In the Mind's Life: A Collection of Short Fiction

An Honors Thesis (Honrs 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This collection of short fiction aspires to evoke thoughtful emotion through its use of introspective characters, dialogue, and subject matter. The "Sudden Fiction" or "Short Short" form was utilized, because I found it to be the form that best met the needs of my stories. By focusing more on character than on the intricacies of plot, the "messages" of the stories were able to shine forth in a descriptive, yet succinct manner. The desired effect was to create vivid characters and events, while avoiding those details which could take away from the essence of the stories, thereby hindering their success.

The Left-Handed Woman relates the happenings inside of one woman's mind. It compares the woman's exciting daydreams to her mundane, almost inferior reality.

In Senora Russell and "I Know I'm Somebody...," the focus is more on voice and character, along with the realization that at times what one sees on the surface is not enough; when the outer shell is left unbroken, there are intricacies of human character which often go unnoticed.

Although Guerrero Valiente and Wagoneer's Granola Mix are set in different points of view, both express the main characters' struggles in coping with personal tragedies in their lives: divorce and illness.

Synonymy was intended to capture the way a changing point in one woman's life led to the recollection of a once-treasured friendship and her loss due to its closure. It is also an act of reflecting on her past struggle to escape a strong feeling of
disenchantment.

Each one of the stories is intended to be read as a separate whole; although all are meant to touch upon some characteristic or event that is common to everyone.

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Senora Russell

Senora Russell bustled into the room sporting a long wrinkled gray skirt with a white blouse turned brown at the bottom. It was the same blouse as last year, I know, because every time she raised her right arm, a large hole revealed her armpit hair. She swung her nasty, yarn-like gray hair away from her eyes as she called roll. The room was so noisy I didn’t even hear her call my name. I remembered last year when Senora left the room crying after the class started yelling and fighting and making fun of her slide show. That same day she passed a bottle of tequila around for us to see the worm. When Senora stepped out into the hall for a minute, Juan Richardson took the bottle from her desk and poured some of it into her half empty can of Coke. I still don’t know whether or not she ever drank from it. We’d cook churros con chocolate and play games and make stuff with paint and do whatever we wanted. I wasn’t learning very much about how to speak or write Spanish; there wasn’t a lot of time with everyone yelling. I would just sit in the back of the room and watch Senora’s lips moving like it was one of those Kung Fu movies my brother watches where their lips move and nothing comes out. Senora Russell soon gave up trying to control us, so instead she’d entertain us with her karate kicks and college track stories. Once, when she was teaching us dances, she pulled up Jorge Smith and started to lambada with him. No one went near Jorge for a while.

One day, to celebrate Cinco de Mayo we went on a fieldtrip
to her house, the most beautiful house I had ever seen. It had a red-brick patio, a fountain that shot water out in a high arc, and high white walls like some Spanish nobleman would have or something. While she was giving us a tour, I imagined myself wearing a long flowered skirt, sipping lemonade by Senora's fountain on a warm spring day. But I never could understand how she belonged in a house like that.

That day, while the rest of the class hovered around the big bowls of chips and salsa, I picked up a novel from her coffee table called *My Dear Maria* by Margarita Del Sol. I started reading the back cover of it:

> Esperanza Lopez, a young Spanish girl, struggles to hang on to the estate of her late father, once a wealthy nobleman. She denies herself pleasure and comfort in order to save the beauty of her childhood home, while discovering love along the way.

I sat alone, like usual, on one of the white stone benches that surrounded the fountain and flipped through the pages, jamming to the sound of maracas and those little Spanish guitars coming out of Senora's state-of-the-art sound system. "Hey Bookworm! The party's over here," Juan Richardson yelled from across the yard. I just ignored him and kept reading, suddenly realizing that the girl in the book was who Senora always talked about in class. Esperanza, who I used to think was some former student or a real-life Spanish princess or something, was really the character in a Spanish Romance novel. As I was reading, I looked up and noticed Senora's blue eyes staring intently towards
me. She came over and made a big fuss about how I should take the book home to finish it. She said to keep it as long as I wanted since she had the non-translated version in hardcover. So I said "O.K." just to humor her and so I could get a release from her tortilla breath blowing right in my face. I put the book in my backpack, and noticed a photograph on the mantlepiece. It was of a dark-haired, good-looking guy who looked like he might be Senora’s son. I could tell it was taken in this house since the water from the fountain shot up in the background. I remembered hearing rumors that Senora and her husband had gotten a divorce after her son died of leukemia. I quickly placed the picture back where it was so Senora wouldn’t see me snooping, then went to watch Manuel take a swing at the pink and green donkey pinata.

