

A Triad of Diary Entries

# ONEROUS



Tyler efford (single parent)  
Margaret Morris (king)  
deMichelle

Editors

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# Onerous

*A Triad Of Diary Entries*

Edited by Kaneez Zehra Razavi

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CHAPTER I

THINGS HEARD  
ABOUT BANKS

**Jon Shorr**

*Baltimore, Maryland, United States*

# THE DEBITAUNT'S BAWL

“Welcome to First United Bankcorp. I’m Sherrilyn Dukas. How may I help you?”

“I need to stop an autopayment, and I can’t figure out from your web site how to reset my autopay to remove that particular payee. That’s why I came in.”

“I understand, Sir. I’m sure we can resolve that issue for you. I have a form that will stop the next payment to that payee. Would you like me to mail you the form or send it to you electronically?”

“First of all, I don’t want to stop the next payment. I want to discontinue all autopayments to this company. And secondly, can’t we just fill out the form now?”

“I’m sorry, Sir. This form will only stop payment for one month. I can send or give you multiple forms, though, each one stopping payment for one month.”

“So if I never want you to pay them again, I need to fill out an infinite number of monthly ‘stop payment’ forms?”

“Oh, no, Sir, there’s a maximum of 12 monthly forms that you can complete.”

“And then what happens?”

“I don’t know, Sir; I haven’t been working here for 12 months yet.”

“But why can’t I just permanently stop the autopayment? Why can’t I just turn off the autopay function? These people are no different than any other company that I owe money to. If I don’t send a check to the phone company, they’ll send me a late notice and eventually cut off my phone service, but that’s no concern of yours. Why is this one any more of your business?”

“Well, Sir, all I can tell you is that our policy is that the creditor will need to notify us that they have stopped billing you, so we can stop sending them payments.”

“They *have* stopped their billing,” I said. “It’s a mortgage company, and I’ve paid off the mortgage.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but this is all we can do on our end. You’ll have to contact the payee to stop their billing.”

“I have to contact the mortgage company and tell them to tell you to stop sending them money?”

“That’s right, Sir. May I help you with anything else today?”

“Yes, you can help me resolve this right now.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but as I said, you’ll have to contact the payee and ask *them* to stop their billing.”

“OK, then, I’d like to call them right now, while I’m sitting here with you, on speakerphone, and try to get this resolved.”

“Well, Sir, as I said, there’s nothing I can—”

“Will you sit here with me while I call them?”

“Yes, Sir.”

\*\*\*

“I’m sorry,” the recorded voice said, “but we don’t have an account associated with this phone number.”

That made complete sense to me. Our mortgage predated cellphones; they obviously had our mortgage tied to our old, now disconnected landline. “Please type in the phone number associated with this account.” I typed in my old landline number.

“Thank you,” the recorded voice said. “We’re sending a verification code to that cellphone number. When you receive it, please enter it here.”

“But that phone’s—”

“—I’m sorry,” the recorded voice said, “we don’t have an account associated with [the cellphone number on which I was calling]. Please type in the phone number associated with this account.” Again, I typed in my old landline number, and again, the recorded voice said, “I’m sorry, we don’t have an account associated with [the cellphone number on which I was calling]. Please type in the phone number associated with this account.” I tried two more times and then tried unsuccessfully to back out of that loop.

Eventually, I got back to the main menu and found the “Speak to a service representative” option. And eventually, Michaela answered—from somewhere in Texas, she told me. Michaela did most of the talking, but her seven-month-old baby provided a running commentary within several inches of the phone. I explained my dilemma to Michaela, she pulled up my account on her computer, and said, “This account’s paid off and closed, Sir.”

“I know,” I said, “but my bank needs you to stop billing them.”

“We’re not billing anyone, Sir, your account with us is closed.”

“OK, then,” I said, “Can you send a note to my bank telling them that my account is closed so they’ll stop sending you bi-weekly payments?” Sherrilyn gave me a thumbs-up sign.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Michaela said again, “but your account is closed; we no longer have any relationship with you.” Although she was telephone-polite, there was an edge in her voice that implied that I was harassing her company and that she wasn’t far from getting an injunction that would prohibit me from calling or in any other way stalking them anymore.

“OK,” I said, “I understand. Thank you, anyway.”

“You’re welcome, Sir,” Michaela said “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Do you clean out gutters?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I don’t understand,” she said.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks for your help,” I said, hanging up. And that was the end of that.

I looked at Sherrilyn who, by now, was filing her nails.

“So?” I said. “Now what?”

“It sounds like your account is closed, so that should solve the problem, Sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No, unless they continue sending autopay notices. Then what?”

