

Great Student Essays!

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Fishing for Courage

by Larry Anderson

University of Northern Iowa—Fall 2005

The weather was great, the lake was sparkling, and I was sitting in the car with my brother in law as my fishing pole waited anxiously to be a part of the “big catch.” However, as much as I wish that fishing trip could have been my story, I found another story unfolding at an unbearable pace.

The phone rang. I saw it was my mother and answered. Expecting the “Be safe near the water, put bug spray on, and have fun” speech, I was startled to hear her crying. I begged for her to tell me what was going on. She told me to meet her at the hospital; my brother’s car blew up.

Panicked, I told my brother in law, Mark, to turn the car around and head for Marshalltown. As we streaked 45 miles north, I was constantly on the phone with my family gathering what bits and pieces of information I could.

As it was turning out, I found out that my brother Brandon was about to work on his lawn mower when the garage exploded due to high temperatures creating a widespread gas fume leak across the floor of his garage. As his cigarette butt hit the floor, the fumes ignited into a cannonball explosion that burned the garage to a pile of charred rubble.

What happened after that makes my stomach sick every time I repeat this story. My brother was, from head to toe, engulfed in flames as he hurdled into the neighbor’s yard across their waist-level fence. He broke through their back door and into their living room. The old-timer inside pushed him to the floor and

proceeded to blanket out the flame and finally cease it with a fire extinguisher. The ambulance arrived soon after and he was taken to the Marshalltown Community Hospital. This is when my mother was informed and where this story started out with me on a happy fishing trip.

Just as we arrived in the Marshalltown hospital we were greeted by the family with talk of decent chances of recovery. Not fifteen

minutes after our arrival at the hospital did we find out that Brandon was to be sent to the Iowa City Hospital’s Burn Unit because his injuries were too severe to be dealt with at the current facility.

My family and I made the trek to Iowa City and climbed the stairs towards the burn unit. When we arrived, we were each allowed a turn to speak to Brandon, who was no longer coherent according to the doctors. I waited patiently and found time with him when the rest of my family

was done. I struggled. I knew he taught me to be stronger and if I didn’t have to see him helpless in the white sheets I could have been strong. It broke me though and my cheeks streaked with tears.

I said to him “get up out of bed.” I told him to “jump out of those sheets, get out of those scrubs, and get out of that hospital with me.” He lay motionless. His eyelids were white puffs. His mouth was dry and parched. I said to him “Brandon, you know we aren’t done building my car. So climb out of those sheets. Please.” I wanted to just rip him out of that bed myself. I wanted the smell of the hospital to be

I wanted to just rip him out of that bed myself. I wanted the smell of the hospital to be off me. I wanted to go back to those times we played football together in the back yard.

off me. I wanted to go back to those times we played football together in the back yard. Soon enough, I was yelling at him. I kept telling him to get up.

My father came in to comfort me. We cried together until the doctors came in to tell us we needed to wait in the lounge. We were nudged into a conference room with the rest of the family. There was an old man in the room with a comforting look on his face talking to my mom. He was a hospice. I wanted to send him out of the room. I wanted to tell him that hospices are for families that LOSE someone. Brandon wasn't dead.

The door to the conference room opened and in came two nurses. They began to assess the burns on my brother. The words came out, one at a time, and in slow motion "Brandon has endured far too severe of burns and his heart will not support him. We are all very sorry." The room spun. The room flooded with tears. The room filled with echoes of sobs. The hospice was still there. I hated him. **BRANDON WASN'T DEAD!**

As it set in that I had lost my hero, that I had lost my mentor, my closest friend, my role model, I felt crushed inside. I felt like a giant hand grasped me and squeezed the tears out of me. I was soon in extreme self pity. I hated everything. I hated the hospice. I hated the nurses. I hated that stupid room. I hated that fucking moment! No matter how much I hated, I couldn't stop that aching pain that started in my stomach and took over my blood, nerves, and brain. It soon enveloped my entire body cavity. It was a terrible ache that made me feel dizzy. I glanced around the room to see my family overwhelmed with sorrow. I had suddenly realized how close my older sister Jessica was to me as she extended her arms in my direction. We linked together and I couldn't let go.

Life crashed into perspective just then. How would I ever let go of anyone again? We stayed in a lock-tight hug for several minutes. Taking it in and clearing our minds. She muttered

something. I muttered something back. It didn't matter what the context of our murmurs were. The point was, our brother died. He was gone.

The hospice began speaking. He made me uncomfortable. I wasn't about ready to let a man who didn't know who my brother was begin to tell me that everything was going to be alright. Hell no. That was *my* brother. *I'll* decide if it's going to be alright.

The funeral came a few days later. The church overflowed with people inside and out. A cable was run down the hall to another congregation room so people in the overflow crowd could watch it on the T.V. I sat with my family. Jessica locked onto my arm the entire time. That is, until it came time to escort Brandon to the hearse. I got up from my seat and convinced my nervous legs to move. I nearly faltered as my lower limbs trembled at a rate that made it almost impossible to walk. I took a deep breath and gathered myself. I felt like everyone in the room was looking at me. I hadn't cried throughout the entire funeral, until I started walking to the big doors at the end of the room and I realized that I had to carry my brother through them. He taught me to be strong. I had to be. I gathered with the five other men and took the spot on the front left side near his right shoulder and head. I carried him with my right arm.

My right arm now bears the tattoo "Brothers For Life" with my brother's birth and death dates. I got it for my eighteenth birthday. It reminds me that Brandon will always be my hero, my mentor, my role model, and my brother. This story couldn't have been about a fishing trip. I haven't gone fishing since.

Growing Up with Fear *Dedicated to my parents*

by Shkurte Berisha
Wartburg College—Spring 2005

When I was a child I heard different stories about war, especially from my grandmother who used to tell me her war experiences. At that time, her stories didn't make much sense to me although they were very touching. As time went by, I began to think more about her stories and I tried to understand a distant and unfamiliar world. As I grew up times were changing and things were getting worse in Kosova.

When I was six, something happened that changed me forever. It was a beautiful spring day and I could not wait to go to school as we were going to learn letter D, which was the first letter of my brother's name—Dugi. I was very excited because I always wanted to be the one who would teach him to write his name. Unfortunately, that beautiful spring day turned into my darkest day at school. The bell rang, which meant that the classes were to start soon. As I stepped in the hallway,

suddenly, it was too hard for me to breathe. Soon I collapsed. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. The next day I heard that over 8000 Kosovar Albanian schoolchildren were poisoned with nerve gas called Sarin. I did not understand anything. I just knew that this was an attempt to kill thousands of schoolchildren and scare them away from their schools. It was a dark plan designed by Slobodan Milosevic's regime to purify Kosova from the Albanians.

As a six year old, I thought this was the

end of it. The world would soon realize what was happening and would do something to stop a dictator. But I was wrong because that was just the beginning of his plan. After a few weeks, the government decided to close our schools.