I was an avid reader who liked books because they offered me a way of escape, so over that next week I read the novel during my other classes, our free period, and my bus ride home. I soon began to think that maybe Senora Russell was just a little obsessed with this girl Esperanza. For one thing, they seemed to have the same taste in clothes. You see, in the fifth chapter, Esperanza was forced to sell her jewelry and fine dresses and combs so that she could pay back the man her late father had borrowed money from and get him off her back. The man, Carlos, had been threatening to take over her father’s estate, which he had lovingly named Maria, if he didn’t get his money. This left Esperanza with a make-shift dress she put together using the stained white curtains that had been stored away for years.
Later on, in the seventh chapter, Carlos warned her again, telling her that if she didn’t have the money in thirty days, he would have her killed and seize her home.

Dear father in Heaven, how will I ever overcome this evil man? I forgive you of your gambling debts. I know it was Mama’s tragic fall from the horse that led you to that reckless behavior, but oh must our house, our beautiful Maria, suffer in this way?! She is all I have left of you and Mama. So long as I am alive, I will never give up our home.

In chapter eleven, Esperanza eventually found work as a school teacher for the sons of Indian peasants. She got up early in the morning and walked two hours to get to the Indians’ village. She knew the meager wages she received from teaching would never pay off her father’s debt, but she still got up each morning and used the hours of walking to try to think of a way to hold on to her dear Maria.

One Friday, I was battling my way through the jam-packed hallway lined with lockers on my way to history class, when Senora came running up to me, grabbed the sleeve of my blouse, and asked almost threateningly, how I liked the book. I praised it thoroughly for fear that she would demonstrate her karate expertise by proving herself a black belt and "high-kicking-me" in the face if I didn’t. Then I darted into the history classroom.

I flipped open the dog-eared page of the novel and started to read, ignoring the sound of Mr. Nevenick lecturing on the
American Civil War. A couple chapters later, Esperanza returned home from work exactly twenty-nine days after Carlos had threatened her. It was only a matter of hours until Carlos would come to rip her away from the only house she had ever known. Feeling hopeless and alone at the thought of losing Maria, she wandered out onto the patio and let her tears mix with the water in the fountain. Just then a stranger rode up on horseback and saw the beautiful Esperanza, dressed in rags and weeping at the side of the fountain. When she raised her head at the sound of hoofbeats, her eyes locked with those of the stranger and they fell instantly in love with each other (in a Romance novel, go figure). Anyway, the guy ended up being a wealthy prince, so he paid the debt Esperanza’s father owed and saved Maria. Maybe this stuff was more believable in Senora’s non-translated version.

One weekend, about a month later, I went into Waldenbooks while I waited for my brother who was trying on shoes at the Footlocker next door. As I was browsing through the Romance section, I saw the title My Dear Maria on the spine of a paperback sitting on the second shelf. It seemed to be one of a series by the same author, so out of curiosity I picked up what appeared to be the first of the series, marked Volume I. When I flipped open the inside of the back cover, my eyes doubled in size and I nearly dropped the book. There was a picture of Senora, about thirty years younger with curly blond hair, piercing blue eyes and a smile a movie actress couldn’t compete
with. She was posing in a high-backed ornately carved wooden chair with a string of pearls around her neck and a black satin dress that flowed to the floor. Her picture rested under the caption: About the Author...

Margarita Del Sol is a graduate student at New York University where she is working toward her master’s degree in Psychology. In her youth, she lived in Mexico City for ten years, and currently resides in a New York City apartment with her cat Jack.

Psychology? New York City? This seemed like a whole different person. There was no doubt that Margarita Del Sol and Senora Russell were one in the same, but how did she go from psychology major, beauty queen to . . . Wait a minute! Senora Russell, with the same tattered clothes, teaching job, and beautiful home as Esperanza Lopez, is now trying to live the life of the very character she created. Maybe this crazy, lambada-dancing woman was really trying to shed the pain and loss of her old identity. Maybe, by becoming Esperanza, she was hoping to be rescued by her own mysterious man on horseback. Maybe the mystery meat I ate in the cafeteria yesterday was clouding my vision.

Every school day for the past two years I thought I had this woman figured out. I didn’t think I had to dive beneath the surface, since the surface clearly offered an unkempt, ditsy teacher who, after many vain attempts had finally given up trying to maintain control of her class and took to the task of
entertaining them instead.

Just as I was often deemed the quiet and unsocial one, overlooked by so many, Senora was trapped in her own false exterior with no one ever bothering to look any deeper. But if you searched into this exterior, you'd see how she had created a place of escape in hopes of some day being rescued.