“I’m sure everything will be fine, Sir,” she said, easing me out of her cubicle and toward the main door. “And thank you for banking at First United Bankcorp.”

A couple weeks later, I received a letter from a *mortgage collection payment company*, “Re: account suspension due to inability to make debits. On July 15, 2025, we attempted to make a debit from your bank account,” it read. “The debit was unsuccessful due to Payment Stopped. We cannot make any further loan payments on your behalf until the issue is resolved. If you have questions, please call our Customer Happiness Team at your earliest convenience.”

I called their “Customer Happiness Team” at my earliest convenience.

“Good morning, Sir,” Pia Luna said. “How may I help you today?”

I explained the situation to her: “The reason that Payment was stopped at my bank,” I said, “was because I told my bank to stop payment (albeit by filing a form every month) because I no longer owe anything because I paid off my mortgage, and I talked to the mortgage company, and they verified that, and so I have no idea who you are or what your involvement is in any of this.”

“I’m happy to clear that up for you, Sir,” Pia Luna replied. “Our company handles the billing and collections for your mortgage company.”

“OK,” I said, “then you should know that I no longer owe the mortgage company any money, so there’s no need for you to continue billing me or my bank for payments that I no longer owe.”

“I understand that, Sir,” Pia Luna said, “but you’ll need to notify us to stop billing you and close your account.”

“But the mortgage company DID close my account and said that—”

“—I understand that, Sir,” Pia Luna said, “but we’re a separate company, and so you’ll need to notify us to close your account, at which time we’ll stop billing you.”

“OK,” I said, “I’d like to notify you that because my mortgage is paid off and that my account is closed, I’d like you to close my billing account.”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Pia Luna said, “but that will need to be in writing. I can mail you a form that you can sign and return to me. Is your address the same one that we sent our earlier letter to?”

“Can you send me the form electronically right now, so I can sign it send it back to you electronically right now and be done with it?” I asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Pia Luna said, “but very often people prefer snail mail because it cuts down on confusion.”

“I think we’re way beyond that point,” I said. “Please email the form to me at this email address,” which I then gave her.

“I’m happy to take care of that for you, Sir,” Pia Luna said. “As soon as I receive the signed form from you, I’ll close your account, and that will stop the debit notices to your bank. Oh, and one more thing, Sir. I see that you currently have \$436.00 in your account. Would you like me to issue you a check for that amount?”

“If I have \$436 in my account, why are you billing me for more money?”

“We’re not, Sir, we’ve closed your account. Would you like me to issue you a check for the \$436 that you overpaid?”

“Yes, I would,” I said.

“I’m happy to take care of that for you, Sir,” Pia Luna said. “Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

