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# Everest

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EVEREST

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

Rebecca Seaman

The Honors College

Midway Honors Scholars Program

East Tennessee State University

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## Introduction

At the beginning of my junior year, I was convinced I already knew what I would focus on when writing my honors thesis. I planned to write and edit as much of a dystopian novel as my faculty advisor would allow. For years I had been planning to do something in that genre of fiction, and I was excited to have the chance to finally tackle the challenge. However, my original plan and the subsequent reality have differed a great deal. Instead of writing a section of a dystopian novel, I have elected to write two short stories based much more in my own reality.

It was obvious when I began to meet with possible advisors that I would be unable to write what I had planned. The time constraint as well as the maximum number of pages allowed would have made it impossible to do a good job with a novel. This discovery was a setback, but, through creative writing courses I was taking, I realized the short story could be the solution I was looking for. I took Creative Writing I and II as well as the Creative Writing Capstone from Dr. Baumgartner. I also took a Special Topics course from Dr. Graves, which, while a regional writing class, still focused on creative work. Both classes required short stories, and both had an impact on how I thought about my creative project. For me, one of the most challenging aspects of writing a short story has been finding inspiration that does not feel like it is asking to be made into a longer piece. Every time I began writing, I either ended up with an outline for a novel (or, at the very least, a novella) or I ended up writing a chapter of a book rather than a self-contained story.

By this point, I had an advisor, Dr. Westover, helping me. Though I was not sure exactly what I was going to write, I knew I wanted the stories to have a similar feel to

them. My advisor assigned a few different short stories from various collections so that I could have some models of stories of this kind and also help refine what I liked and disliked aesthetically. I first read “Trauma Plate,” by Adam Johnson, which is a dystopian short story. Oddly enough, reading it made me certain I did not want to write anything dystopian for my thesis. It was a wonderful story, but I knew I should probably write something less challenging due to my lack of experience in the medium. The second story Dr. Westover assigned was “A Temporary Matter,” by Jhumpa Lahiri. By this point, I had determined that I wanted to focus on more realistic scenarios. Reading Lahiri’s work cemented that decision in my mind. It contains a lot of emotional depth and I enjoyed the richness of the situation, even though it was short. Finally, I read “Cathedral,” by Raymond Carver. It follows a character who goes through a significant transition in the space of an evening spent with a stranger. Although I could imagine there being more to the story, I was satisfied with the ending. All of this reading was very helpful because, aside from not having written many short stories prior to beginning my thesis, I had not read very many either. Through my assigned reading, I discovered I most enjoyed reading the stories that were realistic and character-driven. Though I liked certain aspects of each story I read, I was more drawn to the “slice of life” texture that several of them had. While novels need to be more comprehensive and show an entire arc of a character’s journey, short stories can focus on a pivotal moment. The trick, for me, would be to keep myself away from the temptation to focus on longer journeys rather than the smaller steps the journey is made up of.

From the beginning of this process, I knew there was one story I would be using in my creative project. I had originally submitted it to Dr. Westover as a writing sample,

but we later decided that, with some rewriting, I could use it as one of the short stories in my collection. In one of our conversations, I mentioned how the story had some basis in my own experience. I also expressed my concern that writing from an event that really took place could be problematic, even though I enjoyed it. The only way I could know whether or not it would be an issue was by stepping out on a limb and beginning to write from my life with a purpose beyond simply getting a class assignment finished. To do that, I decided to grab my journals from home and read them for inspiration.

My first journal dates back to 2004, when I received it as a gift for my eleventh birthday. Since that time I have filled several books with the random ramblings of a child growing into an adult. These journals have been especially important for me as I have written about family trips, adventures with my friends, and the homesickness of going off to college. Much of my inspiration in writing comes from real experiences that I once wrote down or typed into a blank computer document. This is true in regards to my thesis. The creative project contains two very different stories that both have roots in my own life. I did not set out, at age eleven, to focus on themes of traveling and journeying. When I see the results of my work, however, it is clear that I subconsciously wrote about these topics the majority of the time, and it only makes sense to include this constant theme as a part of my thesis project.

My family made a habit of taking lengthy camping trips every year. We'd spend weeks moving from campsite to campsite, visiting museums and taking hikes along the way. I did not enjoy all of it, of course, but it had a huge influence on how I view life. These adventures were unique. Not many people have the opportunity to travel with their families the way I did. Most of my favorite memories come from these treasured trips,

and I wrote most prolifically when I was traveling, detailing what I experienced. The more I looked through what I read of my memories, I recognized how similar my journal entries were to short stories. I typically wrote when there was something my younger self thought was important. That means that most of my entries were the small “slices” of life that have made my life interesting so far. A memory I am particularly fond of is the attempt my mother and I made to see the sunrise from the top of some enormous sand dunes in Michigan. We woke early and left my father and brothers behind in the camper while we went on our own adventure. The park was closed, but we noticed the gates were not, so we snuck in and hoped no one would catch us. Upon reaching the top of the dunes, we suddenly realized the sun was rising in the opposite direction from what we thought it would. While it is a funny memory, it is still precious to me.