One day during the last week of school that year, I was barreling down the hallway so that I could change my gaucho costume after giving a presentation on South America. On my way to the bathroom I turned the corner and ran smack into Juan Richardson. Meanwhile, Senora heard the clatter of spurs hitting the metal lockers that lined the walls and had come out to see what all the commotion was about.

"Watch where you're going!" Juan yelled. "Who the hell do you think you are, the God-damn Lone Ranger?"

I looked up and caught Senora's eyes. "Maybe I am," I said. Just then Esperanza offered a warm smile to the mysterious "person on horseback," the only one who seemed to truly know her for who she was.
"I Know I'm Somebody..."

The screeching of the screen door announced my arrival for a 3:30 appointment. One step inside and a waft of hair permanent immediately made me gasp. I descended the three steps into the cramped quarters of the salon, which also doubled as the basement of Sharon's house. It contained two small rooms and a tiny kitchen area where a pot of coffee was always kept for her customers. As I entered, Sharon, the owner, bellowed out, "Well hello there Lisa!" easily beating out the noise of the dryers in the adjoining room. Today she was sporting another new 'do: pinkish-colored strands of hair twisted into a big lump on the back of her head. Last month, it was the color of straw and teased into a mass so big that its circumference seemed to at least double the size of her head.

I sat down and picked up a magazine (One of the only highlights of coming here were the People magazines she laid out, seeing as how my parents wouldn't be caught dead subscribing to such trash.) As Sharon pumped the lever of the chair to raise her "patient," I grimaced behind my magazine as the rolls of fat on her legs juggled from side to side. She hovered over the fragile looking old woman whose hair was rolled tightly in plastic rods with pins sticking every which way. Meanwhile, in the adjacent room, two women, with their heads underneath the dryers, were trying, unsuccessfully, to hold a conversation. They looked like astronauts trying to speak over the noise of their space craft. For a while it was, "Huh!" "What?" "Who?", 8
but the women, who were apparently both hard of hearing, finally
gave it up. One turned back to her knitting, while the other one
got out what—judging by the nearly naked couple on the cover—
looked like a romance novel.

I'd often longed to break away from the woman whose
clientele consisted solely of the Golden Girls, but my mom
insisted that I continue to frequent the place until college,
when I could use the excuse which three hundred miles would
provide. I think my mom felt a little sorry for her, not wanting
to offend her or send her off the deep end or something. Sharon
had known my father’s family for years, and six years ago, when
her husband announced he was leaving her, she didn’t take it very
well. (He still came back once in a while to ask her for money.)
Why I was made to suffer for this I was still wondering.

Every time I come here, what should be a quick trim turned
into an all-day ordeal. She was never on time, and the ancient
dryers took about an hour to turn your hair from wet to damp.
She spent most of the time asking her customers questions. The
recurring question that I always got was, "So have you got
yourself a boyfriend yet?". That, and the way my head would
throb after she dug her sharp, fake nails into my scalp to wash
my hair, made me shift uneasily in my seat while I waited. And
her son, who you would think had never seen a female under
seventy, would magically make an appearance every time I had an
appointment.

"There! All dolled-up for Wayne," Sharon yelled into her
customer's ear as she brought the chair down to the floor. "You make sure he notices that special wave I put in the back."

"Honey, he wouldn't notice a change in my hair if I dyed it blue," the elderly woman yelled back.

It's practically there, I thought. Meanwhile Sharon brought out a bright orange plastic wrap and draped it over my body to keep the water and clipped hair off my clothes. As she shampooed me, the grooves she seemed to be scratching into my head made my eyes water, but I clenched my fists and tried to answer her questions in a steady voice. "So... Valentines Day is coming up. Do you have a special sweetheart this year?" she pried. A different format, but the same question that I always dreaded.

"No" I replied shortly.

"Oh...aren't you a little heartbreaker!" she said. "You'll get to college and have to fight them off with a stick. What is it you're going to major in...getting that 'M'R'S' degree?"

Sharon thought college's only benefit was the opportunity to find a smart guy with a lot of money-making potential. From what I'd heard of her husband, I was pretty sure she never went to college. The only thing he left her with was a huge debt.

She led me to "the chair" which she raised until I could see my reflection in the mirror. "Just a trim, please" I said, knowing that she would cut my bangs too short as always. While she slowly went to work on my hair, I heard a creaking that went back and forth across the ceiling. My focus was then interrupted by the sound of "oldies" emanating from the closet behind us. I
had often wondered why anyone would put a radio in the closet, but I thought it was probably just one of those questions better left unasked.

