't you ever miss your high school days? I graduated from East High School last year. I used to go to Farmington. Holy smokes, it gets bad in Farmington. They don't send in the cops for emergencies, they send in the FBI. Someone called in a bomb threat one day at Farmington high school. Instead of sending in some cops to investigate, they sent in the FBI. There were three tanks and a SWAT team with all their vehicles and people all decked out in their uniforms running through the school yelling for everybody to get down. You can imagine the chaos. Anyway, they busted the kid – he locked himself in the bathroom. It was a joke, basically. He had no bomb. About

thirty units all sent to Farmington for a kid who locked himself in the bathroom.

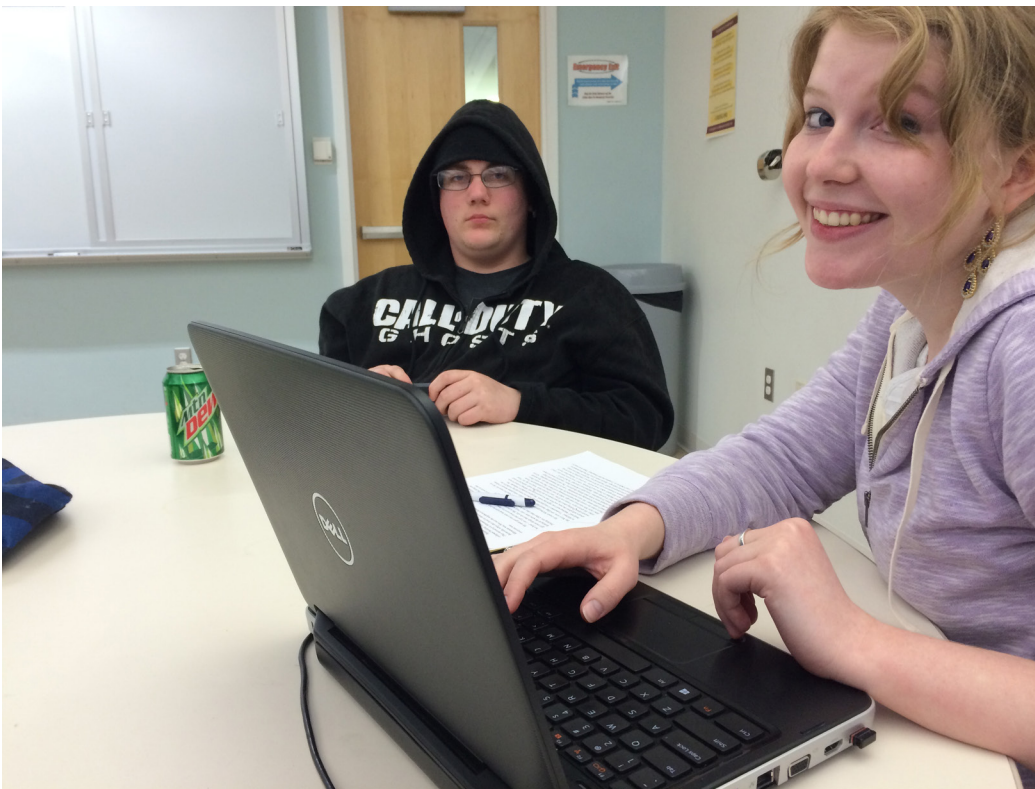
I saw this crazy cop chase a couple years back. I was at a fair and was standing on a street. The engines were roaring so loud; here comes this Ford truck behind me, drifting, and it almost hit me and suddenly there were two cop cars, and they did the EXACT SAME THING. I turned the other way, and there were EIGHT more cop cars coming from the other direction. Two from Apple Valley, three from Rosemount, two from Farmington, two from Lakeville, and they were all chasing this guy. They actually got him – holy smokes.

I used to get my blood drawn two times a month. I would get growth hormone shots in my thigh. To make sure it worked, they would take the blood out of my wrist. It leaves bruises. Dark ones.

I have a thing on Saturdays where I stay up all night watching anime on Cartoon Network. It's between midnight and six in the morning – there's a thing called Adult Swim. There is a TV program called Toonami. I get to watch the shows I never have time to see until I pass out on the couch. When I was little, my favorite anime show was Gundam.

My future apartment would come prepared for me. There would be

a couch, my own bedroom, with a television, my own kitchen. A chair just for relaxing, and I would sit and lean back like John. He's my roommate who tells stories all the time. He tells stories about Viet Nam. It is part of his brain injury – to tell stories about it – but he was never there. I would miss John, but the quietness would be great. To stay up all night, play video games whenever I want, to fall asleep on the couch. I would have a fridge full of beer. Just kidding. When I am free, I am going to walk into that apartment with my own bedroom and kitchen and my video games, and I am going to jump on my bed.



# WHATEVER LAVENDER SMELLS LIKE

By Dustin Wyberg

*In Collaboration with Kyle Farris*

*Idea developed with John Fahnenstiel*

Rudolph hoisted the fat black bags and slung them over either shoulder, his face reddening and teeth clenching.

“Get those bags the hell away from me,” Noah said. “Smells like shit.”

Rudolph laughed and lingered in front of Noah a few seconds longer before dumping the bags into the back of the truck. The scowl Noah wore as if part of his uniform tightened and Rudolph grinned at a piece of gum stuck to the street. Without a word both men hopped onto their respective platforms and the truck crawled to the next house like an off-putting glacier.