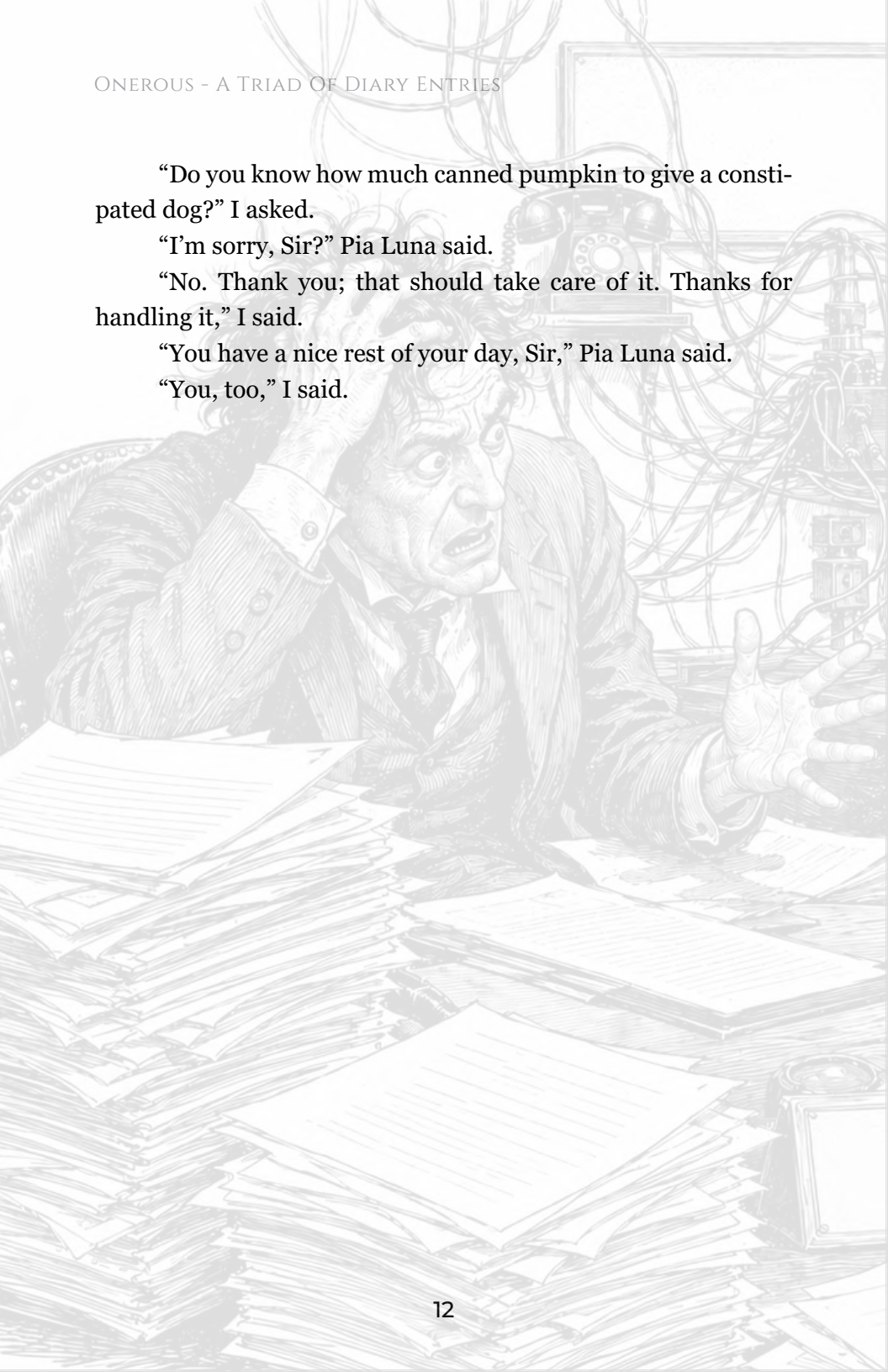
“Do you know how much canned pumpkin to give a constipated dog?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, Sir?” Pia Luna said.

“No. Thank you; that should take care of it. Thanks for handling it,” I said.

“You have a nice rest of your day, Sir,” Pia Luna said.

“You, too,” I said.



**deMichelle**

*Coventry, Connecticut, United States*

## FIRST ROBBERY

It was approaching 4:00 in the afternoon at the bank in which I was working as an assistant manager.

Someone must have called out sick and I needed to operate a window for the day. It was quiet so I went ahead and balanced my drawer so I would be ready to move into the rest of the closing process. The manager was away at a meeting that day and so I was on my own.

I did everything necessary, put the paperwork on the counter behind us where it always belonged at the end of every day, I covered and locked my cash box, I picked up my vault keys in my right hand and carried my cashbox with my left arm to the also locked entrance door through which I could leave the teller line. Once I was through the door, I let it close and then pulled it to be sure it had locked behind me.

I moved through the nine feet of the distance between the teller line and the vault gate. I took out a second key to the gate which led to the safety deposit boxes. I, again, pulled the door closed behind me. I walked through to the next gate which led into the cash vault. I used the same key to open the gate and I closed that last gate behind me.

Inside the timed cash vault was a cabinet with openings for six teller drawers. One for each cash box at the end of the day. I pulled out that key, slid my box in place and . . . as I was trying to lock the box—I heard the two tellers screaming my name from the teller line.

I was startled and confused until I heard “I have just been robbed.” Immediately, my hands started to shake. Because of multiple traumas, and I didn’t realize that yet, I went into a panic attack. I couldn’t hold my hand steady enough to lock the box, when I heard “We’ve been robbed.” Again. I struggled through both gates to get to the front door of the bank to lock it.

On my way to the door I heard. “There he goes! That’s him.” And I watched him and his girlfriend run past the empty drive-up window while I was locking the front door. “Hit the alarm!”

If I had my wits about me, I would have realized that I was, now, safe already. Instead, the anxiety grew to cause every part of my body to tremble. I couldn’t hold my head steady. My neck was contracting at a rapid pace. My limbs were not responding to my thoughts anymore. My stomach trembled.

I sat down on the corner of my desk and, purely out of instinct, called the police and learned they were already on the way.

“Did you pull the alarm, Mary?” I spoke with a tremble.

“Yes. As soon as he reached the door.” She replied.

I then called the building, where the meeting room was, to speak to my manager. The branch administrator answered the phone and I told her.

“We have just been robbed.” I heard her in the background say “Go get Ann. Her branch was just robbed.”

“OK . . . Hon.” She was so kind.