As I looked in the mirror I saw Sharon’s excess flesh hanging down from her upper arms. I tried not to cringe at its coldness as it brushed my cheek when she reached around to comb out my bangs. A test of the Emergency Broadcast System, turned my attention to the closet and to a new poster she had taped up. On it was the chubby face of a boy, a face smeared with dirt, with a smile full of crooked teeth. The caption read, "I know I’m Somebody... ’Cause God don’t make no Junk!" My English teacher would have a field day with that double negative, I thought.

Another creaking noise made its way across the ceiling and I thought I was going to have to protect my head from falling debris. The noise continued down the stairs until I glanced to the right and saw Sharon’s son Larry. Larry had definitely inherited his mom’s eating habits, and the horizontal stripes he had on did nothing to hide this fact. "Hey Mom, um... what’s that thing you wanted me to do this afternoon?" he asked.

"I left you a note on the kitchen table. I wanted you to run over to the grocery store and get a few things," she said.

"Oh, O.K....Uh, hi Lisa," he mumbled as he turned to make the treacherous journey back upstairs.

"Hi" I answered quietly without looking at him.

When Sharon finished cutting my hair I sat down under one of
the dryers which she lowered over my head, then turned on. I thumbed through about five Peoples before it finally shut off, signalling my return to freedom. I quickly paid her, then hopped up the three stairs to the door. As I opened it, I stepped face first into the big soft belly of her son who must have left while my head was under the dryer. "Oh, uh, excuse me," he said backing up so I could get through. "It’s O.K." I mumbled, practically running to my car.

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Four years later, when I was a senior in college, I went home one weekend for my nephew’s birthday party. In desperate need of a haircut before graduation, I made an appointment with Sharon.

There I was, back in those familiar surroundings, on a day when Sharon happened to be even more inquisitive than usual. "Only three weeks before you’re out in the real world, your mom tells me. So what are your plans after graduation?" She asked as she combed out my wet hair.

Now this was the dreaded question. The question that had been asked a lot lately, and to which I still didn’t have an answer. Images of my friends who had already graduated sped through my mind. English majors, like myself, now living at home, managing fast-food restaurants or working in factories.

"Well, right now I’m trying to find a job. I might go to graduate school in a year. I’m not sure yet."

"What’s your major?"
"English," I mumbled.

"Oh, so you’re going to be a teacher?"

No! I wanted to scream. I was tired of hearing the familiar conclusion that English major equalled teacher.

"I’m not sure yet," I said in a voice that discouraged any further discussion.

A few seconds of silence ensued before she continued cheerfully, "Oh! I bet you haven’t heard about my Larry yet. For a couple of years now, he’s been investing the money he earned over at Joe’s auto-body shop. About two weeks ago he called and told me he had made a fortune from one of his stocks. He says we’re going to pack up and move to California. Sunny California! My Larry, a financial genius, can you believe it?"

All those years of over-priced hair cuts, and now her son, who didn’t even graduate high-school, is rich. "Unbelievable," I thought as I looked in the mirror and caught a glimpse of that familiar poster still taped to the closet. It was yellow with age, but still sporting that same chubby face, full of stained, chipped teeth.
"Why do we need five words that have the same definition and five definitions for one word?" Patrick practically yelled, trying to be heard over the music blaring from the dorm room next to us.

"Basketcase. That has only one definition," I said as the music shut off mid-sentence.

"You sure?" he asked. "Let me look it up...Basketcase: Number one—a completely incapacitated person. Number two, hah!—a person who has all four limbs amputated. And think of all the other words that can mean basketcase: ‘hysteric’ or ‘nervous wreck’..."

"That’s two words." I said. "Bouillabaisse—now that has only one meaning."

"Take the word ‘freedom,’ he went on, ignoring me. "What the hell does it mean? Everybody says they want freedom, yet they live their trivial, robotic existences according to money. Money and pride steal our freedom."

"Are you gonna eat that last piece of pizza?" I was not in the mood for one of our discussions.

"Freedom is the highest good. You’re free if you have the courage, but it’s always at a terrible price. A truly free person suddenly can’t find a place in the world, and it’s because society hates them." As I looked up, I noticed the redness in his face as he continued. "It does everything it can to make
those people miserable, to keep others from seeking freedom."

"So what exactly is this freedom?" I asked, tired and slightly annoyed. This was exactly the kind of conversation I had had with myself many times, the kind where at the end I felt drained and all I wanted to do was sleep and dream and sleep. It's the feeling I had hoped to escape after graduating high school; I thought college could provide me with a fresh start.

"Who can tell for sure what real freedom is? It's an impossibility in this society," he said, his voice never losing its intensity. "Ya know what, the day-to-day conversations of man are filled with so much drivel... 'drivel', now that's an underused word. Is 'underused' a word?"