Noah let himself drop to the pavement before the truck stopped. With a careless hand he flipped back a lid and pulled out two bags clinking like xylophones. Bottles. Noah liked bottles because they seldom smelled, and if they did, it was only faintly of beer. Beer Noah could handle. What Noah couldn't handle fell onto the thick shoulders of Rudolph, who had lost his sense of smell as a child and would gladly load a block's worth of bags himself should the bags in question smell “like shit,” by Noah's definition. Rudolph had no way to verify Noah's



claims, of course, but a tighter-than-usual scowl was normally enough.

From the driver's seat, Randy followed Noah's movement in the side mirror. Randy had been the driver long enough to be able to guess, with seemingly infallible accuracy, the contents of a bag simply by the sound it made when dumped among the rest.

Randy?! Rudolph would shout quizzically when the two were in a playful mood. How about that one?

Leaves? Randy would shout back. No! Women's clothing!

Got it again! Rudolph would shout, keeping the bag's true composition — equal parts paper plates and wrapping paper — to himself. We should sell tickets!

Rudolph's praise and withholding had convinced Randy that many years as the driver had rendered him a garbage savant. It was the

self-perceived savant in Randy that told him something was wrong when Noah's bags made an unfamiliar crash. And then a thud.

“Uh, Randy? A little help?”

At the back of the truck Randy found Noah, arms folded and eyes reduced to slits, staring at a heap on the ground. Rudolph was a strangely serene mass, like a statue removed from its base and laid on its back.

“The guy stepped right in front of me,” Noah said. “It was an accident.”

After a long minute Rudolph's eyes blinked slowly open.

“Rudolph?” Randy said, trying to make his gruff voice soft. “You got hit in the head, Rudolph.”

“I'm alright,” the statue said and sat up. “Wait. What's that?”

“What's what?” Randy and Noah looked at each other, and then back at Rudolph.

“What am I smelling? Guys! Guys! I'm smelling!”

Rudolph stumbled to his feet and



continued stumbling away from the truck. His mind raced, cycling through what had happened, how it had happened, and what it meant.

All he could manage was, “Why?”

“Why don’t you come ride up front, Rudolph?”

“The truck ... I can’t ... how do you guys?”

“Come on, Rudolph. We’ll roll up the windows and get you —

“No!”

Rudolph crept further away. He could still smell the truck.

“Suit yourself,” Noah said, already perched on his platform. “His choice, Randy. Let’s go.”

“What if we —

“Let’s go!” Noah said.

Reluctantly, Randy went back to the driver’s seat and watched Rudolph in the side mirror.

The truck crawled, slower than usual, around the corner.

Fumes of decomposing pad Thai hung heavy in the air, though Rudolph couldn’t know it was pad Thai. His mind dizzied, Rudolph passed house after house whose trash he had just disposed of, and disposed of happily. It seemed dirty now.



With each breath Rudolph received a new, unwelcome whiff; he was almost certain the stench had debauched his uniform. Clumsily, Rudolph yanked his shirt over his head and threw the uniform into an empty trashcan. That was a little better. Perhaps if he ran. And Rudolph took off, bare-chested, in the direction of a strip mall he knew sold men’s clothes.

By the time he reached the strip

mall, Rudolph was out of breath and conscious of the smell of his sweat. The automatic doors opened and he stepped inside P.J. Dunnigan’s.

But Rudolph found no clothes. He found instead tables lined with miniature glass bottles, some

more miniature than others, and women roving about in animal print.

The women stared back at the shirtless and out-of-breath man.

“Sir,” a woman with large eyes said carefully. “You can’t be here without a shirt on.”

“That’s why ... I’m here,” Rudolph said, catch-

ing his breath. “I want to buy one.”

“We sell perfume, sir.”

“This is P.J. Dunnigan’s, isn’t it?”

“This is Belladonna, sir. I’ve never heard of ... what was it?”

“P.J. Dunnigan’s. They sell —

“I’ve never heard of P.J. Duncan’s, but you can’t be here without a shirt on.”

“Where’d P.J. Dunnigan’s go?”

“I don’t know, sir, but you have to —

“What’s that?” Rudolph said to the back of a woman with heels and loud bracelets.

“Sir, please don’t —

“Excuse me, lady, but what is that?”

“Huh?” The woman turned around and the scent intensified. It came to him.

The scent was his mother’s perfume. Rudolph had smelled it on Friday nights as a child, when his mother and father went looking for prime rib and left him with a faceless babysitter. He smelled it for only moments at a time, but he remembered it like the chorus to a catchy song heard only at parties. It was the only smell he ever remembered missing.

The woman stood silently facing the pants-wearing bear in front of her.

“Your perfume. What is it? I —

An arm of bracelets knocked a bottle to the floor and it broke like a scented water balloon. There was a shriek.

“You’re making a scene, sir!” The woman with large eyes became a woman with small, mean eyes.

“Leave!”

“Please! I want to know her perfume. It’s important. It smells like lilac. Or lavender. Whatever lavender smells like. Is that lavender?”

Rudolph’s naked arm was grabbed from behind by a man with a badge.

“Alright, alright,” the man said, struggling to move Rudolph, who, this time, resembled a standing statue.

“I just want to know her perfume. I can smell. And my mom. I’ve had a rough —

“Alright,” repeated the badged man.