If I was not writing about my family journeys, I was writing about other kinds of traveling. I wrote on days when school was difficult, when I was able to visit with my friends, when I moved to college, when my grandmother passed away, when I decided to transfer schools, and when I began my job as a live-in nanny for six children. Looking back through what I wrote, I found that there are threads of the person I now am winding through each entry. In fact, this mode of traveling is even more important to me than physical traveling. It is not surprising, then, that my short stories contain the essence of journey taking, both figurative and literal.

In my story “Everest,” I incorporate this more figurative aspect of traveling. As I have already mentioned, I have a very unique job as a live-in nanny for six children. Having spent countless hours reading to them and pretending with them, I know that it is something I enjoy. However, most people think I am crazy for having a job like this.

There are other people who tell me they cannot stand children. It has always been hard for me to wrap my mind around how they can hold this opinion. Though my job is challenging, it has been rewarding as well. I have learned a great deal more from the children than I have ever taught them. This is not a new concept, but I wanted to capture the idea in a unique way. This is another thing I have learned about short fiction: it can approach the universal by being uniquely personal. I decided to create a character who disliked children, but for a complex, understandable reason. Then, through the story, I wanted him to be transformed. He needed to grow throughout the story so that he did not just come across as a jerk that hates kids. His journey never leaves the backyard, and yet for him it is the emotional equivalent of scaling Everest. He never makes it to the top, but the reader has a sense that when he comes back down, he is not the same person he was before. Again, this is not a monumental change, just a “slice,” but there is a sense that it is a very important piece of his story.

For my other story, “Shenyang,” I focused on traveling in a more literal sense. One of the biggest journeys I ever took was without my family. At age thirteen, I was given the opportunity to travel halfway around the world to China. In retrospect, it is difficult to believe my parents allowed me to go so far away at such a young age. I went with my best friend, her parents, and her two younger sisters. Before leaving, my mother helped me find a journal specifically for that trip. While I did take a camera, that small diary was the most important part of capturing memories from that month abroad. It is a small, black book with a red ribbon for marking pages. There is nothing particularly special about its appearance, but it is priceless to me now. I include this journaling concept in “Shenyang” as a way to give Melissa, the protagonist, some form of self-

reflection aside from just her internal monologue. Shenyang is a real place and is located about ten hours from Beijing by train. My friend's parents were starting up an English school there, and I was helping the girls adjust to life in another country. It was a crazy month during which I wrote in almost every free moment. By the time I returned home, I was filling the last few pages.

A large portion of "Shenyang" is taken from experiences I really had while I was there. It was a challenge to decide what details were important to the fictional story I was telling and what real events would bring my idea to life. At age thirteen, I was not dealing with the same issues the narrator faces; however, I knew that scenes I could remember would strengthen my story and increase its authenticity. I can vividly picture the moment when male students at the school discovered me in the boys' bathroom. I was embarrassed and tongue-tied. That scene ends up in the story. I also mention scaffolding covered in green fabric and use it as a symbol in the story. That is a real detail. Every other building in Shenyang seemed to be under some sort of construction. Because we were at the school almost all day, every day, I, like Melissa, was asked on several occasions to help with the younger children. Just like Melissa, I was homesick. I missed being with my annoying brothers and hearing English being spoken all around me. While Chinese is a beautifully musical language, I had no talent for speaking it. The little I learned while I was there, I pronounced incorrectly. In the evenings, I would curl up with books I had stuffed into my suitcase, anxious to read letters in a form that made sense to me. Altogether, the trip was not very much as I had imagined it. I would not trade the memories for anything, though. Not only do they make up part of who I am, they often serve as my inspiration when writing stories.



There was no way I could include every detail of my China trip in “Shenyang,” and I didn’t want to. One of the most difficult but also most important things I have had to learn is how faithful (or unfaithful) to be to experience when writing fiction. I learned to ask myself, “Am I putting this in because I feel obligated to my own experience or because it is good for the story?” In many cases, I found myself rewriting in order to make sure what I put on the page needed to be there. For example, no one needed to know there was a small grocery store down the street I went to at least once a day. It was an interesting store with a lot of potentially interesting detail, so I began to include it, but I eventually realized the story did not require that detail. On the other hand, leaving the description of the “squatty potties” ended up being necessary because it allowed me to explore Melissa’s feelings of awkwardness and vulnerability. Admittedly, there were times it was impossible for me to discern whether or not a detail belonged. I had to rely on Dr. Westover to catch sections that did not strengthen the fictional story I was telling. But the more I wrote, the better I became at realizing these things on my own.

In addition to filtering what was necessary from the random memories I had, my advisor pointed out my tendency to over-explain things. This was my biggest weakness when I began. Rather than letting actions and images speak for themselves, I felt the need to make sure the reader had no doubts as to what I intended. Dr. Westover challenged me to write a scene that contained little to no explanation. I was fairly certain I understood what I needed to do, but still not confident about how I could alter my writing style. It was critical that I learn what information a reader needed to understand and what they might find insulting to their intelligence. The result of the challenge has become the first scene of “Everest.” It was more time-consuming to craft the story so carefully, avoiding

my tendency to put neon signs around the point I was trying to make. With that being said, the outcome was much more rewarding and I gained confidence in how to write a solid scene. There was still a lot Dr. Westover suggested taking out, but not nearly as much as there had been in previous drafts.