"No. Throw me that dictionary... 'Drivel,' now do you mean Number one--to let saliva flow from the mouth, Two--to talk childishly or idiotically or Three--childish, silly talk?"

"Ha ha," he said sarcastically, "I gotta get going. I have to go take a test, which will eventually label me with a grade, which will decide my fate in a money-controlled, greed-filled world."

Patrick was indeed labelled with a grade. An 'F' to be exact, and was nicely asked by the university not to return for the following semester. So our thought-provoking discussions were to come to an end.

I met Patrick my freshman year in college after he briefly went out with my roommate, Becca, a detail he was to deny vehemently when I used it as retaliation if our bantering
happened to get out of control. You see, my roommate was a
cheerleader, wrapped up in the world of homecoming queens and
fashion statements he condemned. And if that wasn’t bad enough,
she belonged to a sorority, the "kiss of death" in his eyes.
"It’s like paying people to be your friends," he said once. "It’s
everyone’s irrational need to be popular and liked."

Patrick and I always had conversations which Becca would
call "in another language," as she flirted on the phone and tried
out different facial expressions in front of her full length
mirror. She had had a crush on Patrick ever since she saw his
sweat-drenched tan body after soccer practice one day. "He’s
just too... I don’t know, intellectual or something," Becca said
to me after their first, and last, date. Considering that
Becca’s conversations rarely strayed from the words, "Does this
look good on me?" I didn’t put too much stock in Patrick’s mental
agility.

But after I got to know him I noticed something that I
thought was extraordinary. He could put into words the thoughts
that I had never imagined anyone felt or even understood. I
thought my bitter disillusionment was just that--mine, and
separated me from everybody else.

After Patrick left school I discovered a letter which he had
written to me on a page of one of my notebooks. Part of it read:
"I just want to live on an isolated island without money-driven,
thoughtless, greedy, lustful humans where I can write and be
happy without having to cater to people in order to make money,
in order to live. You can come and we can form our own island of writers and artists and musicians and people separate from this world."

I understood how he felt, for I thought at one time that I pretty much hated and resented everyone in the world, especially people's motivations for doing things—to be popular, prestigious. Maybe it was because I felt like I was always on the fringe, trying to find some meaning in my actions, but always coming up short. I had always looked with disdain on the people who would use every bit of their energy to feel well-liked and accepted by others. I had tried to shut off the rest of the world, their harsh words, stupidity, ignorance, ridicule and standards. Patrick’s conversations brought me back to those old feelings, the belief that often-times I was just "playing the game" of life like everyone else, but not really living. Unlike Patrick, I somehow managed to stay "in the act." He flunked out of school while I managed straight 'A's. There were times when, after he would leave, I would cry; our conversations often left me depressed and sucked back into that feeling that I wanted to run away from.

Patrick and I kept in touch for a couple of years after he left the university, but I began to see his visions as unrealistic, however tempting they were to hope for. During our last phone conversation I finally uttered my feelings: "Every time I talk to you I become so depressed, like I’m being pulled farther and farther down, and I hate that feeling, Pat; I hate
how I have to analyze everything and everyone. I just want to feel less burdened, you know, just be happy once in a while."

"You're just pushing me away because we're so much alike," he insisted. "I'm exactly like the part of you that you're so anxious to change, and that scares you."

Maybe I did need a break from Patrick at that time; but now as I'm about to graduate and wondering how I'll fare in the dog-eat-dog "real world," I miss him and his understanding.

I now imagine Patrick as he was: his disheveled hair, his catty remarks, his copy of Walden, and as the last words in his letter describe him: *I'm hopeless, beautiful and alive.*
Guerrero Valiente

I am calm; I am confident. I am strong, positive and lean. I am intelligent. I am proud of myself and my accomplishments. I am relaxed and having fun. Repeat these sentences to yourself every night before you go to bed and every day when you wake up. You will gain in confidence and ability. Nothing is stronger than a positive attitude and a great self-image.

Linda bought a self-help book the other day, exactly one year since her husband, Richard, left her for another woman. He met the girl at the health club where he regularly played tennis with the guys from the firm. Initially he would go only on Fridays, but soon it was up to three or four days a week. Linda had marvelled at her happier, more energized husband of six years, who was suddenly bringing her flowers and small gifts for no reason.

She eventually found out about the affair from the wife of Richard’s co-worker. He had still been playing ball only once a week; the other absences from home were spent just five blocks away at the apartment complex of a woman only a year younger than Linda’s age of thirty-two, but with the face and body of a twenty-year-old. The flowers and gifts, she then realized, had been to ease his guilty conscience.