Rudolph was pulled painstakingly to the doors.

“Please! If I could just —

“Alright.”

The automatic doors opened.

“Wear a shirt next time. I could write you up for indecent exposure.”

And the doors closed.

Rudolph wondered where P.J. Dunnigan’s had gone, and if he would be allowed back in if he went home and grabbed a shirt, and if the woman with bracelets would still be there if he did come back. Why

hadn’t she told him the name of her perfume?

The smell of decomposing pad Thai had been replaced by fruits and florals, but Rudolph felt worse walking home than he had running to what turned out to be Belladonna’s. For the first time, he realized that he had probably quit his job. And if he hadn’t, how could he go back?

After about twenty minutes of only semiconscious walking, the houses and yards and trees that Rudolph passed became increasingly familiar. And he wondered if they had always smelled the way they did now.

Rudolph reached his block. It looked the same as it always had, except for an unassuming sedan parked on the street in front of his house. An unsettling question entered his mind: How would his house smell? And another: Would he have to move?

Rudolph walked regretfully through the grass, opened the door, and inhaled. The air filled him up like water and his old babysitter suddenly had a face. And he felt the kiss his mother used to give his forehead when he was pretending to sleep. And he was certain he smelled lavender.

“Mom?”

# MOVEMENT

By Kelli Wilson

*In Collaboration with Scott Koski and Kimberly Hyatt*



The room was almost empty. The last of the furniture had just been taken out, and as two of his coworkers maneuvered the couch precariously down the stairwell, the foreman for the moving crew surveyed the apartment. “What else is left up there?” he shouted up to Zach. “One box and that’s it,” Zach replied, as he walked over to where the box lay by the bedroom closet. “Well, hurry up. I’d like to get this job done before 6 p.m.; I have dart league tonight.”

Unlike the rest of the items he and the rest of the moving crew had been relaying down the stairs for the last two hours, this box was different; the flap lay open, a roll of packing tape on the floor next to it, as though someone had been adding things up until the last minute—most likely personal stuff, he figured. As he began to fold the flap over, his attention was drawn to the top item, a newspaper article, laminated for some reason, and he knelt down to take a closer look. It was the headline that caught his eye: “A crash, a comeback, and the gift of life.” Instantly he was brought back—December 30th, 2005. His mom, that girl, the accident; the night he’ll never forget.

Confusion—

Nancy and Zach were driving home from Wabasha late Friday night after a belated Christmas gathering. Zach was sitting in the back seat with all of the presents and luggage, falling

in and out of sleep, suddenly awakened by the force of his body pressing up against the seatbelt and the cautionary scream of his mother, “Don’t leave the car. Call 9-1-1, tell them we are at the curve and there’s been an accident.” She tossed him her phone before the door was ripped out of her hands by intense wind.

He was calmed by his mother’s composure, yet frightened by her tone and the sharp seriousness in her eyes; something horrible was outside; this was no ordinary accident.

It was late and the weather was terrible – typical for that time of year, but terrible nonetheless. The temperature dropped to -10 and the snow waxed and waned between flurries and total whiteout.

Nancy disappeared over the mangled remnants of the guardrail; a flash of red from her Columbia jacket and then nothing, nothing but the biting cold and the emptiness of the night.

As she peered down through blackness, Nancy could barely make out the form of the mangled vehicle that lay below. The steep ridge was littered with a mixture of debris from both the guardrail and what appeared to be

the remains of an SUV. As she tried to make her way closer to where the vehicle sat, the head of a young woman emerged from the broken back passenger window. Her blonde hair was soaked red with blood.

To Nancy’s amazement, the young woman crawled to her feet and began walking up the steep hundred-foot drop, vomiting continuously as she grew closer. It seemed as though the only reaction the young woman’s body was capable of after experiencing such tremendous trauma—the speed, the force, the impact, the pressure—was to vomit. Sliding, struggling to climb through all the ice of the winter. As the young woman continued to fight her way up the hill, away from a scene Nancy could not imagine anyone surviving, let alone walking, the wind died down just enough for Nancy to become aware of the smell—that distinct odor of burnt rubber on black ice mingling with gasoline fumes and the acerbic smell of crumpled metal. It was nauseating.

The next instant the wind picked back up, bringing with it a storm of December needles causing Nancy to squint and hunch herself deeper into her coat as she turned away to recover her breath. She heard a faint echo of sound, half-muffled through the snow and trees, from which she could discern the banshee-like scream of the approaching ambulance. The night air filled suddenly with light, red

light, ricocheting off the quiet canopy that covered the tops of the surrounding pines.

The shock passed and instinct took over—in any other situation she would have tripped or stumbled—but in seconds Nancy was at the side of the young woman who crumpled into her arms as soon as her hands met her shoulders. The loss of blood was tremendous, a gaping wound stretching from ear to ear; the brain was exposed. She did her best to stop the bleeding, removing her coat in an attempt to shield the massive gash from the elements, the hot red blood steaming as it touched her frozen Gore-Tex jacket. Minutes turned to seconds, and the next instant Nancy was on her feet, watching as the EMTs moved the young woman onto a stretcher, forcing a tube down her throat to keep

her from choking on vomit. Once the neck brace was on and the gaping head trauma stabilized, time became fluid, almost a dream; the EMTs went about their work, seeming to levitate the girl up the hill and into the back of the ambulance with machine-like precision, despite the raging of the storm around them. This lucid state, due perhaps to the severity of the injury or perhaps to the storm, was interrupted abruptly when the ambulance slid into the ditch as the driver tried to race back to the hospital. Though only a matter of twenty minutes, it seemed like an eternity before the second ambulance arrived, finally moving the young woman toward the medical care she so desperately needed.