Then I sat in my chair, and remembered, “Everyone away from the windows! Touch nothing. Get a sheet of paper from the resource cabinet and fill out as much identifying information as you can come up with, now, while it’s still fresh. Stand at opposite ends of the teller line and do not speak a word.

The administrator was awesome. While she was doing her part on the other end she asked if everyone was ok. I hadn’t even checked. I just responded to the checklist that had been drilled into us, twice each year.

How everyone was, was not on that list.

“Ladies, is everyone ok. I can’t believe I didn’t even ask?” I yelled, why I was yelling I have no idea.

“Yes. We are. He was at Mary’s window. I’m gonna’ get her some water.” Cathy yelled back. Why she was yelling I do not know, either.

“Of course!” I said.

The police sirens blared from across town, and I had never heard a better sound in my life.

To the administrator “It was 1 window. Mary’s. Closest to the beginning of the Teller line.”

“Did the tellers move away?” she asked.

“Yes, I reminded them. They’re at opposite ends of the teller line filling out the description worksheet. I can see the police.”

I ran to the door. The first policeman asked. "Is everyone ok?"

"Yes." That's the second time. I cannot believe I never asked.

"Are they in? Lock it again!" the administrator asked.

"Yes, ok." I said softly.

"Ok. That's everything, girl, you are done. Get yourself some water and breathe deeply. Your managers already left." She said.

I say, as I realize I'm breathing because I forgot to breathe while I was completing my mental check list "O . . . Yes . . . Ty."

"Get it together because the police are . . ." she attempted.

"Apparently, we are waiting for the state police." I said. I had just overheard a conversation on my right and the police officer had said just that.

"OK. They are all going to have many questions for each of you. Do not speak to each other." She said.

"You are all set. I'm gonna let you go." The administrator said.

"Thanks" and I lost it.

I sat in my chair and cried. Shook, and cried.

The rest of the process is both long and drawn-out. Different officers spoke to each of us independently. They took what we had written for description and asked a couple follow up questions.

Fortunately, Rose remembered the height tape. I overheard her telling her officer, and I was glad she remembered the height tape next to the door and she got his height.

For the sake of this essay and not wanting to encourage more bank robberies I will have to choose what I disclose.

\*\*\*

“Was there a weapon.” I had no idea, honestly.

“That’s ok. We’ll get that from Mary.” He said and he tried to calm me but my whole body just wouldn’t sit still. He was able to get me to stop crying by reassuring me that we were safe, now.

He had me look around at all the officers that were already there. “Look in the parking lot. See. The State Police are here now, too. This is the safest place in your world, right now? It couldn’t get any safer, could it?” and I laughed with him, and the tears slowed a little bit.

At some point in time, the manager walked back into the branch. I was in the conference room going over the plethora of video tape. We had him from every angle. He was careful to not show his face but we did get a glimpse of his profile from a shadow on his hoodie.

One of the State Police assured me that this was a once in a lifetime event. This never happens to anyone twice. The good news was that it had already happened to me and now I could put it behind me.

As he was speaking, I was following the video tape. This one was from Mary’s camera. Because of where it is, it showed her window and the nine feet next to it to the door of the vault and even part of my desk.

There I was, standing just outside the first gate, going through my keys to find the key for the next gate. I was holding my full cash box on my left hip, and that moment is when he came in the door.

Naturally, I freaked out, but the State Policeman said, “It’s ok. He didn’t see you. You’re fine. But it does tell me he isn’t a

very good bank robber if he walked right past that drawer and an open vault door.” And everyone in the room laughed.

I did think to call my mother because this was going to be all over the five o'clock news and she watched that show religiously. If I didn't call, she'd have gone into a full-blown panic. I was calmer now. Not perfect, but calmer.

I called her and played it down gently. At that point, the worst was over.

The only remaining moment was leaving the building. One of the things on the checklist, Don't Speak to Anyone, especially the press.

Somebody did speak and the dollar amount of what the robber left with was in the next morning's paper. Naturally, the manager asked each of us, all three of us, who spoke. We all said it was not us. I do believe that to be true.

I know I didn't, and those two ladies were so shaken, I can't even imagine them stopping off to talk. This is the press, if there was a photo, they would have been happy to put that along side the article in the paper.

It was weeks before the anxiety attack passed. My husband was indifferent about the whole thing. I didn't notice then because I was shaken but, now, I recall absent, rehearsed questions. Learned from others I'm sure. Somebody, somewhere said I should say. . . .

I'd like to say it didn't matter but, after three prior traumas and abuse everything mattered and yet nothing did. The numb which overtook me in the end lasted months. The total absence of any emotion. The lack of reaction. The rote processing. The silence yet unknown got me through that robbery of which I was assured there would never be another,

December 21st, 15 or so years later, my second day on the teller line at a new bank, when . . . it happened again.