Thus, we created an underground school system using basements of private homes as schools, even though it was very dangerous for us. I know that this is hard to understand for anyone who has not gone through a similar experience. One might even wonder if something like this could really happen in the 20th century. But it happened and, unfortunately, I was part of it.

Imagine how one can finish school in a classroom with no chairs or desks! My classmates and I had to sit on the floor while professors were standing with no blackboard to write on. Usually we would use each others' backs to place our notebooks and write more easily. Sometimes I thought we even made new standards for

geometrical figures as it was impossible to draw straight lines writing on someone else's back. That is how I finished most of my high school. But even this was nothing compared to what was about to come.

This long interethnic tension escalated and, in 1997, war started. On April 3, 1999, I found myself with many others on the road to nowhere. We were being deported and we had been told to leave our homes and follow the crowd. We could not even talk to each other as

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Serbian police threatened to kill us if we did. My siblings and I followed the crowd and arrived at the train station. We entered the train without knowing the destination, which we thought was death. We even paid for our tickets. Fortunately, we arrived safely at the border between Kosova and Macedonia. We stayed in “no man’s land,” the area between Kosova and Macedonian border, the neutral zone, for more than a week as we were not allowed to enter Macedonia. Everyone started to wonder what, where, how we were going to survive there without shelter or food. It was raining and nights were pretty cold. I thought we were just going to face a slow death, and I could see that I was not the only one to think so. People looked terrified and in deep pain. Many elderly and children died being unable to bear the cold, hunger, and fear.

A week later, the news came that, with international pressure, the Macedonian government had agreed to accept us as refugees. Buses came to pick us up. We were taken to a town where a camp was built for refugees from Kosova. Everyone thought at least we found a place to live until the war was over. Yes, I was finally safe, but there were about two million Albanians, including my parents, remaining in Kosova or sent to other unknown destinations. More than four months passed before we could get in touch with them. We, at least, wanted to know if they were still alive. There was a TV in the camp where we could get news. My siblings and I spent three months watching and waiting for my parents’ names to appear in the bottom of the TV screen. Unfortunately that didn’t happen. My sister, who worked as a journalist at that time, managed somehow to find our parents who were sent to a different country—Albania. After all the tortures that they went through, they were still alive. This was one of the happiest moments in my life. But, I was still hurting for my friends and everyone else in Kosova.

On a Friday night, I was watching news on TV and suddenly I heard the name of a friend

of mine whom I grew up with and who was found killed together with his grandfather. He was only sixteen, just like me, and that scared me as it did all of my other friends, because it meant that it could easily happen to any of us. That day I felt pretty bad, and I was really disappointed.

Four months passed, and I could not meet with my parents. Four months were like four years to me waiting to see my parents and not having an idea what was going to happen with all of us. Every single day I asked myself a question: am I going to have the opportunity to see my parents again and when is all this going to be over? There was no answer; nobody knew what was happening with us and who was going to decide what our destiny would be. It took me four months for my question to be answered. This time, for a change, the answer brought joy and hope. We were told that we were going to RETURN home! Imagine four months waiting for somebody to open the door to my country, my home, and worst of all preventing me to see my parents.

This was a difficult time for me and others in Kosova, but the terror was going to come to an end. I remember myself with my siblings and friends celebrating all night long, laughing, and crying the whole time. Everyone was excited because the next day we were free to go home even though it was very dangerous because of the land mines installed by Serbian soldiers and police. People were tired of living their lives in camps so they decided to take the chance.

We made it. We came back home but it was not like before. The first day I got home I went to see our neighbors across the street and when I knocked on the door I was waiting for the same person to open the door like before, but it didn’t happen. He was not there; somebody else opened the door—it was his mother wearing black. When she saw me she hugged me and started crying, I realized what had happened. Yes, my neighbor, my brother’s

best friend was killed. He was only 12 years old, the same age as my brother! I didn't know what to do, I asked God what next to come? All day long my brother and I cried remembering him. Even as I write this his face appears and I see him clearly parking his bicycle in front of his apartment like before the war.

It took me a month to find out if all of my friends and my neighbors were all right and if there was anyone else that I was going to miss my whole life. Unfortunately, there were many who were missing. It was and still is difficult for me to accept the fact that they are not among us anymore.

My childhood and my teenage life was rather complicated. I had to learn things the hard way. Though my experience may sound horrifying and dark, I am glad that I survived to tell the story. My life experience made me see the world differently and made me stronger. Furthermore, it made me appreciate everything in life more than I ever would. There are many things which people around value and which seem trivial to me now and make no sense. I am glad that my experience made me aware not to take for granted my family and friends as well as everything else that gives meaning to my life, which others sometimes overlook. Today, by sharing my story, I'd like to help others become aware of not only what happened to me but what is happening in the world such as in Sudan and Iraq, etc. I wish that PEACE existed not only as a word in the dictionary but as an ideal which we all want to achieve.

Hampton's Most Wanted

by Rachel Pecha

University of Northern Iowa—Fall 2005

Living in a small town in Iowa leaves little for teenagers to do on a Friday night in the summer. Occasionally someone's parents go out of town for the weekend and there is a party, and sometimes there is nothing better to do than attend a baseball or softball game. The parties were fun but, like I mentioned, they only happened occasionally. And the ball games never kept my attention for longer than the first few innings. I needed to find other means of entertainment to keep myself busy.

There was a home baseball game that Thursday night and Kelsey, Kendra, and I decided to attend. While attempting to be loyal Bulldog fans and cheer on the players, we were also trying to come up with something that we could find remotely fun to do that night. It was a toss-up between going to someone's house to watch a movie and breaking into the local swimming pool. We all easily agreed that climbing the fence and going swimming at ten o'clock at night was much higher on our list of fun than watching some lame movie we had probably already seen.

After the game, we went to Kelsey's house to change into our swimming suits and then we were off to complete our illegal event for the night. We parked the car across the street from the pool and very nonchalantly ran across the street and up the hill to the pool. The security lights were off that night, so we knew that our plan would work. Kelsey was the first one to ease her way over the only place in the fence that did not have wires poking out of the top. Then, one by one, Kendra and I followed her lead. As soon as we were all safely in the baby swimming pool area, we heard a vehicle pulling up the driveway to the pool. We all took a dive into the cement and lay as silent and motionless as possible next to the pool. The

vehicle was only the truck that drives around town spraying for mosquitoes, so we were not too worried about it.

When the truck finally disappeared down the road, we crawled to the main swimming pool. I am sure it was quite a sight to see as we hunched beneath the slide, trying to move as little as possible, undressing down to just our swimming suits. Next came the riskiest task we would overcome that night, actually getting into the pool without making a sound. It was done easily, almost as though we had done it millions of times before. The water was so cold we were afraid our bodies would go into instant shock. We decided the only way we would be able to keep warm is if we actually swam rather than just stand around in the five-foot swimming area.