The ambulance pulled away, taking with it the piercing scream of the si-

ren and leaving in its place a million worries and prayers, almost a reflection of the stars above. In the emptiness was a small voice – half crying, half questioning.

“Mom...what’s going to happen to that girl?”

“Zach, honey, get in the car.” The words came out more forcefully than Nancy had intended, and it showed in the tears forming around her son’s eyes. “Honey, please, I need to get you home and get to the hospital; get in the car.” This time the words were uttered more gently, with a soft smile on her face. They both got into the car and pulled away, moving as swiftly as the roads would permit. As they drove, Nancy looked back at her son in the rear-view mirror, both to make sure he was all right and to check that he was wearing his seatbelt.



Composure—

Nancy pulled into the parking lot of the hospital just before 3 a.m., letting the car idle as she allowed the quiet serenity of the empty parking lot to wash over her. She closed her eyes, breathing slowly as she thought about what had happened and what was yet to come. She knew this feeling; it was all too familiar, but this time, somehow, it was different—more real. She turned off the engine; silence. Slowly, she reached for her hospital ID badge and exited the car, walking with a deliberate stride as she approached the sliding doors.

She was greeted by a gust of warmth and the myriad sounds that are the chaos of working in a hospital....

“BEEP BEEP BEEP...BEEP BEEP BEEP—We have a code here!”

“Get me an IV!”

“Nurse! Nurse!”

Through the swirling of noise Nancy went—the rattling wheels of the hospital bed, the shuffling of feet, and the whooshes of air as nurses and orderlies raced in and out of the rooms.

She arrived at the desk outside the ICU to the sounds of a heated argument—

“...We have to amputate below the knee; the membrane of the calf is the only option.”

“No, it isn’t! And I’m not letting this girl lose her leg if there’s another option and we both know there is!”

“McIvor, no; it’s too experimental.”

“It’s been attempted successfully several times; bovine membrane is a viable option and we are proceeding. Amputation is off the table and that is final, but we need to induce a coma immediately for her to have any

chance of survival.”

Nancy knew—she knew—they were talking about the young girl from the accident. A coma was her only option.

Blackness—

A seemingly routine morning drawing blood. This particular morning, however, a nurse-in-training drew the blood. Nancy was usually patient with trainees, but today the young nurse treated the comatose girl like a dartboard — puncturing the forearm not once, but twice. On the third, just as Nancy was to intervene, a not-so-godly sign in the gesture of a single finger stopped the novice nurse in her tracks.

“She flipped me off!”

“Doctor, she’s conscious!” Nancy shouted, quickly simmering her irritation, half crying, half laughing.

“That’s impossible! It’s too soon. Someone get her family,” the doctor responded in utter shock.

An instant later, the girl’s father rushed in, inherently overshadowing, nonetheless harmonizing with Nancy’s excitement.

“Spud, give me a thumbs up.”

The sound of his voice was a catalyst within the girl’s brain. To the amazement of everyone present, both thumbs raised and the flicker of a grin appeared in the corner of the young girl’s mouth.

Awakening—

From that moment, Nancy witnessed the progress daily. Although the girl was unable to talk or walk, she could move of her own volition with the help of a wheelchair in a matter of two months. Soon passed nine months, and she was transferred to

the rehabilitation center after laborious, relentless therapy.

There, from afar, Nancy was witness to a second miracle of the girl walking to her father, balancing on the balls of her feet for first time in months. She knew then that her role was far from serendipitous.

Light—

Zach stood dazed, examining the newspaper like an X-ray, as if he were trying to decode the words, the picture of the destroyed vehicle, that he held in his hand. He remembered wanting to go with, but his Mom, Nancy, wouldn’t let him. He wanted to see, to help, to be there for that girl.

“Whatcha doing?”

Instantly his attention was pulled from the article he was adulating, to a voice too kind and full of breath to belong to anyone on the moving team. He flinched, shaking his head out of his surrealistic daydream, glancing down at the article he still held in his hand and looking up sharply to see the smiling face of a girl.

“Why do you have this?” he asked, his eyes intent and searching.

“Whaddaya mean? That’s me. You like my car? It only had one wheel; the rest of ‘em all flew off. Don’t drive a Chevy.”

Zach stood in amazement, unable to speak, looking back and forth between what he held in his hands and the young woman before him.

“You got a problem? Your eyes stuck? Yeah, that’s me; what of it? Hi, I’m Kelli.”

Zach’s hand began to tremble—the article falling from his hand, his eyes searching for an explanation.

“Yeah, that’s me. I was on my way

home from my boyfriend's house; idiot. I made him dinner that night, good too, walleye, Canadian, nice and flakey. I was supposed to get home earlier, but that jerk wouldn't let me leave. God, the roads were bad that night. Stupid black ice...wind probably didn't help. Thank god I had my seatbelt on 'else I probably wouldn't be here. Well, seatbelt, and that woman, I s'pose. She was nice, stayed with me the whole time 'til the ambulance came. What was her name again? Ahh, Nancy, that's right. She was nice; a nurse, too."