Taken as a whole, my creative project was an intense learning experience. I discovered a love for writing short stories I never knew I had and, through constant working on “Everest” and “Shenyang,” I became a stronger writer. While I still give my readers too much information at times, I have learned to cut back drastically. On top of that, I have a better understanding of how to create and then transform a character in a compelling way through action rather than through boring internal monologue. It has been a rewarding adventure for me, and I hope the stories that have come out of it will help others to better understand their own journeys.

## Shenyang

Although the bathroom had only been cleaned a few days earlier, it hadn't taken any time at all for the students to make it just as disgusting as it had been before. The tiled squatty potties were covered in urine, toilet paper hadn't been flushed, and the floors were coated with grime. This proved my theory that, no matter where you went, men's restrooms were universally gross. This morning, weak sunlight slipped in through the only window, which faced a wall of green scaffolding. I didn't even bother looking at it - every building in Shenyang was covered with scaffolding. A thought had struck me when I first arrived: the scaffolding was a huge, dull, green exoskeleton, concealing the city's mistakes from critical eyes and keeping the buildings from toppling into the busy streets below.

*That bathroom isn't going to clean itself*, my mother would have said had she been there. *It also hadn't made itself dirty*, was my grumbling response as I popped in my ear-buds and began to scrub. Since my arrival, my brain had begun impersonating the various people I'd left behind in the states, engaging them in conversations that were half remembered, half invented. This was especially true of my mother. It was a long conversation I had with her that propelled me toward Shenyang in the first place.

I probably should have been listening to music in Chinese. Before I got to China, people had told me that it would be easier to learn when I got there. I would be immersed in the culture, they said. Besides, everyone would automatically know enough English to talk with me. The people who told me that information were either wrong or they were lying. I was immersed in something, all right, but it wasn't culture. The little Chinese I had managed to learn from a tutor everyone called "Aunt Mary" got me laughed at when

I attempted to introduce myself. I later discovered that Shenyang was the Chinese version of Boston and that Aunt Mary spoke with the Chinese equivalent of a southern drawl.

I got down on my hands and knees and went to work with a large bristled brush. Throughout my life I had been told repeatedly that it was important for me to do my best, whether I liked what I was doing or not. Hard work would pay off in the end, and all that. Did I believe that, or was I just hearing my mother's voice again? Before I could decide, I heard other voices. I turned around to find a group of laughing teenage boys. I turned the music down.

"I'm just cleaning. Uh, sorry." They had huge smiles on their faces. "I know it's the boys' bathroom, not the girls'. I'm supposed to be helping out." I wasn't sure how much they understood. "I'll just finish later, I guess." I left the bathroom as the boys loudly enjoyed my embarrassment.

When I was about to leave for China, my mother had tried to sneak a gift into my carry-on. I pretended not to see and I made up my mind to wait until I touched down in Shenyang before opening it. Once off the ground, I went over the math again, calculating how long it would be before I could afford to return home for a visit. It came out to ten months, again. We'd been in the air almost three hours when I pulled the wrapped present out of my bag. Patience had never been a strong suit of mine. The package had distinctly wrapped-book qualities, and I carefully pulled off the tape, taking my time. Inside was a new journal. I'd complained that I didn't have enough time to find one before leaving. Mom had clearly been listening to my rants.

"That's a neat journal," my neighbor in economy said.

"Thanks." I flipped through the blank pages.

“What does the cover say?” I handed it to him for a closer inspection. He put his glasses on. “‘Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not.’ Ralph Waldo Emerson. That’s a good quote.” He gave the journal back. “So where are you going?”

“China.”

“Is this your first time?”

“It’s my first trip out of the states, actually. I’m going to be teaching English at a school there.” The glasses made his wide eyes look even bigger.

By the time we reached the next airport, I’d told him my whole story, probably much more than he was interested in, but he was patient with me. I’d first heard of the job opportunity at the beginning of the summer, applied just for kicks, and somehow managed to get the position. What had followed was a hectic time of planning during which not nearly enough preparation took place. This complete stranger listened to all my excitement and worry. When we walked off of the jet, he wished me the best of luck.

While I waited for the boys to clear out of the bathroom, I went to the small teacher’s lounge for a break. The battered white cabinet in the corner housed a bottle of Ibuprofen and I popped a couple, hoping to avoid a stress headache. My first few weeks had been spent happily listening to the musicality of Chinese, but it was beginning to sound like a broken record. Certain days I was convinced that, if you played the record backwards, there would be a very ominous message that I should go back to where I’d come from. I’d written as much in my journal, then closed the cover to find Emerson lecturing me about what I was, or should be. At first, I really had believed I would find the beautiful in those streets filled with mini-cars and the stink of fish. Somehow, I would

see something magnificent in the legless man pushing himself around on a wooden cart. My friends and family had convinced me that the beauty of what I found would astound me. Many things in Shenyang had shocked me, it's true, but I was still waiting for the beauty.