Finally, after about forty-five minutes of swimming, we were beginning to get cold again and Kelsey's curfew was approaching quickly. We decided it was time to leave. Just as we were swimming to the edge of the pool we heard voices that were getting closer and closer. Without hesitation we all swam to the corner of the five-foot and huddled together, not for warmth, but more out of panic of what was going to happen next. Only seconds later we saw four figures begin to climb the fence just as we had done only an hour before. We could not recognize the bodies until we heard the voices, and then we knew we were safe. The four people climbing the fence into the pool were not cops, but only classmates of ours. Kelsey, Kendra, and I were almost frozen statues by this time so we decided to leave, even though now it was more of an illegal "party" at the pool rather than just a few girls with nothing better to do.

When I went home that night I could not think about anything else besides the fact that we

had broken into the pool and actually gotten away with it. It was such an adrenaline rush that all I could think about was that we *had* to do it again, and soon. There was a home baseball game the following night, so of course the trio attended. We went through the same conversation we had just discussed only twenty-four hours earlier. We had no plans for the night, so the best decision that we could come up with was to climb the fence and go swimming *again*. We thought since nothing had gone wrong the night before that doing it the very next night would be perfectly fine. We had no idea that we were in for the ride of our lives when we left the game that night.

That Friday night we decided to do things a little differently than we had the previous night. Instead of wearing our clothes inside the pool, we were just going to leave them in the car and only take our towels this time. Kelsey changed into her swimming suit at her house and then put her clothes on over top so that her parents would have no idea what adventure we were about to embark on. Kendra and I, for some very odd reason, ended up changing into our suits in Kelsey's car that night. I'm sure it would have been quite the sight if someone had seen what was going on in that car. We finally got to the pool and parked across the street, just as we had done the night before. We got out of the car in just our suits and towels and began to make our way toward the pool. Now you would think that because there was a car coming, we would stop and go back to Kelsey's car...of course we didn't do that. Instead we ran in front of this oncoming car, so the driver could clearly see what we were about to do. I

guess you can say the night went downhill from that moment.

We ran full speed up the hill to the pool and threw ourselves against the building in hopes that we could catch our breath and hide from

I could hear a scanner getting closer to me. Then the beam from a flashlight fell directly on my face. In that moment of knowing I had been caught, a million thoughts were running through my mind. What would he ask me and would I lie?

any more cars that could have possibly seen us running in our swim gear. The next thing we knew, a black car was pulling up next to us. We thought it was our friend Riley. But just after this sense of relief, the guys in the car started yelling something in Spanish at us. We were all creeped out so we just stood next to the building as still as statues. The car sped away which is what you could say *we* did next. We ran toward the back of the parking lot, which is totally the opposite direction of the pool. We had become so worried about hiding from anyone that had seen us, that breaking into the pool was the last thing on our minds. Once we reached

the western most part of the lot, we jumped into a small grove of trees and decided that we would hide out there and call for someone to pick us up. The only person we could think to call was none other than Tyler Johnson. Tyler was not only the guy I had been trying to hook up with all summer, but he was also the guy that had been leading me on over and over again. Anyway, he was our last resort.

I dialed the number and told him that he needed to come and get us at that very second because there was no way we were going swimming. Just as I hung up the phone with him, we saw flashing lights at the bottom of the hill that the pool sat on. We thought for sure that the cops were after us and their master plan was to sit at the bottom of the hill and wait for us to come out of our hiding spot. Only seconds later

Tyler called back and informed us of the cop situation but that they had someone pulled over, so he could not pull into the parking lot. I told him that we would just wait in the grove and he should come whenever the coast was clear.

Finally the lights disappeared. There was only one way out of the grove and that involved us running back across the parking lot toward the pool. It was my brilliant decision to call Tyler and tell him to come back and that we would be waiting by the entrance of the pool. I guess that Kelsey and Kendra have enough trust invested in me to think that my idea would work and even though we wouldn't end up going swimming that night, at least we would make it out of there alive.

We had just reached the fence surrounding the pool and were quietly standing there, waiting for our ride. From where we were positioned, I was the only one who could see the road. I saw that there was a cop slowly making his way past the pool and, just as he reached the driveway, he flipped off his headlights. I knew what was happening. I turned, swore, and started running away from the pool toward the baseball diamond that sat just to the south of the fence. Kendra and Kelsey turned and watched me run and they might have yelled something at me, but when they saw the look on my face, they knew it was in their best interest to follow me. I'm not quite sure how Kelsey got ahead of me, but she was the first one to reach the hill. She started out running down it, but by the time she got to the bottom, she was sliding on her butt. I decided that sliding down would be the fastest way, so I jumped into my best softball slide and away I went. Kendra was right behind me. Kelsey made it to the bottom and took off running. I wasn't sure how close the cops were, so I decided to hide under the closest object to me: the bleachers. Kendra stopped beside me and all I remember saying to her was, "Are you staying here?!" Her response was one that I will never forget. Out of breath and in a state of

panic, the only words that seemed to make it to her mouth that night were, "Fuck no!!" and away she ran.

My two best friends had abandoned me, so I thought. I looked up to see if I could see where they had gone, and to my relief they were hiding behind a pop machine that was only ten feet from my *very* visible hiding spot. I lay on the rocks under the bleachers that night, my heart pounding so hard that I thought it was going to pop right out of my chest. I thought for sure we were going to make it out of there because I could slightly see the cop car circling the parking lot above. The next thing I knew I could hear a scanner getting closer to me. Then the beam from a flashlight fell directly on my face. In that moment of knowing I had been caught, a million thoughts were running through my mind. What would he ask me and would I lie?

"Get up!!" is the next thing I heard. I was scared to death as I made it to my feet. I felt a little foolish as the cop asked me what I was doing and all I said was, "Nothing." Apparently I had been doing *something* because it was midnight and I was hiding under bleachers in my swimming suit and towel. He asked who else was with me but the last thing I was going to do was rat out my friends, so I told him I was alone. Well, that lie didn't work because just as I said "No-one," another cop car pulled up and found my two friends curled up behind a vending machine. Luckily it was Officer Schaefer who stepped out of that car, a family friend of all three of us girls. A sense of relief came across all of us as he sat on the hood of his car laughing at us that night. On the other hand, the cop who first found me continued searching the baseball diamond in hopes of finding more people. Officer Schaefer told the other cop he could go, and then offered us a ride to Kelsey's car. We took him up on his offer, because none of us had ever ridden in a cop car before.

That night was one surprise after

another. It was a night that will forever remain humorous yet dreadful in my mind. Kelsey, Kendra, and I continue to sarcastically ask each other, when we are bored, if we want to go break into the pool. The response is always a laugh and no real answer. Maybe someday, sometime, we will make it *over* that fence again. But until that day comes, I think I will just pay to go swimming.