Tears formed in Zach's eyes as he stuttered, "Tha-that was my mom.

I...I was there...I called."

The room filled with a silence as Kelli took in what Zach had just said.

"Hey, Zach! How long on that box? Let's get a move on! I got league!"

Neither of them knew what to say, so Kelli reached down and picked up the article, placed it back in the box. She folded the flaps closed, picked up the box, and shoved it into Zach's arms.

"Sound like they're calling for you; better get going."

Still in a bit of a daze, Zach drifted his way toward the door, trying to think of something—anything—to say, but there was too much. He was

about to walk out the door when Kelli called after him:

"Hey, Zach, remember to wear your seatbelt."

He spun around quickly, shocked and confused.

"How did you know my name?!"

Kelli smiled. "Your mom told me."

# THE TROPHY PICKLE

By Dan Clark

*In Collaboration with Ben Pieper and Hannah Jocelyn*



One day in the small town of Scottsdale, TX, the Swanson family's blue 1992 Chevy Corsica pulled into the driveway of their new home. The moving truck that followed them slowed down to park alongside the road in front of the house. Before Mr. Swanson got out of the driver's seat he leaned over to unbuckle the trophy that was in the passenger seat. The trophy was inside of a glass display case with a wooden base. He grasped the case carefully and got out of the car.

Mr. Swanson was still looking at the trophy in his hands when he heard his wife get out of the back of the Corsica.

"Really? You picked the trophy over me?" said Mrs. Swanson irately.

"I didn't have to do much hard work to get you," replied Mr. Swanson. "On the other hand, I worked extremely hard to win this trophy. It's mine."

Mrs. Swanson's beet-red face glared at her husband. "I may be used to coming in second place to your trophy," she said. "But your son should come first."

The A-1 moving truck that had been parked on the side of the road stopped running and Kenny Swanson climbed out. Stupid trophy, stupid dad, Kenny grumbled under his breath. I have to ride with a bunch of strangers...I wanted to ride with Mom but he said get in the truck – grrrrrrr...

"What did you say, sport?" asked

Mr. Swanson.

Kenny snapped out of his grumbling.

"Nothing, Dad." Kenny turned his head down to his latest issue of *Astronomy & Space*.

Kenny had not been looking forward to living in a new neighborhood where he had no friend within a million miles. With his magazine and a box of his clothes in his hand he entered the house and walked into his new bedroom. His mom came in behind him with a box full of the awards that he had won at his previous school. Mrs. Swanson took the awards out of the box one by one and polished them each before laying them gently on the floor. All of Kenny's Student of the Year plaques, Science Fair trophies, and Spelling Bee medals were now sitting in the corner of the otherwise empty room.

The Swansons had moved to Scottsdale so that Mr. Swanson and his business partner, Mr. Whitman, could open up a new sports equipment store in town. The name of the store would be Sports for Life.

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It had been a month since Kenny

had moved to Scottsdale, but he still had not tried to make new friends. So one Friday after school Kenny decided to follow Benny to the Pit in hopes of making some friends with the neighborhood gang. From the first instant Kenny saw Benny, he knew that he wasn't like the other kids at his new school. Benny was a leader. If he went one way, there would always be a pack of people, his gang, following right behind him. Kenny hoped that Benny and the rest of the kids would be at the Pit that day so he could get his foot in the door.

When Kenny arrived at the Pit, the gang was in the middle of one of their mean games of kickball. Benny and the others wanted to be the best at every single athletic skill. Kickball was no exception. Dust was flying in flurries around the boys as they rolled their fast pitches and dashed around the diamond. Running the bases, Benny shouted commands at Bertram, the second baseman, to throw the ball to Tommy, the third baseman, so that they could perfect the art of tag-outs. For five straight minutes they practiced their skills without noticing Kenny standing out in center field.

All of a sudden a stray kick came Kenny's way, and the gang began to shout out their warnings.

"Look out!" the kick-ballers said in unison.

Kenny attempted to show

some athleticism and threw his hands to catch the kickball. But it was too late. The ball hit Kenny directly in the face and broke his nose.

Kenny ran home, holding his nose and saying through tears that his life was totally over. Behind him he could hear the laughter of all of the members of the team – except Benny. The tears falling from his eyes came from both the pain of his broken nose and the embarrassment that he felt at not being able to prove himself to the group, but they trickled down his face the same.

The next day, Kenny was sit-

ting on the front step of his house pouting with an ice pack held firmly against his swelling, bruised nose. Benny was on his way to the Pit when he saw Kenny and his bag of ice moping. He made his way over to talk to him.

“Do you want to go play some soccer?” asked Benny.

“I don’t know how to play,” said Kenny. “I don’t know how to play anything. Leave me alone. When the ball hit me in the face yesterday, all you guys did was laugh.”

“Hold on,” said Benny defensively. “I was the only one in the

gang who didn’t laugh when that happened.”

Kenny thought about this for a second.

“You didn’t laugh, but what about the others?”

“I took care of the others after you left,” said Benny.

Hearing this, Kenny agreed to play soccer with the gang. Instead of going straight to the Pit, Benny headed to the local grocery store where the gang was waiting in the parking lot. There were Bertram, Scott, Tommy, Jon, Tim, Mike, and Julio waiting in the corner of the lot. While Benny





was met with high-fives from everyone, Kenny was subjected to a mix of blank stares, raised eyebrows, elbow nudges, and murmurs-under-breath like Kenny was some sort of alien being or something. Bertram broke the silence by asking Kenny a sports history question. Bertram always made sure to test new members with a few questions about the thing he loved most.