Three weeks after she purchased Think Your Way to a Better Life, she finally opened it up. That was the same day she was driving home from the mini-mart and saw the little slut with her
spandex shorts and sports bra jogging down the road. Waving her little butt back and forth as if to say "Nah nah nah nah nah!" Linda's first instinct was to hit and run, but instead she sped up and brought the car closer to the curb where there was a big puddle of rain from the morning's thundershower. After she heard the water whoosh, she looked in the rear view mirror to see one really pissed off male senior citizen flicking her off, while her target jogged right passed him.

Now, in between sit-ups she glanced at the book and repeated: I deserve the best. Slim and thin, I exercise to win. I am in control and ready to roll. Expect success, I'm one of the best. I am a courageous, risk-taking warrior. I'll show her warrior, that little bitch when I plummet my fist into that plastic-surgeon's playing field. I love myself and my abilities. But I guess my abilities weren't satisfying enough for him! (At times she tended to stray a little from the text.)

After her sit-ups, she took a look in the mirror, sucking in her gut, only to let it out in a sigh of frustration. Throughout her fair share of dates in college, she had always been complemented on her wavy brown hair, and green eyes; but after all that work she expected the body of a goddess.

She had met Richard during the summer after her junior year in college. They had both taken part in a month long study abroad program in England. The last two weeks of the trip they spent a lot of time together, touring the different sites around Oxford, hitting the pubs at night. After the class ended, he
stayed another month to travel around Europe, while Linda went back home to Iowa. When the post card he promised to send never came, she gave up hope, thinking it had probably just been a summer fling. Then, the first day of her senior year she got a call from him. He had just begun law school out East.

That year he came to watch her compete at her school's conference diving championships. The party that followed left them a little too drunk and they fell into what was to become a four year, long-distance relationship.

I am a courageous, risk-taking warrior. I am a courageous, risk-taking warrior. "If I'm a courageous, risk-taking warrior, then why am I still living in the same town where I got married, exactly four miles from the new house where my ex-husband and his ex-mistress now live?" That was another of the questions that flitted in and out of her brain.

The other day, Linda was sorting through some boxes in the attic and came across a bunch of Richard's old high school sports awards. There were two large boxes filled with trophies from track and soccer and tennis. Fake gold and silver colored men, no, Gods they looked like, frozen into poses that showed off their defined legs as they kicked a soccer ball, or their forearms, strong and taut, as they gripped a tennis racket. Linda immediately loaded the boxes into the trunk of her car and hauled them over to the dumpster behind a nearby grocery store. As she threw Richard into the dumpster, she threw as well the slight hope that a few shed pounds or a brighter laugh might make
her worthy of his love.

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Linda flipped through the book of Spanish words and phrases, to refresh her memory of the language she hadn’t spoken since her college classes. A tinge of anxiety ran through her stomach as she realized she was really on her way to the place she had always dreamed about visiting. She turned back to her book and repeated softly to herself, "Hablo espanol un poco." I speak a little Spanish. "Hasta mañana." See you tomorrow.

"¿Este restaurante es bueno?" Is this a good restaurant? Even the look of annoyance from the woman in the seat next to her couldn’t convince Linda to stop. Eventually Linda tried to take a little nap, but the fast rhythm of her heart would not allow her to relax. She poked around in the seat pocket in front of her and pulled out the Emergency Procedures Pamphlet. She started to doodle in the margins, then absent-mindedly scribbled: I am a courageous, risk-taking warrior. She flipped back and forth to her book, then turned to the woman next to her and said, "Soy un guerrero valiente." The woman raised her eyebrow, then sneered at Linda before returning to her magazine.
Wagoneer’s Granola Mix

"What’s wrong?" I asked the second I stepped off the hospital elevator.

"They took your dad into surgery to see if they could pinpoint the problem; his lung collapsed because it was so saturated with blood. They were able to get most of it reinflated right away though."

My mom managed to get the words out in her best nurse’s voice, calm and composed, but her red and swollen eyes made horrible thoughts flit in and out of my brain. *What if he doesn’t make it? What would my mom do without him? He’d never see me get married.*

As I listened to my mom, I noticed my reflection in her glasses: my mouth tight and frowning, eyebrows drawn close to form those worried lines across my forehead. I had always used this face as a shield against tears, but the feeling of my mom’s hand running in circles on my back made it harder to hold them in.

"They put a chest tube in him so a machine is helping him breathe," she went on to explain, "and it’s also helping to take some of the pressure off his lungs. Right now they’ve got him totally unconscious, so when you see him, he won’t be able to talk or move."