If Emerson was right, then the problem was me. By his explanation, I was devoid of beauty. Like most women, I had always struggled with my appearance, but the idea that I didn't possess inner beauty was even more difficult to swallow. I had agreed to take this job for at least a year. It had been a quick decision that I hadn't thought out very well, but I was stubborn, and once I had decided, I was going to go. I had charged ahead to teach English at a place I once joked about digging holes to – a place that would probably never seem beautiful to me because I wasn't carrying any.

“Melissa?” I jumped. One of the few translators at the school peeped her head around the door. I completely butchered the pronunciation of her Chinese name, so she told me to call her Sunshine. I knew she meant to make things easier for me, but it felt like I was offending her every time I called her a pretend name because I couldn't make the sounds of her real one.

“Sorry if I startle you. We are having class for young children tonight so other family can go to special event. Can you teach game for them?” When I'd first met her, Sunshine had insisted that I tell her if she ever made a mistake so that she could learn better English, but after reminding her for the umpteenth time that articles existed, I didn't have the heart to continue. I could never decide if that made me a good friend or just a bad teacher.

“Sure,” I said. “Does it matter what kind of game I teach them?”

“Game with English in it. That is all.” She smiled, flicking her knee-length hair behind her shoulder.

“Okay.” The only game I knew that didn’t involve English was Uno, so that didn’t narrow it down very much. “How old will the students be?”

Sunshine said that the kids would be around Kindergarten age. I forced a smile. Finally, after a long time of simply observing other teachers and trying to be useful around the school, they finally trusted me with babysitting. Well, it was better than cleaning the squatties.

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My first day in Shenyang had been a blur of meeting new coworkers and dealing with terrible jet-lag. At some point during that day, Sunshine had been given the unenviable job of translating for me and answering any questions I had. It was through a translated conversation with my new boss, whose English name was John, that I was informed of some new expectations that had not been covered in our email correspondence.

“He says you need to help with cleaning sometimes. Not just get ready to take English job,” Sunshine said. John smiled and waited for my response to be translated back to him.

“Okay. That’s fine I guess.” I wasn’t sure what I was agreeing to. It was taking all of my energy to keep my eyelids semi-open.

Everyone working at the school was very kind to me and introduced themselves

enthusiastically. I worried about the professional impression I was making. There was no telling how many yawns I was barely managing to stifle. Walls and floors seemed to wobble and spin.

Sunshine was by my side the entire time and even found a Chinese Fanta for me. The students and teachers were leaving for the day when we were able to have our first real conversation. She already knew a great deal about me from translating, but I knew nothing about her. I couldn't even say her name.

"Tell me about yourself," I said. An embarrassed look crossed her face.

"I am translator here to help teachers." She shrugged. "There is nothing to tell."

"But what about when you're not translating?"

"I like reading books, watching English movies, and translating." A smile lit her face. "What hobbies do you have?"

"I like to read, too. I also enjoy writing and teaching, obviously. Of course, I haven't done much actual teaching yet, so maybe I won't like it." It was supposed to be a joke, but Sunshine seemed concerned. "What I mean is, I can't know until I've tried for a while, right?"

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I walked into my small apartment on the fifth floor and my panting echoed through my nearly empty room. The building designer had decided there was no need for an elevator until the sixth floor and I cursed that unknown designer every time I had to make the ascent. The lack of material possessions in the place made it appear much larger



than it was. As annoying as clutter was, there was something magical in it that could never be noticed until there was no chance of it existing.

I picked over restaurant leftovers and tried to decipher the Chinese characters, grappling for pronunciations based on the Pinyin. After an hour or so, I gave up. Without anyone around to tell me if I was right or wrong, what was the point? The couple of boxes I had brought with me were set up near the sink - a cardboard library of sorts I used to console myself. Whenever I got the chance, I would select a book and pretend I was somewhere very American - maybe New York City.

*Mark Twain would make a good companion tonight*, I thought. His *Innocents Abroad* always cheered me up. No matter what happened, he found a way to laugh and be happy about his surroundings. I had no such talent, as my trip to the Great Wall had shown.

The over-stuffed tour bus should have clued me in to the massive number of other tourists I might find there, but even if it had, I would never have been prepared for the obstacle-course of vendors and trinkets. The relatively short distance between the parking lot and the wall was a sea of colors and pressing bodies. Never before had I been so frightened of being trampled to death. My dislike of crowds should have been a red flag when I thought about working in China.

Diligently, I hiked up to one of the higher towers along the wall. The original builders must have expected everyone to have great calf muscles. With the overcast sky, it was difficult to enjoy the “view.” I took the obligatory photos anyway. It would have been silly to be at the Great Wall and not take any pictures. *Perhaps it will seem more special in retrospect*, I thought. Most memories did. A glance at my watch told me I had

more than enough time to get back to the bus, but I walked quickly down the way I had come.