“Who tried to break Babe Ruth’s home run record?”

“Who’s Babe Ruth?” Kenny replied.

Bertram and the rest of the gang were dumbfounded when they heard this coming out of Kenny’s mouth. Benny jumped in quickly, hoping to avoid another scene.

“Don’t worry about the questions right now. Let’s stop wasting time and get to the Pit.”

“It’s 8 A.M. in the morning,” the gang whined.

The rest of the day was filled with some intense soccer practice. Even though Kenny still felt out of place, he was starting to feel more at ease around the rest of the gang.

After the game Kenny ran into the house shouting, “Mom! Guess what? Mom, you won’t believe it!”

Mrs. Swanson raced from the kitchen, where she had been preparing the family dinner, into the living room where Kenny was shouting for her.

“How was your day?”

“How do you think it was? I just came into the house running and screaming!”

Over the next few weeks Kenny even began to build a special bond with Benny. They became closer than

before. They now accepted each other as carnals.

“What does that mean?” Kenny had asked when Benny had first called him carnal.

“It means, brother,” explained Benny.

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One day at the Pit, Kenny and the gang were playing a rambunctious game of football. During half-time, they gathered around their water cooler to talk about this year’s All-Star trophy ceremony.

“My dad’s got tons of trophies,” said Kenny after crushing a soda can against his forehead.

“I dare you to go get your dad’s trophy,” said Mike. “I dare you to bring it here and show us. Put your money where your mouth is, punk!”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said Kenny leerily.

“What, too much of a wimp?” jeered Tom.

Kenny looked towards Benny, hoping to find some relief from the taunts.

“It’s OK, man,” said Benny. “You don’t have to grab one.”

Despite what Benny had said, deep down Kenny still wanted to; he was just too nervous about his dad.

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A month or so after the conversation about trophies with the gang, Mrs. Swanson left the house to drive her husband to the airport. Mr. Swanson was going on a business trip for the weekend and would be back on Monday at any time. Before Mr. Swanson had left he spoke to Kenny about being the man of the house.

“While I’m away,” said Mr. Swan-

son, “you’re the man of the house, so take care of things and mind your mother.”

Although Kenny had been playing sports with Benny and the gang for some time now, he felt like he had yet to completely emerge from his shell. He wanted to prove to his new friends that he was not afraid to take risks. His father’s business trip provided him with the perfect opportunity to prove that he could really be one of the guys. Kenny had finally built up enough courage to bring his dad’s trophy to the Pit to show off to the gang.

Kenny went into the den after his parents left to retrieve the All-Star trophy from its lighted display case. The case was off to the side of his dad’s work desk and swivel chair. Whenever Mr. Swanson worked in the den, he would always put his feet up during phone calls and stare at the trophy glimmering safely in the case. Now that he was gone Kenny opened the glass doors on top of the display case and reached inside to pull out the trophy. With his fingers on the trophy’s handles, Kenny understood at last the powerful feeling that had come over his dad after winning the trophy.

It would usually have taken Kenny only five minutes to get to the Pit to meet up with his friends, but with the trophy in his grasp, he took a full twenty.

“Guys,” he shouted holding the trophy at chest level. “I got it!”

Benny and the gang turned to see the object that Kenny held in his hands. They all met each other half way across the field.

“Hey,” said John excitedly. “Let’s run around the field doing a few laps

with this thing. Just like the pros.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” said Kenny quietly.

“Who should go first?” asked Benny.

An order of victory lappers was determined. Mike would go first, followed by Benny, then John, and Kenny would be the fourth to run.

When it was finally Kenny’s turn he ran around the field faster than any of the three boys before him, holding the trophy above his head as he ran. The gang cheered him on as Kenny was about to finish his lap of triumph. But before Kenny could complete the lap, he tripped over a rock. Shocked, he let go of the trophy as he fell face first against the gravel. The trophy flew into the air and crashed into the ground in front of him. He looked up, horrified at the mangled remains of his dad’s prized possession.

“Oh crap!” the gang yelled out.

The boys’ cries of despair were loud enough to reach the outskirts of the Pit and the ears of a stocky, rough-looking kid who was wandering along near the back fence. Jon noticed the figure in the distance. “Oh, no,” he whined. “Nelson’s here.”

Jon’s whining was echoed by his friends for good reason. Nelson had been the bane of the gang’s school existence ever since he had moved to Scottsdale. The gang was constantly plotting to exact revenge for the endless bombardment of noogies, wedgies, and name-calling. Nelson didn’t play by anybody else’s rules and the rules that he did play by were unsavory at best. Now as he approached them, the gang was braced for a new plague of unpleasantness.

“What’s up, morons?” said Nelson when he had swaggered over to them at last. “What are you crying about now?”

“We’re not crying about anything,” said Kenny, trying his best to hold back his tears.

“Looks to me like you done busted up something pretty important.” Nelson examined the golden remnants of the smashed award. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that was an All-Star trophy.”

“Whatever it is,” said Benny advancing towards Nelson, “it’s none of your business.”

Benny and Nelson stared each other down momentarily before Nelson cracked a smirk, pivoted around, and began walking away. “Good riddance,” said Bertram.