*It’s always weird when the doctors are referred to as "they," as if we know them or something, as if they come over and eat dinner with our family every week.*
My mom led me into the small waiting area to a chair next to my older brother Jim. We waited for our sister, Diana, who was still in Chicago finishing up the last part of the bar exam. I slumped back against the couch and watched as other members of my dad’s family drifted in and out of the waiting room. Every time I see these people I wonder how on earth I could be related to them. There had to be some gene my dad was lucky enough not to get. First there’s my Uncle Larry with the prosthetic leg who insists that each new member of the family sign his limb in permanent marker. By now it’s a myriad of different colors. There’s also my cousin, Tony, a mortician. He wheels around his year-and-a-half old son in a baby stroller made from a small casket. My relatives have invaded the hospital and it looks like they are setting up camp.

Meanwhile Grandma Sonosey had practically tackled the poor girl who was pushing the food cart into the patients’ rooms on the unit across from ICU. "Do-oo you think I cou-ould get so-ome of tha-at food? I’m ki-ind of fe-eeling a little light he-eaded," she said to the worker in her shaky voice. "And aren’t you-oo girls supposed to-oo be-ee wearin ha-air nets?"

"Oh brother," I thought as I rolled my eyes. Ever since I can remember, Grandma has engaged her not-so-subtle ways of letting people know how she thinks things should be. "Why, you’re not go-ong to the pa-arty dressed like that?" she said to me before my junior high Fall dance about five years ago. "You shou-ould be dressed li-ike a lady. Not in tho-ose ra-aggedy
jeans. I had been looking forward to going away to college and leaving behind her helpful hints, but now suddenly, I couldn’t imagine taking off at a time like this.

I hadn’t been sitting there long when my sister got off the elevator and ran to my mom. "Grandma left a message on my machine saying dad took a turn for the worse," she said, her voice threatening tears. Grandma always was one to break things gently.

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I spent weeks in the hospital, in and out of my dad’s room or in the waiting area, putting away enough red licorice to keep me on a sugar high for the rest of my life. (A sweet tooth was one of the things I had inherited from my dad.) The rest of the time I had to fight three hyper children for control of the television. They had been left in the waiting room while their mom visited with a sick relative. The sound of the TV helped drown out the beeping of machines and wheeling of carts that went on around me. Although the waiting area was around the corner from the patients’ rooms, it did not prevent the stale, nauseating smell of sickness and fear from wafting in.

The doctors finally diagnosed my dad with an extremely rare disease called Wegener’s Granulomatosis. "The cause is still unknown," the doctor explained. "It’s a vasculitis in which the blood cells clump together, sticking to the inner and outer walls of his veins. That’s why his lungs were so filled with blood. Early detection is of the utmost importance," he went on in a
grave tone. "Part of the trick is to keep his immune system suppressed. What’s happening right now is that it’s attacking itself. I’m going to put him on some very potent medicine: prednisone, a steroid, to help suppress his immune system, and cytoxin, a drug used in treating types of cancer. Both will have some very serious side effects, but a remission is possible."

Grandma went to great pains to learn the disease’s name so she could tell her friends what her poor son was afflicted with. "Well, yes my poor To-ommy’s got Wagoneer’s Granola Mix. It’s so se-erious, you know I haven’t been able to eat or sle-eep for a week. In fact, I’m not fe-eeling too well." Another time it was, "Ye-es, that’s right, it’s ve-ry rare; it’s called Wageners Gorilla Mist," at which I burst out laughing. She immediately turned, aiming her death stare at me. Oh, give it a rest, I thought.

My dad’s otherwise sterile room was lined with snapshots of his treasured 1934 made-from-scratch yellow Ford in an attempt to brighten it up, but the sobering white walls and clutter of machines made our attempt futile. Every time I would enter to see his ashen complexion and swollen body, my breath would become shallow and my mind numb. It was when he opened his eyes and I saw the confusion and fear, that I tried to imagine myself in that bed, with him taking care of me like he always had. Like when I used to come home from grade school crying because people made fun of how short I was. He would always say, "Your feet touch the ground, don’t they? As long as your feet touch the
ground, that’s all that matters." I never found that too comforting at the time, but he would follow it up with some of his corny jokes, "Did you hear the one about the string in a bar?" and somehow manage to make me smile.

Before going in his room, I peeked through the pulled curtain to see if he was awake. I saw my mom holding his hand while tears ran down his cheeks. I quickly walked to the bathroom down the hall, and stood in a stall with my hands covering my face, while my body jerked to the rhythm of an uncontrollable sobbing.

Every night when it was time to go home, I stuttered the words, "Goodnight Dad." But I finally mustered up the courage, with my face flushed and the words coming out in a whisper, to say "I love you." A slight smile went across his tired, much older looking face before he drifted back to a drug-induced sleep.