“Buy, buy, buy!” a young man holding an array of souvenirs pounced on the opportunity to catch a tourist on the way back down. It was like he knew I was weaker than when I’d been by earlier. The colors were yelling almost as loudly as the vendors.

“My price better! Best!” An older woman, intent to show me the cost of her merchandise, shoved a calculator into my face. She had an eager expression much like I’d worn when I started out on the bus. Without responding, I snapped a picture of her. Maybe that would be the way I would remember the Great Wall - through her face. Back on the bus, I realized how sunken her cheeks were and that she was missing a few teeth. Some people talk about the beauty of aging very eloquently - so much so that I almost believe them when they speak. I doubted even those who believed aging was graceful would find the vendor in the picture beautiful.

I decided to get my laptop out and get the pictures off my SD card. My mother had been griping for weeks that she wanted to see pictures. After finding the touristy photos I’d taken, I scrolled slowly through them. I was smiling in the photos, but the sky was still grey and the old woman was still slightly scary to look at. The nostalgia hadn’t hit me yet, of that I was certain.

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Sunshine interrupted my lunch break, asking if I could take a walk with her. My food wasn’t looking particularly appetizing, so I agreed to come along. I grabbed my

jacket and small bag and followed her through the glass doors and out to the sidewalk.

“Do you have plans for children’s class now?”

“Mostly,” I said. I’d spent most of the morning brainstorming game ideas.

“That is good.”

We sidestepped some scaffolding and headed west down the block. A minute or so passed while I tried to think of something to say. There were too many people out on the street for me to feel comfortable, but that was not the sort of thing I thought I should comment on to Sunshine. She was always so cheerful and helpful that it didn’t seem right to express my worries and frustrations.

“Melissa, what is wrong?” Sunshine asked.

“Nothing is wrong.” After I received a skeptical glance, I continued. “I’m tired, that’s all.” She shook her head. “I can’t really explain. I am okay though. Don’t worry about it.”

“Try explaining. I want to understand. This is good English practice.”

“Uh, okay, I guess. I think the simplest way to explain what is wrong is that I think I made a mistake coming here. I didn’t know what I was getting into and I don’t think I can do this job. It is hard to teach, especially when I don’t know Chinese. I can’t even say your name right.”

“You say my name good,” she interrupted me.

“You’re just saying that because you feel sorry for me.”

“No, that not true. You are good at saying my name. You will learn Chinese and you will be great teacher here.” Her smile nearly had me convinced.

“You’re very sweet, Sunshine.”

“So are you. Most American people do not even try saying my name.”

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When we had almost reached the school once again, I told Sunshine to go one without me. Our conversation had given me a lot to think about. I had always been curious about the building next door, hidden by scaffolding that might have been there since the building was first constructed. Making sure no one was paying attention to me, I slipped between pieces of green canvas that covered the scaffolding. Immediately, the lighting changed. Rather than entering a dilapidated building, I was discovering the Emerald City. The closest door looked as if it had been forced open a long time ago. My mother's voice warned me that it was dangerous to go inside, but I ignored it. Three steps later, I was inside a stairwell. Walking up the stairs to my apartment was nothing compared to the journey to the top floor of the building. I lost count of the number of floors, but I assumed it was close to ten stories. My thighs burned when I pushed the rooftop door open.

The sky was surprisingly without smog. There were only a couple of clouds and they were in the distance. In all directions, Shenyang was all I could see both below and above me. Cranes and scaffolding clung to the majority of the city. With so many people, it was in a constant state of construction. Nothing about it was settled. The city would continue to grow, shedding its skin almost before you could get used to the old one. I sat down and pulled my journal out of my bag. I would have enough time to write a little before I had to go teach games to the children. I wrote about talking to Sunshine and how

she was so very encouraging. I expressed how worried I was about teaching. Most of it was repeating what I'd written on other occasions, but that didn't bother me. A page or two later, I found myself sketching the school from my new vantage point. It was a terrible drawing and I was glad I hadn't been hired as an art instructor.

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Sunshine introduced me to the group of children who were clearly younger than the five years I had been expecting. My own name was the only word out of her mini-speech that I recognized. With that finished, she wished me good luck and was gone. I was left alone with my toddling pupils, realizing the game I had originally settled on would never work. I really wished I could call Sunshine back, but the kids stared at me expectantly. Without any idea of what they'd been told or any way to know for sure they could understand anything, I was as lost as they were. One of them started crying and I attempted to comfort him. Maybe he missed his mother. I couldn't blame him for that. However, I did wish he'd stop making it sound like I was murdering someone in the classroom. His small face scrunched up and his cries were increasing in pitch.