“Shame you don’t know no one whose pa has got one just like it,” mumbled Nelson under his breath just loud enough for the others to hear him.

“What was that?” said Kenny, wiping some gravel from the side of his face.

“Oh, you don’t know?” Nelson turned back around to face the group. “My pa’s got one of them just like yours. Only difference is, it’s a lot less beat up.”

The gang paused at this. An idea was floating around in the air; it was just a matter of thinking before someone reached out to catch it. Suddenly, Tommy spoke up.

“Why don’t you race him for it?”

Despite his stocky stature, Nelson was one of the school’s finest runners. He and Benny frequently competed in district track meets and had always

ended their races with neck and neck finishes. It was never clear to the spectators who would come out the victor when Nelson and Benny faced off in the lanes.

“I don’t got no time for you idiots,” Nelson scoffed. “I got bigger pigs to wrassle.”

“I thought you might say that,” said Benny, tapping his bat thoughtfully against home plate. “This woulda been a good chance to settle who the better runner is once and for all.”

“Aw, shoot man,” Nelson said. “You gots a point there. I think you losers just made me an offer I can’t walk away from.”

“Well, it’s settled then,” said Bertram. “Meet here tomorrow at the crack of dawn. You can run the usual loop around town.”

Nelson and Benny spat in their palms and met with a firm handshake. The race was on.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day at the crack of dawn, the gang gathered underneath the orange-red sunrise that was beginning to come over the Pit. The gang tried to talk Benny out of running the race against Nelson while Kenny paced between second and third bases. Despite the pleas of the gang to surrender, Benny remained confident about his chances in the race.

“Are we racing or what?” Nelson walked on to the Pit from the east side of the field holding his dad’s All-Star Trophy. With the morning sun at his back, his shadow hit them before he was within hearing range.

“Wait a second,” replied Benny. He walked over to Kenny and put his hand on his shoulder, which

stopped him from pacing the bases. “I got this.”

Benny and Nelson lined up on either side of second base. They crouched down in starting positions like track stars and waited eagerly for Mike to begin the race. Mike dropped his arm and the race was off.

The two competitors were out of view from the Pit’s home base in seconds. They followed the course that they had planned out the day before. First up was a run through the public library. They bolted through the front doors, weaving through the crowd of library goers who were making their way out of the building. They kept up their pace as they ran towards the back doors. The pair of them nearly knocked over shelves of books on their way, and the librarian let out the loudest “Shhhh!” that she could without further disturbing the quiet readers.

Benny and Nelson stormed through the back doors as thunderously as they had the front. Nelson gained a slight lead over Benny. This was enough to buy him time to slow Benny down. Nelson was an employee at the local zoo, which was the next stop on their racing route. His plan was to use his set of zoo keys to open cages in order to turn the doors into obstacles for Benny. Nelson was able to swing open twelve animal cages and the metal doors were now a problem for anybody behind him. When Benny made it to the zoo he did not let the barrier of open doors faze him. He was able to strategically swerve between the gaps left by the unlocked cages and make it out of the zoo without a misstep. He could hear the screams of zookeepers alarmed at the number of

animals attempting to escape, but he had no time to turn back and help.

Nelson’s lead was beginning to lessen as Benny picked up his pace on the way to Scottsdale City Hall. I gotta do this, thought Benny, Kenny’s life is on the line! Benny saw the bully’s back grow closer and closer. The pair passed by City Hall and ran straight into traffic in the town square. Benny was able to regain the lead as they passed the public pool. Nelson had not been able to weave through the traffic as easily as Benny had been able to make his way through the cage doors.

Benny was still in the lead when they passed the outdoor community center in the middle of town. People feeding birds on benches, children jumping rope, and teens skateboarding all stopped to watch the racers fly by. As they neared the final stretch of the race, a dirt path that led straight back to the Pit, Nelson had kicked into gear and was breathing down Benny’s sweaty neck. Benny felt his rival’s breath behind him and told himself, I gotta do this for Kenny. Let’s kick it into turbo!

Benny looked like an Olympic sprinter as he pulled into the Pit. The gang had been standing around waiting eagerly for his arrival and they started cheering “Good job!” and hit him with back pats and high fives as he ran past. Benny was running at full force. Knees high, heart racing, arms pumping – there was no way he was going to lose this race. He lifted his arms in victory as he crossed second base to finish the race.

Nelson came back to the Pit about a minute later and saw the gang gathered around Benny, smiling.

When he saw the group of friends happily supporting each other, he realized that he did not have to be such a jerk to get his way. Nelson was stopped in the outfield, watching the scene unfold, when he saw Kenny break away from the group to approach him.

“Hold on there,” said Kenny. “You may have lost the bet, but you can still be our friend, starting with me.” He extended his arm for a handshake. Nelson shook his hand and they walked back to the rest of the group to exchange trophies.

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Even after the ordeal of the race, Kenny still felt that it was his responsibility to tell his dad about his carelessness with the trophy. Although Mr. Swanson was upset that his prized award had gotten busted, Kenny felt that the experience had brought them closer. He felt that being grounded for a week was easily worth the friendship with Nelson and the closer bond with his dad. Nelson had received the same punishment from his father, but he felt better than he had when he wasn’t being grounded because he knew he had new friends to hang out and play sports with for days to come.