Starving on God

by Jennifer Zavala

University of Northern Iowa—Spring 2010

The light through the window was gray. I could see the dust specks swirling in the pale morning. The air was stale to match the bitter taste of morning breath. It was her screeching that woke me, compared to her usual sobbing. I stumbled over the clutter as I went down the stairs, to see her face bright red in an angry passion as she yelled into the phone. Her hair was a yellow puff of frizzy curls, and her pale, sea green eyes were blood-shot. She still wore her red and white Christmas robe, though it was midday, in the middle of summer. I can't remember the words she said. I only remember the wretched sound of her voice. You always know it's bad when a woman is yelling so fiercely, her voice begins to sound like a broken, raspy, man's voice.

By this time, I wasn't unaccustomed to her raising her voice, but now she didn't sound like my mother. She sounded like a beast. Her character at that moment reminded me of an angry mother raccoon I saw once when I was running, which growled at me as it crouched in front of its brood. Everything about my mother's appearance was animal now, excluding the clothes on her back and the phone in her hand. I think it was the gas and electric company on the line, but I can't remember for sure. I could never stand to see her like that, so I went back up the stairs.

It had happened slowly. First to go was the phone, then the gas and electric, the water and trash, and finally the rent. She couldn't pay those things- and neither could we. I was thirteen years old, and my brother was eleven. I hear people say all the time, "Why should we have to work, while some lazy person sits

around and gets paid for it?" That just makes me smile now.

These were the days when my brother would curl up on the couch at night, because he was afraid to sleep in his room. He'd sleep till three in the afternoon, with his mouth hung open, and his face peaceful with the expression of those baby angels you see painted. His dark mess of quarter inch ringlets formed a halo

around his head. When he woke up, he always rubbed his face, and looked around like he was confused or lost. I'd sit by him in the morning and wait. The house was always empty without him. The dark green carpet whispered our poverty back to us with its white lint and musty reeking. It was a hopeless place.

As things were shut off, discontinued, I found that the heat was something I could stand, without the air conditioning, and missing out on social events, because we didn't have a phone, didn't bother me much. It wasn't till the food in the fridge was spoiled, and we couldn't heat the canned food because the gas and electric was shut off, that I started to worry. Not so much for my mother- she could last awhile before actually starving to death- but for my brother. He was such a skinny little thing already, and it killed me when he looked up, and asked what was for supper. I hated having nothing to give.

Then we lost the water and trash- the house was accumulating garbage, and now we couldn't even shower. We couldn't drink water to help satisfy the thirst or fill the hunger. I remember my mom asking relatives, and neighbors for money, so she could call back the places where she put in applications. I could

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hear it in their voices and see it in their eyes- “What is she asking for? Is she really asking me for money?” They looked disgusted. I remember her crying into the phone that it wasn’t fair that we had to live like this. And it wasn’t fair. But it was her fault.

When the landlord decided to evict us, she screamed at him, and tried to chase him down. I had to hold her back and tell her it wasn’t his fault that we couldn’t pay rent, but she went on raving. He looked at me with dark, tired eyes under thick, gray eyebrows, and I understood, but it couldn’t make me forgive him. I knew that he was apologizing in a way, telling me he was sorry that my mother was mad, but he needed to get by too. But I didn’t want apologies, I wanted freedom from the constant fear that something bad, something terrible was going to happen to us.

Her ravings gave me hope- I thought that maybe she would be institutionalized and my brother and I would be able to go to a safe place- but no such thing happened. I walked up the stairs trying to escape, and I saw my brother sprawled out on his bed crying, and he looked up at me and said, “What’s happening to her?” I knew that I was like a statue of knowledge for him. I’m sure I still am. But none of my mother’s insane ravings could equal the pain I felt when he asked me the simplest question and told him I didn’t know. I was afraid of letting him see me weak, because I was supposed to be strong enough for us all, so I rushed into my room and crushed a pillow to my face hoping to stifle the irresistible sobs. I wouldn’t let my hopelessness poison his youth like my mother had poisoned mine. I couldn’t let them know that it was getting to me too. I still remember the words I tacked up to my bulletin board that day, “And it breaks my heart when they fall apart and I have nothing to give to lessen the pain.”

It was a horrible thing for me to see him cry. I’d had no memory of ever seeing him cry before, even we were young. When bad things happened to him, he wasn’t the one to cry, I was the one to cry. He’d trip and cut his leg, and

I’d see he was hurt and start wailing like I was on fire until one of my older brothers came to help. I cried for him when we were young, because I was weak and back then it was okay. I had my older brothers to be strong for me, the day they left it all changed and I had to be the strongest. My mother could never be strong enough for us. She couldn’t even be strong enough for herself. She was born a weak thing, and has been a weak thing ever since. She wasn’t physically weak, but emotionally weak-weak and as brittle as a frozen, hair thin, twig in the winter.

We went on like that for most of the summer that year. I walked to the park every day to drink from the water fountain and wash my face and hands in the public bathroom. I took my brother with me. He knew it was the only way. I went to the river every day and sat in the water to keep myself cool, and get my mind off the hunger. Every night when I got home I found my mother crying in her room, and my brother lying on his bed. There were times, I would worry that he was dead, and I was tempted to shake him to make sure he was alive. But I knew I couldn’t do that, I didn’t want to think that it was a possibility. I hated the thought that I even had to think it could be. He was my baby brother, and the situation felt like it was my fault. For that it would haunt me forever.

I don’t remember how we ate. I don’t remember how we made it. But I remember after she finished complaining about how horrible her life was, she would say that god would save us. She’d say that god would find a way to get us out of that terrible mess, because he loved us. So maybe I was ungrateful when I turned angry, and said that god would not save us, even if he did exist. She came to my room and told me she was sorry that she let me lose faith, but in truth I’d never had it. God had been a light in the distance kind of hope to me, and when I saw my brother cry, god burned out and died. In my mind, if he existed then he *let* us suffer like that. He *let* my heart be broken. If god existed, I hated him for it.

Over the next few years similar events happened, but by then I was old enough to have a job, which I always kept to make sure I'd have money for us. When it did happen, I'd take my brother to my friends' house all day where there was electricity, and I bought us food. When he needed something for school, I bought it, because she wouldn't, and she said it was my responsibility anyways since I was old enough. I didn't care, because I didn't want to belong to her anymore. I didn't want either of us to belong to her. She wasn't a safe place.

When I go back to that house the memories come back like demons tugging on my brain. I can't stand to be there too long, the depression and hopelessness hang like an invisible curtain, and it traps me. I worry for my brother, being there alone with her. I hope that he gets out soon enough so she can't taint him with her insufferable neediness. Whenever I'm there I'm reminded, only the weak can believe that god will take care of them, only the desperate fall so low that when things get better they throw the blame on some loving deity. I suppose they never consider the fall.

Baptized Under Fire

by Nathan Johnston
Wartburg College—Fall 2005

“Here she comes,” said Greg. I turned to follow his gaze and saw what we had been waiting but not hoping for: the bushfire. As it rushed up our side of the steep valley, smoke filled my nostrils and blinded me. The team took up their positions and got ready. This is what we had trained for all those afternoons and weekend. I felt a tap on my back and turned around to see someone—I couldn’t tell who as their face was covered with a wet rag, goggles, and a helmet—giving me the thumbs up and a big grin. Good luck is what he was saying, and luck is what I was going to need. Bushfires are very dangerous and, each year, homes are lost and people die. That’s just life where I live.