"It's okay, it's okay," I went over in an attempt to comfort him. "We're going to play a game. It'll be fun! Just please stop crying. That'd make me a very happy person." My belief was that this happened to sound exactly like someone saying in Chinese that they wanted to kill you and eat your parents for dinner. So, rather than continue spewing frightening words and risk making the other bewildered toddlers cry, I went to the whiteboard at the front of the room. I drew a huge ring on it, and then attempted to

pantomime the idea of sitting in a circle. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that I was looking incredibly silly, but I was getting to the point where I didn't care anymore. It was my job to teach, and teach I would. As the children slowly figured out what I wanted them to do, they moved around, arranging themselves to the best of their ability. The crying slowly subsided as the seating shifted into something resembling a circle. Maybe the arrangement was something familiar to the boy as the music on my iPod was something familiar to me. I was thrilled I wasn't scaring him anymore. At last, they seemed prepared, and I said, "Hello, I am Melissa. I am going to teach you English."

## Everest

“Pack the food. We’re leaving.” Most five year olds didn’t have the nerve to order Rob around. At six foot three, he intimidated all children with the exception of Will. Against his better judgment, he’d agreed to watch his nephew for the weekend while Alison and Brad went out of town to celebrate their anniversary. The last thing they said before getting into their minivan was that they wouldn’t have service on the mountain, but they knew everything would be fine.

“Leaving?” Rob asked. The microwave beeped. Will gave him a short nod in response, looking at him expectantly. He had a bag across his shoulders with a jump rope tied to one side. A sword was shoved into one belt-loop. In one hand he carried a loaded Nerf gun. The extra orange bullets were ready to spill out of both pockets. A pair of binoculars hung around his neck like a medal. Rob only had a second to take this in before he turned to leave. The back door slammed and Will skipped out of sight.

The microwave gave off another beep. *Just like Jessica, constantly making noise.* She wanted to get married, settle down, and have kids, the whole shebang. He’d tried to tell her it wouldn’t work out. *If she could see this, she’d get it.* The leftover casserole had blown up in the microwave and he wondered if his sister would notice or if he could just leave it. For the moment, he ignored the mess. The kid couldn’t have gotten too far yet.

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There was no way Will needed to use the bathroom again. Rob tried his best to maintain what patience he had left while informing him that it was too late and he had to

go to sleep. His phone's display showed that it was already 8:40. He could remember when his bedtime had been so early and when his little sister had complained about it.

"At least tell me a story or something," Will said. His truck nightlight glowed from the corner and cast a green light on his bunched-up bedspread. Rob started to grab the first storybook he saw. "Mommy already read me all the books." Will pointed at the ones strewn across the carpet and stacked on the small red bookshelf. "You have to tell me a story from your head."

"I don't know any stories."

"Everyone knows stories - at least one."

"Not me."

"You're a liar. You just won't tell it." His eyes were grumpy in a way that reminded Rob of someone he wanted to forget.

"Fine. You know what, fine. I'll tell you a story." A celebratory yippee escaped and Rob shushed him. "Once upon a time, uh, there was this dog named Max. He was big and tough and liked the pick fights with kitties. They were really scared of him because he was so tall and they were really little. One day, he cornered the smallest kitty and called him mean names."

"What was the kitty's name?"

"He doesn't have a name. Anyway, Max scared the kitty and made him cry. Then the kitty told his mom what had happened and the mom cat talked to her friends. They all got together and attacked Max when he least expected it. After they beat him, 'cause they're crazy good fighters, they made him promise never to pick on little kitties anymore. He said he wouldn't. The end." He got up from the edge of the bed and told



Will it was time to sleep.

“That was a dumb story and I’m not going to sleep. I’m going to read my book from school.” Will climbed out of his covers and picked up a book that had been lying open on the carpet. It was an hour past his bedtime, and he was convinced his parents meant for him to be allowed to stay up the entire night. The book he propped on his bed had a large picture of Mount Everest on the front. He scrambled back on top of the covers as fast as he could. In the strange shadows, the look on his eager face was exaggerated. Rob took the book away from him and put it high on the dresser before he could open it.

“I make the rules while your parents are gone. You’re going to sleep if I have to sit on you and hold your eyes closed all night long.” Will stared at him, and then back at his book. He started to retort and, instead, folded his arms and allowed his head to free-fall to the pillow. Rob could still see the frown on his face as he shut the door.

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He knew Alison was happy he’d found someone, but it made him uncomfortable that she thought so highly of his girlfriend. His other girlfriends were “too immature” or “goofy beyond belief.” Why did she like Jessica so much? They’d become friends faster than made sense to him. Alison asked her to help out with the baby shower preparations over the phone, she’d been beyond thrilled. Rob hoped the baby talk would be over when the party was. Blue balloons smacked him in the face as he rounded the corner to the living room where the two women were getting things ready for a name guessing game. The couple had kept the name a secret so they could reveal it at the shower. Rob wasn’t

entirely sure why it mattered so much, but he wasn't about to get into an argument with his pregnant sister.

“Just tell me you didn't choose *Robert*, then I won't bother you about it anymore,” Jessica said. Her blond ponytail whisked across her shoulders as she turned and smiled at him. “I'd really like to use it if I ever have a boy.”

Rob wished he'd walked right past the living room and down the hall. They'd been dating for five months and Jessica had never mentioned kids before. For a moment he convinced himself she was only teasing him, but the pink in her cheeks said otherwise.