THE END

# WHOM WOULD I LET UNRAVEL THE MASK?

By Roxanne Nelson

*In Collaboration with Satya Putumbaka*

What you are about to read is real.

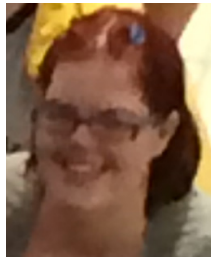
1. Don't let people take advantage of you. Do something about it.

I was eight. At the foster house. Where I found people who adopted me. During the day, I don't know what time. Sun was still out. You do it when nobody was around and nobody was looking. I can't guarantee that no one saw. But obviously when my parents weren't around. He didn't care about my brothers; they were around. I felt ashamed. Dirty. I don't think they knew what was going on. I don't know if they knew how to do anything. I just happened to be in the room. I didn't feel comfortable doing it, but he kind of grabbed my hand. I found out that was wrong. It was my gut instinct. Well, you're eight. Who are you gonna believe? If he grabbed me now, I would move. I would move my hand back.

Be careful of people—whom you let in: you never know their outcome. If they'd actually be on your side. Do something about it.

2. Looks aren't everything.

I learned that because I would go



after certain types of guys I was attracted to. And they would leave me places and I would have to find my own way home. That changed once I decided to give my boyfriend—my current boyfriend—a chance. He wasn't my type—but he was all right looking. I knew that if I wanted to change what was happening to my life I had to change.

3. Get involved. That's a good way of getting to know people.

I actually didn't get involved. I was shy; I mean I dressed nice but I would be quiet. Just small chats. Start a small chat. Introduce yourself first, so they don't freak out; just introduce yourself and make small chat. Like: how are you? Ask questions. Get involved with sports or go to pep rallies. Where other people would be, like a coffee shop at school.

*Hi, my name is Roxanne. I've seen you around school. Do you have a*

*moment? I'd like to get to know you better.*

If they accept, then you might exchange numbers. Or ask if they have a girlfriend first, since girlfriends can get mad. Just in case. Even just asking for friendship.

4. Stay in a public place.

Why? Well, because. It could potentially put you in danger. Because I've had experience throughout junior high . . . even kids in junior high will—you don't know them as you think you know them. They could leave you places or make you find a way home. Especially if they seem attracted to you, they'll try to go after you. Even at a friend's house don't ever—if you sleep over at a friend's house—I would position myself on the opposite side so it didn't look like “oh, two girls are in the same bed.” I've had a knife and a gun pointed at me and this is all because of when my friend's boyfriend and brother and even my brother—he didn't do anything, you know. He's showing off in front of his friends. He nicked me a little with a saw.

But I've had a knife put to my knee. Guns pointed at me. When I

was at my friend's house; he pointed it at me. And so he and a lot of his friends would mess with me while I was trying to sleep. He would blackmail me.

5. Don't overreact.

Because I realized that guys can have friends that are females. It's okay to have female friends. As long as you have trust. He was talking to a married woman online. And right then and there I was ready to end it. But after I went to my roommate, I told my roommate how to break up with someone. And then I ignored him the next day. He was mad at me because my roommate did all the breaking up. She broke up with him for me though I didn't ask her to. We just talked it out. And we put

the past behind us. Just celebrated our eight- or nine-month anniversary. He got me a bowling ball and we went to Belisio's. Getting married in a year and four months.

6. Find a person you can confide in or go to.

When you know someone has your back. And you can trust them, tell them anything. I live in a group home. We don't call it that, though. It's just four roommates and we have staff. Assisted housing. I don't know. I've gone through roommates; I know if you've been there or go to church. You don't want to confide in the wrong person. They can refuse to believe you. Or it can escalate. Especially bullies.

When I had my son. At first I was afraid because I didn't even know I was pregnant. And when she found out I had a baby she didn't freak out like I thought she would. And my staff had my back. I've never really believed strangers who are like, "Oh, he has a crush on you." And I remember my staff got really heated and had my back about "Don't say that, or don't lie."

7. Believe in your dreams.

I felt something that wasn't right so I just pulled it out. A baby.

Was it a shock? Mhm. Believe in dreams because they can come true. I have a lot of dreams. But it's weird because that dream happened that way. I had my dream. I had a dream



that I had a kid in my room by myself.

It happened when I was nineteen. I had the kid when I was nineteen going on twenty. I'd had the dream before.

The pregnancy was a sign. Like a reality check.

8. People have good intentions.

Try to realize that people have your best interest at heart. They're being good. Like "Oh, I think you should stay away from pop." They're actually trying to do you a favor and look out for your best interests.

9. Treat everything equal. Treat your relationships equal.

10. Forgive people.

Forgive and forget. Remain calm. Remember to just do it—I'm not talking about sexual things—I'm talking about: just get stuff done. It's okay to grieve.



# THE STORYTELLING PROJECT:

*Project Director*

Katie Van Wert

*Project Coordinator*

Eric King

*TBI, Inc. Liaison*

Brandon Karie

*Community Participants*

Brandon Babbitt

Dan Clark

Roxanne Nelson

Kelli Wilson

Dustin Wyberg

Anna Wychor

*Student Collaborators*

Scott Koski

Kimberly Hyatt

Hannah Jocelyn

Ben Pieper

Satya Putumbaka

Hayley Westfal

Kyle Farris

John Fahnenstiel

Meghan Carney

Anna Heisler

*Anthology Design*

Taylor McCabe