I live in a relatively large town in New South Wales, Australia. My house actually backs onto bush land that goes on for kilometers and, as such, bushfires are something I have grown up with. My home town has been ravaged by fire five times in the last ten years. In 1992, twelve houses were burnt to the ground in a nearby town. Then again in 1993, fifteen houses were destroyed. After the 1993 fires, the government ordered the local fire stations to do regular backburning, which is basically a small, purposely lit, controllable fire used to burn away all the undergrowth which fuels a bushfire. The idea is that if this is done regularly, the fires, when they do come, will have less fuel to burn which means a smaller fire. The problem is that this doesn’t help with crown fires—fires that

burn from tree top to tree top—which is mainly what happens in the area I live. To do the back burning, you need the right weather conditions: no rain in the last week, not too hot, low humidity, and no wind. The chances of all these things happening at once are very slim. The area around my home has only been back burnt once, in 1994.

When the 1995 bushfires arrived, the undergrowth had had a whole year to regrow.

The results were disastrous. The 1993 fires were bad, but the fires of 1995 shall be remembered for a long time. They were the worst fires to hit the area ever, and over twenty homes were lost, some of them just streets from my house. Six people died as a result of the actual fire or from falling branches over the next week. It wasn’t just homes or lives that were lost, businesses and local facilities were also destroyed. Thankfully, due to the direction the wind was blowing, my street didn’t suffer any major damage—only a few holes burnt into our trampoline by flying embers.

Some of my friends weren’t so lucky. One friend had his garage burnt, another had the side of his house singed, and one even had his swimming pool damaged on the day his sister was going to have a pool party for her birthday.

The government promised to step up the back burning and train more fire fighters, but my street had had enough. During each fire, we had been forced to leave our homes and move to

I went outside to meet the rest of the team and was hit by the smell of smoke the instant I opened the door. I looked up and could see a faint red glow, and more and more smoke began to fill the sky. I knew the fire was getting close.

safety because we weren't trained, so we decided to take action. My dad, Greg next door, and John across the road did some research and discovered that the New South Wales Fire Brigade has a program called CFU, Community Fire Unit. CFU is a program where a group of local residents are given the equipment and training they need to defend their homes from bushfire. It was decided that the street would join the CFU program and be ready for the next fires.

Over the next three years, I watched my neighbors train and prepare for fires. I was unable to join since the required age to be a member is eighteen, and I was only fifteen. They got very good at the training, considering they were thirty-five years old or older and only trained when they had the time. They weren't trained professionals, but boy were they good. Watching them train on a Sunday afternoon is one of my fondest teenage memories and now, thinking back on it, they were heroes to me. I wanted to be just like them and I couldn't wait until I turned eighteen.

In 1997, fires came to town again. They weren't near as bad as 1995, but once again, homes were lost and lives taken. The only good to come out of the 1997 fires was that the CFU team had a chance to test their training. Luckily the wind was in our favor once again so it wasn't too bad, but property would have been damaged, maybe even a home destroyed if not for the CFU team, now local heroes. The newspapers ran stories on them for weeks and they were even invited to march with the firefighters in a thank-you parade a few weeks later. A few dedicated neighbors showed what a CFU team could do.

Next thing you know, CFU teams were popping up everywhere. My street was even asked to be in a video to help promote CFU's and show new teams what to do and how it's done. State-wide competitions were held for CFU teams and Landy Close, my street's name, were state champions for three years running. I

remember asking my dad what it was like fighting the fires and if he was scared. "Son," he said, "It was one of the most amazing things I have ever done. I was able to protect my home and my family and that's not a thing every man can say."

"But Dad, were you afraid?" I asked.

"There are some things a man and his son should never talk about. This is one of those things."

As you could imagine, when I turned eighteen in September of 2002, and was finally able to join the team, I was a little nervous. Since I had been watching for years and had known most of the members as friends since I was young, I had no trouble fitting in. I remember lying in bed after my first training session as a member thinking how long it would be until I had the chance to fight my first fire. Little did I know that it was only a matter of months away.

November is the start of the fire season, but the first fires didn't start until December 10, 2002, in another part of Sydney. But once they start, we know it's only a matter of time before they hit us. On the sixteenth, a fire started approximately forty kilometers away, and we were put on standby. For two nights, we took turns taking keeping an eye out for smoke on the horizon or even the flickering of a flame reflected into the sky. But on the third night it seemed like the wind had changed and the fire was blowing back on itself and would be out very soon, maybe even before morning. It looked like we were going to get lucky and miss the fire. And this was a bad one. Not many homes or lives were lost, but hundreds of hectares of bush land burnt. When I went to sleep that night after my watch was up, I had the feeling I would have to wait until next year for a chance to prove myself to the team.

I was awoken at nine the next morning by my mum who told me that, during the night, the wind changed and we were expecting the fire within the next two hours. She and my sister

were going to my grandparent's place a few suburbs away where it was safe. It was just Dad and me left behind to protect our home. I went outside to meet the rest of the team and was hit by the smell of smoke the instant I opened the door. I looked up and could see a faint red glow, and more and more smoke began to fill the sky. I knew the fire was getting close. We had a meeting to organize what everyone would be doing. I, as the newest and least experienced, was given a position out of the main front of the fire. We hosed down the surrounding bush every half an hour and waited.

When the fire finally came over the hill and started down the valley, I couldn't help but have a feeling of sadness. I had grown up playing in this bush, making forts, playing explorers and seeing native animals, and now it was burning in front of me. I remember watching T.V. later and seeing all the injured, homeless animals wandering the streets covered in ash and charcoal. It was truly a terrible sight. That wasn't the only feeling I was having. I was excited, yet terrified and the same time—excited to fight my first bushfire, but scared because so much could go wrong. What if I forgot to do something? What if the wind picked up at the wrong time? What if, because of a mistake made by me, a home was destroyed? Or worse, someone lost their life? These were the thoughts going through my mind as I made my way to my position, double checked all the equipment, and made sure that there was water in my hose ready to go when it was needed.

The fire arrive a lot faster than I expected. It came roaring up the valley towards us. I was terrified, but as I looked around at how calm everyone else was, I found comfort. I saw the fire reach the guys on the main front, where my dad was. Their hoses came on and the fight began. The fire slowly made its way around to where I was, and from the moment when I first turned my hose on, things were a blur. Adrenaline kicked in and all I had time to do was my job—no time for thinking, just

reacting. There are a few moments that I do remember, though: jumping a five-foot fence in uniform carrying a soaked hose to put out a fire on my neighbor's roof, and getting too close and a team mate having to pull me back. I was very lucky as a few minutes later a tree fell down where I had been standing. At another point I remember helping a fellow member get up after they had tripped then hurrying to where help was needed.