Numb struck first this time. The head teller snapped her fingers below her stool to get my attention, pointed to her left and I looked that robber square in the eye. I just stared. I was numb. I saw money being handed over and didn't budge. Cold, blank stare. No better way to describe what a person's numb looks like to the outside world.

Very cold. Very blank.

It turns out that he was planning to hit all the windows until he saw me staring and he took off.

Once the numb wore off about six months after, the panic set in. I went home for lunch one day and never went back.

To this day I have a fear of bank lobbies. I endure it because I know, nobody else will ever understand the panic that follows someone when that someone survived their fifth trauma.

**Peter Wallace**

*Cambridge, Wisconsin, United States*

## OUT OF BALANCE

“Good morning! How may I help you?” The young woman in the white sweater and wool plaid skirt looked happy to see the customer at her teller window.

“You took some of my money.”

“I took some of your money?”

“Not you, specifically, but the bank you work for. This bank.”

“The bank took your money?”

“Not all of it. Ten dollars.”

The customer, sixty-ish and with sensible shoes, held her handbag between her body and the marble edge of the teller’s domain.

“Well here, let me look into your account. May I have your name and account number please?”

“I suppose you’ll need it. I’m Emma Holt. Here’s my account number.”

“I’m Tracy, by the way. Okay . . . here it is. I see that your account is a savings account and that there hasn’t been any activity for a while except for a ten-dollar fee for having an insufficient balance amount.”

“A fee for what?”

“For having an insufficient balance. You need to keep at least five hundred dollars in your account to avoid having a ten-dollar monthly service fee. Your current balance is four hundred and eighty dollars.”

“Service fee? For what kind of service?”

“You know . . . various services.”

Tracy sensed that she wasn’t prepared for what was to come in this discussion.

“Like what. The money is just sitting there. I gave it to you . . . to the bank, rather, to save it for me until I need it. That is the only service I wanted. Just leave it alone. Save it.”

“Well, I guess our bank has expenses that are needed to keep the money in accounts safe.”

“Don’t you make money by loaning some of my money to other people who then pay it back with interest?”

“Well, we do make loans.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you pay me a half-percent interest on my savings and charge your borrowers ten percent or more on their loans. So, you’re making nine and a half percent profit on my money already. Then you charge me ten dollars for having ten dollars too little in my account?”

“There are a lot of expenses necessary to run a bank.”

“I did notice the new solar collectors on the roof. But how does that have anything to do with my money?”

“I don’t know. Look, our bank has these fees. That’s just the way it is, I’m afraid. But you can put more money in your savings account, so you won’t have to pay the fees anymore!”

“Oh. So, if I put more money in will you give back the ten dollars the bank already took from me?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Mrs. Holt.”

“Just so I understand this correctly, last month I had four hundred and ninety dollars in my account. You’re going to take out ten dollars every month. In three years and three months from now my money, which I put in your bank to be safely kept, will be gone.”

“Um . . . I guess that’s true.”

“Does that seem fair to you, Tracy?”

“It doesn’t. But it is our policy.”

“Do you know what my policy is?”

“No, ma’am.”

“My policy is to withdraw the rest of my money. Right now. Can you help me with that, Tracy?”

“Mrs. Holt, it will be my pleasure.” The girl leaned forward, looked to the left and right to assure privacy. “You didn’t hear it from me, Mrs. Holt, but the bank across the street is having a special promotion. If you open a new account with them, you’ll get fifty dollars.”

“Thank you, Tracy. Thank you very much. I may do just that. After I do, I’m going to write a letter to your bank’s president telling him what a fine customer service professional you are. Maybe someday you’ll be the one running this bank, and I think you’ll do a much better job of it.”

Tracy smiled broadly and got to work closing Emma's account.



**Lindsay Reddick**

*Hernando, Florida, United States*

## RAISED IN A BANK

My dad has been a banker for over 20 years. Every summer and winter break, my sister and I would browse the supply closet for envelopes, copy paper, pens, and sticky notes—anything we could fit in our small hands at that age. I still remember wasting paper and time just to pass the hours until Dad took us to the deli down the street for lunch. We occupied one of my dad's favorite coworkers' by having her print-out coloring sheets for us to stay occupied in the side room because we had already raided the candy drawer and emptied out the lollipops behind the teller counter. After driving Dad crazy and distracting him from work long enough, we were finally told to go upstairs and hang out on the stained couch in the break room for the rest of the afternoon until he came to get us. Naturally, we did a little exploring and found the jackpot. A conference room filled with a plethora of

pens, paper, and far too many helium tanks for a bank to reasonably have. I think the ladies of the bank enjoyed watching us grow up more than we enjoyed writing with each pen we could find. Banks will always have a certain smell and feel that makes me nostalgic.