At home one night I sat out on the front porch in total darkness, with only a few stars and the stinging of mosquitos to keep me connected. I heard the phone ring, then the creaking of the screen door as Diana came outside. She was standing right beside me before I could even see her face, before I knew something must be wrong. "That was the hospital," she said. "The nurse checked Dad’s temperature and said it read 105.6. The doctor even made him check again, because he couldn’t believe it." I still sat outside while my mom rushed to get to the hospital. I was afraid of what I would find if I went with her.
I wanted to stay here and remain in the darkness away from everything that was real.

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After I saw them pull in the driveway, I opened the door and reached out to help my mom lift up the oxygen tank that was connected by a tube to my dad’s nose. His clothes hung over his frame like a drape, his eyes were bloodshot and swollen, and he wheezed for air after climbing the three steps to the door; but he was home. The next morning, he had to practically threaten to throw me out of the house to make me leave for college. "I’ll be out ropin’ cattle and turnin’ cartwheels and runnin’ marathons in no time, so go," he said.

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One day, during the first month of classes, I walked to the Quad that marked the center of campus and leaned back against an elm tree. The sun against the branches made shadows like outstretched arms shielding me from the dry heat that had invaded August. Hard lumps of dirt and dry grass rubbed against my legs as I watched other students hurrying to get to their classes on time. By the time I glanced at my watch, the Quad was practically empty and I was already twenty minutes late for class. I picked up my bag and decided to go for a swim instead.

Near campus, standing by the edge of the lake, I noticed my blurred reflection. I thought I looked a little older, a little taller even. I dove, ripping into the cool water that surrounded my body, trying to pull me down. A rush of adrenaline surged
inside of me and I quickly swam the length of the pond, resisting the water’s pull. When I reached the end, I flipped onto my back to feel the hot sun caress my face, feeling my heartbeat slowly returning to normal.
The Left-Handed Woman

She was poised on the edge of the dance floor in a huge ballroom with an elaborately painted ceiling. In the scene above her, angels were hovering over a beautiful nude female who had just died. They each held a rose whose petals fell down upon the woman as the wind swept them off their stems. She turned her attention to the couples waltzing passed her. Brightly colored skirts brushed her own, as the women glided by with their partners. The floor was so crowded, she couldn’t see across to the other side. But as a couple glided to her left, a man suddenly appeared before her. He had dark hair, and even darker eyes. He reached out to take her hand as he asked in a deep, alluring voice, "Would you like to dance?"

This is what she did when she couldn’t sleep. She lived in her mind, and she liked her mind’s life much better than her real one. In her real life she thought she could look a little better, so in her mind’s life she added a couple of inches in height and lost a few pounds in weight. Her skin became flawless; her straight hair became a mass of shiny, bouncing blond curls; her brown eyes were a sparkling green. One raise of her eyebrow sent men in swoons, while women were green with envy.

She had always wished she was more talented, so in her imagination she was a world-class tennis champion. She also had an incredible voice which could switch from opera, gospel, or blues, surpassing all others in each category. On the weekends she played drums and sang lead vocals in a new rock’n’roll band.
that had just signed a major deal with Columbia Records. She could also paint beautiful landscapes, still-lifes, and portraits, with rapid, yet graceful sweeps of her brush.

In her real life she had always been an average student, but when her mind began to wander, she could transform herself into a genius. She held numerous degrees in law, medicine, and business. She was a high-ranking official involved with military intelligence, and often an advisor to the president regarding military affairs. She was fluent in French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Swahili. She was also an accomplished writer and orator, selling out huge auditoriums to people who wanted to hear of new medical breakthroughs, and standard-setting court cases.

In her visions she was much more adventurous. She travelled to distant countries, and let herself be enveloped by different cultures. She rode camels in the desert, raced rapids in the whitewater of America's most treacherous waters, hitch-hiked across Europe, finally stopping at the Scottish highlands to reflect.

Yet, when she awoke, she was short, and of average weight. She had straight, brown hair and brown eyes. She was still single, with only an old boyfriend who still came around once in a while. The last time she played tennis was in high school. She couldn't reach really high notes, and she didn't know how to play any instruments. She had gotten C's throughout college, and now worked security at nights for an all women's prison.
One night, when she couldn’t sleep, she thought she should really use her left hand a little more. So in her mind’s life she did. After the waltz ended, the handsome, mysterious man picked up two glasses of champagne from the waiter’s outstretched tray. She picked up her glass with her left hand. After setting it down, she waved to an old friend across the room using her left hand. In the powder room, with her left hand she glided the Pale Rose lipstick across her lips. And everyone admired this beautiful, alluring, intelligent, talented, adventurous, left-handed woman.