The whole incident lasted about two hours. As we sat around with a cold beer in our hands afterwards, we reflected on what had just happened. No one was seriously hurt, just Ken with a sprained ankle. The worst damage done to any house was a small burn on the roof. All my house got was a burnt fence, which is very lucky, as my home was in line with the main front. We had done it. We had protected our homes.

The fire was one of the most terrifying, exciting and important days in my life. I learned that, when put under pressure, I won't freeze up. I shared a special experience with those men that day, something I will never forget. They were once my childhood heroes and now I was one of them—baptized under fire.

Memory

by Chris King

Hawkeye Community College—Fall 2003

It's so hot. I'm watching Scooby Doo with my older brother Adam. I'm only two years old and he is four. He is eating a bag of M&Ms, taunting me with them but not giving me any. I start to get mad at him when I hear a thundering crash come from the back room of our trailer. I'm getting scared when I look over at Adam and he stands up, dropping the multi-colored candies all over

the floor. I watch him walk across the brown shag carpeting that stretches as far as my young eyes can see. Another crash. This one seems louder and seems to shake the entire contents of our two-bedroom trailer. I hear a scream follow this time so I run up behind Adam. I put my hands around him and I feel him shaking. We start walking towards the kitchen table. A door slams into the wall as it is swung open. I jump at the sound. Adam and I dash back into the living room out of fear.

My mom is running down the hall carrying my baby brother, Corey, who is about six months old. She is wearing a blue tank top that is so covered in blood it could have been mistaken for red, and a pair of cut-off jean shorts. Corey, held tightly against his breast, is crying. He is wearing only a diaper. I look into my mom's eyes to see the tears of pain trying to escape the blackness that surrounds them. Right as she entered the kitchen from the narrow hallway, I see her tumble, as if pushed. As she descends to the ground, I see my father standing over top of her. The hate is leaking out of his mouth as he screams, slamming his right foot into my mom's stomach. I hear all of her breath

escape her lungs as he thrusts his brown, concrete-stained work boots into her again. Chills bolt up my spine. Adam's grip tightens around me as I start to cry and scream out in fear for my mother and baby brother. I am terrified. I don't understand what I am seeing. I hear horrific screams echoing in my head, deep in my brain. I cover my ears as I watch my mom

climb off the floor using a white chair sitting in front of the round white kitchen table. I watch him stand over top of her in his oil-covered John Deere work shirt. Sweat is rushing off his forehead. As he starts to yell, my mom picks Corey off the floor and I watch her limping toward Adam and me. My father grabs my mom by her left shoulder and spins her around. He towers over her while she is screaming, "Let me put him down. Please, please let me put him down!" His strong right hand came smashing down across her

face. I watch her fall against the pantry door. Screaming for him to stop, Adam started to walk closer to them, tears erupting from his eyes. I wrap my hands around his waist, not wanting him to leave my side. I watch my mom stand there in a daze with her eyes closed. He swings his close-fisted right hand again, striking her in the already swollen eye. Her body hits the floor like a boulder. She still has Corey tucked away in her arms, covered in my mom's blood. His ear-piercing screams cut through my heart. I want to help him so badly, but I'm so stiff. I can't move. I can't make a sound. My father rips Corey from my mom's arm, and throws him

I look at my baby brother and he is limp in Adam's arms. Adam is yelling and screaming for Corey to wake up. I hear another roaring line of hatred spew from my father's throat.

to the ground like a discarded old toy. Watching this makes all the life leap from my body. This is all so unreal. Adam runs over to Corey and grabs him. Adam is wiping the blood from Corey's face as he carries him back to our dark corner. I look at my baby brother and he is limp in Adam's arms. Adam is yelling and screaming for Corey to wake up. I hear another roaring line of hatred spew from my father's throat. I quickly turn my attention to him. I feel numb as I see him picking my mom up by her neck and slamming her into the pantry door. Again and again, he shakes her, slamming her body into the door, harder and harder each time. He tosses my mom into the kitchen table and chairs. The table and a couple of chairs get knocked over. My mom is lying on the floor in the pile. Then he pounces on top of her. He slaps her a couple of times as if trying to wake her. Right as he grips her throat with his big hands, I begin to hear sirens over top of his beer-soaked profanities and Adam's cries. The door bursts open when five police officers rush to my father. They put him in a headlock and take his arms behind his back. They slam him hard to the ground about five feet from my brothers and me. His cold heartless eyes seer into my soul as if he wants to kill me. Just then, even more officers walk into the house and head straight for us. There are people everywhere. I'm so scared and nervous. There are people huddled over my mom. A tall, dark-haired man walks over to take Corey, but as he reaches for him, Adam only tightens his arms around Corey's waist. Two other officers pick up Adam and me and take us outside. We stand outside for an eternity, when a woman who lived a couple of trailers down runs up to us. Hugging us and crying, she asks if we are okay. Then the door opens again, and my father is walking out with his head upright, eyes looking very calm with no remorse or decency. A great feeling of confusion overwhelms me. I feel so lost, so alone, so betrayed as I watch him step down into that cop car. The rest of that evening just fades away, deep into my mind.

Crashing into Faith

by Anna Javellana
Wartburg College—Fall 2006

He threw open the passenger door and defiantly slammed it shut. I didn't care. I wasn't going after him this time.

"Just let him pout and piss for a few days," I reassured myself. He'd get over it. He couldn't tell me who I could and could not hang out with. We had already passed the high school shit. Or had we?

But then I saw it: Out of the five he had to choose from, he chose the middle finger. He raised it high and once he was certain I saw it, he went inside with the thunderous slam of another door.

"Mature. Real mature."

Yep. We definitely hadn't passed over the maturity level of two high school lovebirds. I needed to breathe. The heat of the argument still hot on my forehead, I rolled down the window. The cold winter air filled my lungs but I still couldn't shake the heat. The ride home gave me nothing to do except replay the events over in my head. I could not handle Ryan anymore: His reluctance to trust, his relentless stubbornness, his infatuation with football, his obsession with video games, but most of all, his lack of faith. There had to be at least one guy out there who was a strong Christian. I wanted to feel like I had somebody who loved Christ as much as I did. I guess I would have simply taken somebody who wasn't afraid to step into a church.

This isn't for me, I decided. Sure, a year and a half must have meant something to me, but my certainty was waning. I loved Ryan. I would say that Ryan loved me back. But still, it wasn't enough... Our relationship lacked something and I could no longer ignore the hole that

needed to be filled. My heart hurt, but my anger consumed me the most.

Act like an adult? Talk things out? Compromise? Nah. Instead, I decided to surrender to my childish instincts. And so I did what any other naïve, obstinate teenage girl would do.

I sought revenge.

"Brett? Yeah...this is Anna. I would love to hang out with you tomorrow night...No, don't worry about it. He's out of the picture for a while... Alright, see ya tomorrow."

I arrived home with a guilty sense of satisfaction with myself. I was out to prove a point and I blocked away any remorse I should have felt at the time. Ryan would see it eventually: I wasn't going to stick around forever.