“Nope, we're not using my stinky little brother's name. No worries.” His sister made a face at him and then laughed. “Oh, oh, Jess, give me your hand.” She placed Jessica's hand on her swollen stomach, then looked up at Rob. “Do you want to feel him kicking?”

“Nah, but thanks.” There was no mistaking the look of disapproval that crossed Jessica's face.

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Backpack, Nerf gun, and jump rope in tow, Will the Sherpa guided Rob up to Camp 1 after eating breakfast at Base Camp. Rob could tell the kid was unimpressed with his uncle's “climbing” ability, but he didn't much care. His goal was to survive the weekend and never volunteer for watching Alison's kid again. The original plan had been for Jessica to join him. Rob figured it would show Jessica what having a kid could be like so that she might finally get over the idea of having children, but the breakup left him

babysitting on his own.

The garage-sale swing-set Will claimed was their first stop up Mount Everest creaked under his weight. Paint chipped off under his fingernails.

Because Alison and Brad's house was next door to a farm, the small backyard appeared much larger than it actually was. They enjoyed the luxury of a meadow and mini-forest at the cost of a comparatively small mortgage. According to Will, the farm also contained Mount Everest, which he couldn't be talked out of climbing. After a long night of convincing him to come back inside, eat dinner, brush his teeth, and get in his Spiderman bed, it was too early in the morning to begin that sort of dialogue again. Rob would just go with it and hope that the hike would make time go faster.

"You know, you've got to be careful. Since you're so tall, you'll get sicker than me."

"Get sick?"

"Yeah, with attitude sickness." Will was busy pulling equipment out of his backpack and repacking it again.

"I'm not going to get sick," he said.

"Most people get sick."

"Maybe on the *real* Everest," Rob mumbled under his breath. Will's face reddened a bit, but he didn't respond. Instead, like the professional he was, he started putting on his gear in preparation for the next section of the ascent. Rob took off the hoodie he'd been wearing and tied it around his waist. The last time it had been worn, he and Jessica had been fighting.

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Jessica's mouth was closed tightly. She was not about to say another word until he answered her questions. Every conversation Rob had with her over the past several months were distinctly aimed at avoiding the current subject. He had even bought her some flowers thinking they might help the evening go well. They sat in between them, dying and forgotten like flowers on a tombstone.

"I don't know," he said. "Seriously, I don't have a clue."

One of her eyebrows rose. "If you don't know, then how come you're so set against it?" She was wearing an old hoodie of his and her crossed arms were lost in the extra fabric.

"Like I said, kids just make me uncomfortable."

She exhaled. "That makes absolutely no sense, Rob. You know I want a family someday and, in my mind, a family involves kids - kids that look like the two of us, who grow up and constantly remind us of how awesome life is. You'll lose that feeling on your own."

"I think you're the one who's lost it. You didn't care before Alison got pregnant. Now, somehow you've got it stuck in your head that kids will make life so much better."

"And how would you know that they don't? You've never even been around Will for more than a few hours at a time."

"There's a good reason for that."

"Oh, really? I'd like to hear it if you don't mind." Both of her eyebrows were

raised. Rob wasn't sure exactly where he was going, but was determined to make a good case.

“Kids are awful. They cry, they make messes everywhere, they cost a fortune - and not a small one by any means. They're demanding, frustrating, destructive, and sometimes, no matter what you do, they...”

“They what?”

Rob risked looking at her for a second. She seemed confused. So was he.

“You know, whatever. It doesn't matter. I just don't like kids. If you're wanting to have your own cutesy little family with a couple snot-nosed stragglers, be my guest. Here's your apartment.” He motioned toward it with his free hand as he brought the car to a stop. Jessica opened her mouth as if to say something, but quickly unbuckled herself and yanked the door open instead. Rob could tell a few tears were starting to build up as she made eye contact with him.

“Someday, you're going to realize how ridiculous you sound right now,” she said. Slowly, she unzipped the hoodie and took it off. “Until then, I don't want to see you anymore.” She handed him the oversized hoodie, stepped out, and closed the door with finality. After a pause to shake her head, she ran into her apartment.

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“Da - ng it, Will!” Rob said. Alison would have killed him if he'd cussed in front of her kid. They'd been hiking through blizzard conditions for quite some time. It had just begun to feel less like a chore, and now this.

“Told you it was loose,” Will said with a bit of a lisp. A trickle of blood traveled down his lip and he brushed it with his free hand. He looked at the crimson with curiosity, then used his pants as a towel. He lifted the tooth for Rob’s inspection. Rob didn’t know what was worse, the fact that he’d let his nephew yank his tooth out or that the kid now had bloodstained pants. “Not many people can say they lost a tooth on Everest,” he said. A smile brightened his face as he looked up at Rob.

“I told you not to pull it,” said Rob. “You’re supposed to obey me. Come on, we’re going back inside.” Rob heard his sister’s voice come out of his mouth. It was a little terrifying.

“No. We’re almost there.” The tooth was shoved inside the Nerf-bullet pocket and a stubborn expression bloomed on his face.