**CHAPTER II**

Well Kept  
Records of  
Vacations



**Nanci Rainey**

*Marlton, New Jersey, United States*

## SINKING DONUTS

“You want me to float in one of those?” Lily shrieked, “You gotta be kidding me, they look like over-inflated donuts.”

Emma fell to the ground laughing, “Yea, silly. We’re gonna go tubing in a donut. Are you for real?”

“Ahh, not a cloud in sight. We picked the perfect day for tubing, don’t ya think?”

Lily shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes, “If you say so.”

Emma wasn’t surprised by Lily’s lack of enthusiasm. Emma was a petite ball of energy, shorter than most of the girls in her class. Her blonde ringlets grazed her shoulders and her sapphire blue eyes sparkled when she spoke. She rarely took a breath between words and when she asked a question, and she never waited for an answer. She loved riding fast, twisting roller coasters,

climbing tall rock walls, and watching scary movies. She even found joy in petting a snake.

Lily was soft-spoken and just a bit taller than Emma. She rarely made eye contact, hiding her green-flecked hazel eyes. She preferred to curl up with a good book or watch *Gilmore Girls* and munch popcorn. Lily preferred to have her feet close to the ground, the thought of roller coasters sent shivers down her spine, and petting a snake? No way!

“Come on!” Emma grabbed Lily’s hand and skipped down a sandy path toward the riverbank. The event guide, Tasha, was waiting at the launching area with the other tubers. She collected waivers and permission forms signed by their parents and handed each girl a rubber tube and a safety vest. She blew her whistle to get the girls’ attention, and spoke in a crisp voice, “We want everyone to be safe and have fun! No standing, no diving, and please, stay inside your tubes. Remember, we must stick together!” She tied the tubes together with heavy braided tow ropes.

Emma and Lily settled into the last two tubes. The girls pulled down the rims of their hats to shield their eyes from the sun and slathered sunblock on their faces, shoulders, necks, and arms. Some of the tubers were tossing frisbees in the air. Others were splashing the water with their hands and kicking their feet. Emma rested her back on her tube and closed her eyes. Her legs were outstretched over the tube with her feet just skimming the cool water. Lily sat motionless with her legs twisted together like a pretzel inside her tube and her arms crossed in front of her chest.

The tubes created soothing ripples in the water. The sky was a soft, delicate blue, with golden rays streaming down. The

trees along the shore danced in harmony, swaying like a cheerful chorus line. The refreshing breeze tickled their sun-kissed skin.

Halfway down the river, Tasha announced, "We're getting close to the Hot Dog Man. It's lunch time. I hope everyone's hungry!" Then she led them in a sing-along to the tune of "*She'll be 'coming 'round the mountain. 'We are coming down the river, here we come! Yes, we're coming down the river, and we are mighty hungry! Get our hot dogs ready, here we come!*"

The Hot Dog Man was a floating concession stand anchored in the middle of the Delaware River where the tubers stopped for a hot dog, a bag of chips, and a can of Coca-Cola.

It was the only attraction in the vast river, aside from the occasional speedboat whizzing by. The sun was getting stronger and the girls were baking in their tubes. They splashed water on each other to cool themselves from the penetrating heat.

While bobbing in their tubes, the girls spotted a family of ducks paddling nearby.

"Hey, we must be close, the ducks are waiting for our crumbs." Emma giggled.

"I don't think ducks eat hot dogs, Emma. They're probably just floating around cooling off like we are."

"I think they'll eat whatever they find," said Emma. "But I tell ya, no duck's gettin' my hot dog."

Their shrills of laughter startled the ducks and the swiftly flew across the sky.

As the sun climbed higher, the marshmallow shapes in the sky began to shift. Tasha took a call on her phone then blew her whistle and shouted, "Change of plans girls. We need to head back. Let's go! Quickly!"

“Head back, why? We didn’t get lunch. I thought we were getting hot dogs?” Emma asked.

She continued twirling in her tube. “We’re hungry!”

“I’m sorry, Emma,” said Tasha. “I just got an alert. There’s a storm heading our way and we have to head back. It’s not safe to be out here.”

“Bummer,” said Emma.

“Follow me now, girls.” Tasha insisted, “Grab onto the ropes. We’ll tow in together.”

“Okay, we’re coming,” said Emma.

Emma purposely lagged behind the group pulling Lily’s tube to a stop.

“Let’s go. Now, Emma. I’m not kidding.”