The next night, I took my sweet time getting ready. I perfected each strand of hair, separated each eyelash, and made sure I color coordinated correctly. I wanted to look good, but the girly-girl thing was tedious and boring. In my attempt to be "fashionably late," I gave up getting ready and resorted to sitting in front of the television.

Cory was just about to kiss Topanga

I could not handle Ryan anymore: ... his infatuation with football, his obsession with video games, but most of all, his lack of faith. There had to be at least one guy out there who was a strong Christian. I wanted to feel like I had somebody who loved Christ as much as I did.

when the piercing ring of my cell phone interrupted my evening sitcom. The obnoxious Latin ring warned me it was Ryan. I debated whether or not I wanted to talk to him. I was split:

The angel on my right shoulder kept telling me what a horrible girlfriend I made and how I needed to kiss and make up. Meanwhile, the devil on my left shoulder said, “If you don’t answer, it’s not like you’re lying.”

Damn that devil.

I ignored the call and left for Brian’s house. When I pulled up everybody was already waiting outside. I breathed in two big deep breaths, trying to calm down. Why was I anxious? “It’s not like it’s a date or anything,” I reminded myself. After all, I was still Ryan’s girlfriend.

“We’re hungry. Let’s go to Mickey D’s,” Brett said. Honestly, talk about impatience. He could have at least started with a “Hey, how ya doin’?” Instead, we piled into the car and made our journey to the closest McDonald’s.

And from there we began the car ride from hell. We lived in a mediocre-sized town in Iowa which normally didn’t leave us too many options of fun things to do. We made our own fun.

The rest of the night consisted of car chases, water balloons and fireworks. Once we ran out of supplies, we had to get a little creative. We thought, why not piss off all of Hudson Road? And so, we drove down Hudson going no more than 15 miles an hour until traffic was backed up for a good five blocks. Later on, we left our mark on a few houses of kids we hated and said hello to the kids we loved. We played hide-and-go seek in Wal-Mart and even a little game of tag. Memories of my childhood came streaming back to me.

I had to be the worst girlfriend ever. Nevertheless, I was having fun and every time that Latin ringtone went off, I made good use of the silence button. That night I found a different

side of me I never knew I had: I did crazy, random things and best of all, I laughed... a lot. I laughed so hard that it hurt and my laughs were so true that eventually my eyes watered. I played like a kid again and for the first time, I really didn’t care what others thought of me.

Soon enough, we grew tired of our night on the town and decided to turn in. Somebody suggested that we all watch a movie and so we piled back into our cars. I was walking over to Matt’s truck when Brett grabbed my arm.

“Anna, come ride with me,” he invited.

Oh boy. Finally, the guilt started to set in.

“Yeah, sure thing! Poage, why don’t you ride with us?” Good save, Anna. Poage would make for some good comic relief and surely he would fill any awkward silence.

And sure enough, Poage joked and made fun of people, saving me from having to start a conversation. I enjoyed his company and spent the majority of the ride listening to what should have been a stand-up comedy session. He was in the midst of mocking our English teacher when suddenly, the atmosphere turned cold.

“Oh, FUCK!” Brett yanked the wheel and I looked out my window. Brett was in the passing lane going far too fast. I looked out of my window and saw Matt, the driver of the other car, right next to me. I saw the panic and fear in his pale face.

And that was it. Our car tumbled into the ditch as if it were a Hot Wheels play car. My heart nearly burst out of my chest, I didn’t know it could beat so fast. I clenched my seatbelt, squeezed my eyes shut, and prayed for mercy.

Except for the sound of the car colliding with the solid rock ahead of us, the world was muted. Each hit was louder and more surreal than the one before it.

Once.

“This isn’t happening.”

Twice.

“I’m going to wake up now.”

Three times.

“Make it stop!!”

Four times.

“I’m done for.”

On the fifth roll, the car teetered itself on its wheels. It stood there suspended, as if it couldn’t decide whether it wanted to land right side up or on its side.

“Oh *please*, God.”

And with a loud screech, the car flipped back into its proper position. I kept my eyes closed. I couldn’t feel anything. Nothing at all... not even my racing heart.

“Am I dead?” I opened my eyes and saw blackness, “Oh my God. I’m dead.”

But then everything came into focus and I could feel my leg. The pain was sharp and real. I most assuredly was not dead. I looked over at Brett. His face colored deep red in blood, he screamed all the curse words he knew and pounded furiously on the steering wheel. I was screaming, too, but I cried in pain. Brian and Matt ran down from the top of the hill where we had crashed. I looked at my leg. The plastic siding from the door trapped my foot. I yelled and begged them to open the door as I fumbled around for my phone. Once I found it, I hit my parents on speed dial. I didn’t even wait to find out who answered the phone I just started talking and screaming and crying. The boys finally pried open the door and my foot was set free. They pulled me out of the car and went over to help Brett and Poage as I dialed 911.

The rest of the night was a blur. From the ambulance, to the cops, to the tow truck, the area was a huge disaster. I spent most of my time in the ambulance with Brett. I looked at his face in horror. It seemed so unreal, as if I had stepped into a movie scene. This was always one of those things I never thought would happen to me. To me, my life was on standby and I felt I was simply watching the night unfold from afar. Looking at Brett, I couldn’t help but cry. I couldn’t hug him or hold him out of fear that I might brush the glass shards embedded in

his face. I held his hand and let my tears wash the blood off of my own face.

“Anna, would you mind calling my parents for me? I don’t think I can,” Brett whispered.

“Of course. I’ll just tell them to meet us at the hospital,” and I reached for my phone.

No answer.

Suddenly, I remembered how I had called my own parents earlier. Surely they should have been there by that time.

“Where the hell are they? I called them over an hour ago,” I worried aloud.

I walked outside to look around. By this time, the road was blocked off and more police cars and the fire truck had arrived. I couldn’t believe we caused this big of a ruckus. I didn’t see my parents and was about to step back into the ambulance when I heard somebody call my name.

I looked at the top of the hill and there stood Ryan.

I spent the next day at home. I didn’t feel like doing anything. I was tired and exhausted, but nightmares kept me from getting any decent sleep. I thought it would wear off, but it didn’t. That night, I turned on the shower. In my ears, the falling water sounded like breaking glass. I immediately turned it off and sat on the toilet, crying.

“Is this what it’s like to go insane?”

I pictured myself in an insane asylum. No. I would not let this get the best of me. I decided that regardless of the rumors I would face, I was going to school tomorrow. No way was I going to be put in a room with padded walls: I was going to school.

Later that night, Ryan offered to drive me to school in the morning. Nice offer, but I was a big girl and I didn’t need a chauffeur. We agreed that we’d meet for breakfast instead.

Morning came and I was still disgusting due to my lack of shower. I got in my car and drove up the street to our local Panera.

“See,” I told myself, “I’m totally fine. I just drove and nothing happened.”