“You can’t tell me no,” said Rob. “We’re going inside. Now.” Instead, Will started to run up the last crest of meadow. Sunlight brought a snow-like glow to the hill as the field blew in the wind. Rob ran after him, imagining ticks making a home of his shins. As he wove his way through the grass, he tried to remember what his parents had done when he’d refused to obey. His sister wasn’t a spanker, so he knew that wasn’t going to be an option. Spanking might be too harsh for a something like this anyway. His legs burned. There was a reason he hadn’t ever been into sports despite his height. Will had clearly followed the more athletic side of the family. The way the kid ran reminded him of his little sister, someone he had done his best to forget. He had never even told Jessica about her, though he could remember everything as clear as if it had happened the day before. It was an event from years ago, but was never far away from him.

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A small casket sat at the front of the church. Rob had stared at it, tapping his foot on the hymn-aged carpet. In his eight years, he had never been to a funeral before. His parents were silent on either side of him and Alison was leaning on their dad's shoulder. They were a swath of uncomfortable black on the burgundy pews. The pastor gave a eulogy longer than the life it celebrated.

The receiving of friends was the worst. Everyone was sorry - so sorry. Great-aunts ruffled his hair in passing to weepingly mumble condolences to his parents and Alison. It didn't totally make sense to him, but he understood more than they gave him credit for. His eyes had been the ones shielded by his mother's trembling hand when she turned him back indoors. She had been the one to find his little sister in the trees, and he ignored the numerous choked-up retellings of the event since it had made Alison cry. He didn't want to cry. Though he was too young to understand, he was too old to cry.

Later, they finally laid her little coffin deep in the ground. A few more words were said. Rob continued to not pay attention. The suit they'd put him in made him almost as fidgety as the crying everyone kept doing. It wasn't until they got a few shovels out and people dissipated that he was able to focus. He became absorbed in staring as they threw dirt slowly into the hole. He doubted the dirt could fill a hole so big.

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“Keep up.” Will's order came from around a tree a few yards in front of him. By the

time they had reached the woods, Rob had decided against a spanking. When a kid has just basically ripped a tooth out of his mouth, a spanking isn't likely to do any good. Besides, it could have been much worse than a lost tooth. He told himself that it also wouldn't be a great impression to make if he did decide to watch Will again.

“I am keeping up.”

“We're heading to the last camp. My teacher says it's called the Death Zone.” He appeared for a brief moment to point ahead. Excitement echoed from his leaf-crushing steps. Sometimes, moving in and out of view, disappearing for a moment between one tree and the next, Will became his sister running through the trees. At first she was laughing, running without parents telling her to stop in those last moments before she lost her way. But then it grew darker, colder, and Will imagined her pulling her arms into her shirt, trying to stay warm, saying little prayers to God and hoping the same parents she had run away from were coming find her. Rob almost never allowed himself to think about this, but Will had stirred something up in him. He was determined to follow Will to the top of Everest, or wherever else this was leading him.

The terrain had changed since they'd stepped between the tree trunks. A steep rise was in front of them and Rob wondered if there really was some sort of spot worth hiking to. He certainly wasn't opposed to seeing a good view after the long walk. Will wasn't rushing forward anymore. His pace slowed as he forgot about defying his uncle and remembered what sacred ground he was on. He readjusted his backpack and placed a hand on his hip, estimating what would come next.

“You know, I'm the youngest to ever climb Everest.” The sprint up to the wood had made him out of breath for the first time that weekend. Rob hoped he wasn't too



tired. There was something remarkable about watching so much energy tied up in such a small, fragile person.

“I bet you are.” Rob said. He imagined Will, thirty years into the future, triumphantly surrounded by white. It was an entirely plausible image, and Rob wondered where it had come from. He had never been able to imagine child grown up before. There was no reason he ought to be able to imagine Will as an adult.

Will put a small hand on Rob’s arm and looked up at him, as if he could see the same picture in his own mind. Without saying anything, he calmly turned Rob around. At first, he was confused. They hadn’t finished the hike. The top of the hill was still a hundred yards away behind him.

“Why aren’t we going all the way to the top?” He asked.

Will shrugged. “A lot of people don’t make it to the top of Everest. We almost made it, but I’m tired and I want some lunch down at the base camp.”

“Oh, okay.” He could see the trail they’d left in the dead leaves and began to follow Will’s lead.

It was easier to climb down than it had been to come up. They were at the edge of the trees after only a few minutes. With the rolling meadow in front of them and the small house in the distance, Rob couldn’t help but sit down on a stump just to watch the wind at play. A few seconds passed before Will realized his uncle wasn’t behind him anymore, and he jogged back up to see what the matter was. His curious eyes were just like the ones that had belonged to his little sister, and, for the first time, the similarity made him smile.

“What’s wrong?” He readjusted his bag.

“Nothing.”

It didn't look like Will believed him. “Are you sure you don't have some attitude sickness?” He opened up Rob's eyelids as if he was giving him a medical examination, clearly concerned about his wellbeing.

“You know, I think I might have had it,” he smiled. “But I'm getting over it.”

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