Emma rolled her eyes, “Oh alright. Geez.”

But before the two could catch up to Tasha and the others, the temperature shifted dramatically and the gentle tide began to surge. Dark, rumbling clouds covered the sky. Crashing waves propelled the tubers down the furious river. Murky water swirled around the rubber floats, drenching the girls. Wet clothes clung to their shivering bodies like a second skin. The turbulence violently tossed the tubes from side to side. Emma and Lily lost control of their tubes and vanished into the darkness.

“Can you see anything, Emma? Where’s everyone?”

Emma didn’t respond. Tasha and the other girls were nowhere to be found.

Lily screamed at her friend, “Why did”t you listen? You always do what you want, Emma. Now look. We’re out here alone.”

Emma knew Lily was right, and for the first time, she was frightened. Rather than answer Lily, she let out a loud **“H E L P! . . . H E L P!”**

Lily joined in, **“H E L P! PLEASE SOMEBODY HELP US!”**

No one could hear them. Their desperate pleas were swallowed by the rumbling thunder.

Lily hugged her tube, terrified by the deafening booms. Marble-sized hailstones pelted their cheeks and whipped against the rubber.

“I’m afraid, Emma. Thunder scares me. I’m cold and wanna go home,” Lily cried. Her knuckles were turning white as she clenched them tightly around the tube.

“Emma, you said tubing was fun. This isn’t fun at all. We’re stranded and no one will find us, not ever.”

“You can’t blame the weather on me. Besides, when Tasha sees we’re missing, someone will come for us. They gotta.”

“Just ‘cause you say they’ll come doesn’t mean they will. We’re stranded in the middle of nowhere with these stupid sinking donuts. We’re gonna drown and you know it, we’re gonna drown!”

“No. We’re not, Lily. Chill. The water can’t be that deep. I can swim, I’ll go for help.”

“Emma, no, don’t you dare leave me. It’s too dangerous.”

A streak of light flashed through the dark sky followed by another loud boom. Lily trembled in her tube.

“See that? If we don’t drown we’ll be struck by lightning. We’re not safe out here.”

Emma knew she had to get help. After all, she was a good swimmer.

**SPLASH!** She dove into the furious river kicking her feet and swooshing the water with her arms without direction. She was lost in the dark with only flickering bolts above. The shore

was nowhere in sight. Panic surged through her chest as she paddled fiercely against the current, but the river had its own agenda, turning into a wild, twisting tsunami.

“Emma! Where are you?” Lily’s heart was racing, she could hear it thumping in her chest. The current carried her further into the darkness. Her tube swayed and dipped in the turbulent waves. Her sandals flew off her feet. Her soaked, tangled hair whipped against her face, and her body shook with fear. The waves were getting higher and more violent. Lily’s tube overturned and she plunged underwater. Gasping for breath, she surfaced and cried out,

**“E M M A! WHERE ARE YOU?”**

“I’m here! Hold on!” Emma called out. Kicking her feet as fast as propellers on a speedboat. Her toes stiffened with cramps and it felt like buoys were strapped to her arms. It took all her strength to fight the waves. She finally reached Lily and grabbed onto her tube.

“It’s alright, Lily. I’m here.”

The girls huddled in the water, clinging to their tubes while Emma took inventory of their surroundings.

“There!” Emma exclaimed.

They paddled vigorously to the shore. Drenched and shivering, they hovered beneath a large tree, using its hanging branches and leaves as a giant umbrella.