Breakfast was nice. Ryan and I never mentioned our argument on Friday night or the crash on Saturday. In fact, it was like the weekend never happened. Too bad all arguments couldn’t be solved like that... life would have been so much easier.

We finished eating and I took off first for school, Ryan following me. I didn’t even get but one block away before a car pulled out in front of me and cut me off. Instead of simply slowing down and yielding, I slammed on the brakes and starting crying.

Yep. I had lost my marbles.

I turned to go home and Ryan followed. I ran into my house and sat on the kitchen floor bawling. I hoped if I got into my house before Ryan had the chance to get out of his car, he would just go to school. Instead, he came in and sat in the corner with me. He picked me up and rocked me like a baby. He let me cry and didn’t say a word.

I told him I thought I was going insane. He laughed at me and I sobbed harder.

“Ryan, I’m being completely serious!” and I dug my face back into his sweatshirt to blow my nose.

“Shhh,” he kept saying. Over and over again. He rocked me and “shhhh-ed” me until at last, the water works ceased to snuffles and a runny nose. My trembling hands and shoulders finally relaxed and somehow, I felt that Ryan might possibly be the best friend I ever had. I let the tears stream down my face, each one reminding me that I was still alive.

I sat there, completely enclosed in his arms. For the first time in days, I thought I might be able to fall asleep. Back and forth. Back and forth. Just like a little child, I sat with my arms closed tightly around his neck. He stopped rocking me and took my face in his hand, forcing me to look him in his eyes.

I felt the warmth of more tears streaming down my face, but I didn’t make a sound. I

didn’t want to leave him. Not at all.

“If it means anything to you, I’ve started praying.”

One Milk Too Far

by Joe Kneip
Wartburg College—Fall 2006

The bell rang. I, like everyone else, was thankful to be moving out of the stifling gymnasium heat. We shuffled down the hall, shoulder to shoulder, like cows moving towards their troughs. The few whose hunger was great rushed ahead and claimed first in the lunch line. As I neared the lunch room, a constant buzz of chatter began to fill my ears accompanied by the smell of the day's lunch, chicken strips. Little did I know, I would make today's lunch one to remember.

I put my books on the wooden shelves and fell into line. Ahead of me, two of my buddies, Chris Riggs and Patrick Heckroth, sparked up a conversation on the association of our school's lunch with chicken. It seemed as though we had some kind of chicken product at least two to three times a week. That many chicken lunches begins to wear on a person. We took our trays and filled them with fruits and vegetables that were displayed in stainless steel pans. We punched in our ID numbers and moved in among the noisy tables of underclassmen.

The seniors had their designated table in the back, far corner of the lunch room. We sat down. All together there were about six of us who sat at this table. We dug into our lunches with small-talk stuck in between the bites of chicken strips. As I neared the end of my lunch, I began thinking of a story I had been told yesterday by a friend. During his lunch, a couple of football players had a milk-chugging contest. One guy drank ten milks and the other eight. I looked around at our lunch table; it was lacking excitement like every other day. I felt the need to break the monotony.

"How many milks do you guys think I can drink?" I asked jokingly. The heads turned. "Are you serious?" they asked. I smiled and

rose to my feet trying to figure out if I had enough room in my stomach to size up to the challenge I had just taken upon myself. I went and dumped my tray and hopped into line to buy my milk. I decided to buy only six milks to begin with which would give me a total of eight on top of the two I had already drank with my lunch. As I returned to the table, I could already see the anticipation was building. My buddies were laughing and shouting words of encouragement as I sat down.

I took a seat at the end of my table and set down the milks before me. I grabbed my first victim, gave a cheer to the fellows, and drank it down. The milk went down as easy as slicing through butter; all the time I was thinking, "10 milks, no problem." By the end of the fifth milk, my buddies had managed to turn this into some kind of sporting event. The attention of half the lunch room was looking on in interest. At the table to the left of me sat Eric, a foreign exchange student from Germany, his head bobbing up and down in laughter. "That guy must think I'm an idiot," I thought.

By the end of the seventh milk, the table of juniors directly behind me had migrated in a huddle around our table. "Great, a fan club" I thought. Patrick and Dan, two of my friends, were attracting most of the attention to our table, yelling "seven milks down," and "he's going to break the record." By this time, my brain was registering all the milk I had just drank. Wow! I was full. No, I wasn't just full; I was bloated. I shook up the last milk to distribute the chocolate evenly throughout the milk and then drank it. A crowd of cheers went up with fists pumped in victory.

I sat there, trying to let my stomach digest some of the milk. It felt as though my stomach was a bottle filled to the brim, and it

was about ready to overflow back into my mouth. As I was about to get up and leave, another carton of milk came dancing onto our table. “Oh no,” I thought.

There was no way in hell I was going to drink that milk; the crowd felt differently. “One more!” they shouted. I had already reached my limit. I looked around me again. Sure enough, the teachers were watching now. I hadn’t asked for all this attention. All I really had wanted was to have a little fun at lunch with my friends. Now, it felt as though I was on a stage with a spotlight on me. This feeling left me no option but to drink the milk. I glanced down at the table. Shouts of “you got this man,” “don’t wuss out now,” and “it’s you verses the world,” rang in my ears. I gripped the warm milk and reluctantly drank it very, very slowly. The feeling that came next was not at all pleasant.

“I’m going to puke,” I said with a contorted face. With that, everyone was up and gone. I moved toward the commons area very slowly, not wanting to disturb the milk settled in my stomach. As I passed the book case, Dan grabbed me by the shoulders and, to congratulate me, gave me a good shake. My mouth filled with vomit.

I knew there was no way I was going to make it to the bathroom. My next best option was the open side door straight ahead. I zipped through the crowd, out the side door, and launched nine milks worth of puke all over the sidewalk. It was 100% chocolate milk with the exception of a few stray bites of carrot. Needless to say, I felt horrible sitting through my next period of math.

Word spread quickly about the event, and soon everyone knew what I had done. A

pattern of reactions began to appear when I walked down the hall. The girls gave me disgusting looks in the hall while the guys gave me high fives. One person who was unaware of my accident was our vice principle. I thought it

wise of me to inform Mr. Bach about the accident, and soon a janitor came and cleaned it up. Everyone lined up for lunch got to watch the janitor mopping up my vomit out on the sunny sidewalk. It was not at all appetizing.

Looking back on this event makes me smile every time. This is my senior year in high school; I have to get in some good laughs before I graduate. Sometimes you have to say “What the hell, why not?” That’s exactly what I thought when I drank those

nine milks. It doesn’t bother me that people know I drank nine milks and then threw them up all over the sidewalk. You can’t live your life wondering what other people think of you. A week ago I was walking to my car when I was asked by a peer, “Hey, are you the guy that drank all the milk and threw up all over the sidewalk?”

“Yes I am,” I said. “You’re absolutely right.”

I zipped through the crowd, out the side door, and launched nine milks worth of puke all over the sidewalk. It was 100% chocolate milk with the exception of a few stray bites of carrot.