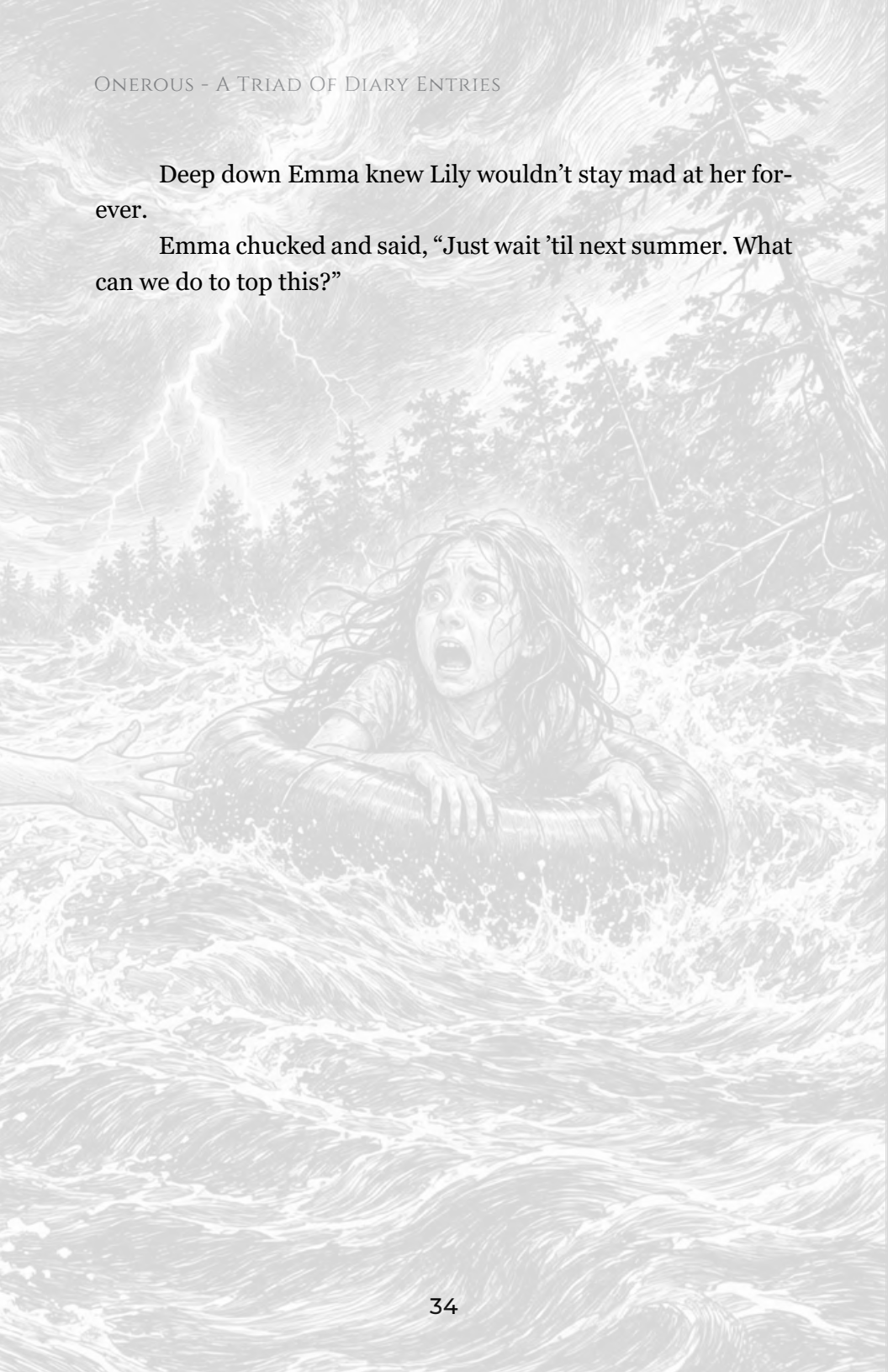
Lily’s hands were trembling, “That was terrifying! I thought we were lost forever!”

“But we weren’t!” Emma replied. “We stayed together and we made it.”

Lily still quivering mumbled, “I’m still mad that you left me alone, Emma.”

Deep down Emma knew Lily wouldn't stay mad at her forever.

Emma chuckled and said, "Just wait 'til next summer. What can we do to top this?"



**Jane Majkiewicz**

*Louisville, Colorado, United States*

## ADIRONDACK ANGUISH

In this photo, Anne sits at the end of a dock, pensive and confident, elbows on knees, yellow-gold sweatshirt draped over her adolescent frame, a baseball cap covering a pageboy haircut.

The 1970s thankfully gave us more than unappealing hairstyles. For my sister and me, they offered exhilarating freedom. In that photo, we were in the Adirondacks on a rare family vacation. Anne and I took a small boat out on the lake by ourselves, an outboard motor attached after multiple attempts by my father.

In my memory, Anne steered first. She was older and always protected me. We rounded a bend and the shoreline shrank. Our cabin became only a speck. Mom and Dad seemed far away, and without knowing it, Anne and I were rehearsing our futures—floating on unknown waters, navigating murkiness, unsure of

our destination but certain that we had each other. Mom and Dad weren't there, but we knew they weren't far away.

Out on the lake we were breathless with liberation. We skimmed the surface, sensing the vast, mysterious expanse beneath. Ultimately, it offered only two choices: sink or swim.

As an adult, I found a third option: dive deeper. And trust that my family would always be there to pull me up.

On Lake Canada, we were practicing a talent encouraged and condemned in equal measure: take charge and be self-sufficient. I can still hear Mom's refrain: "Oh, you're *SO* independent." She delivered it with pride and sarcasm braided together—sometimes hissed, sometimes snarled.

When it was my turn with the motor, I yanked the lever too hard, jerking us into unexpected speed. It wasn't the first time I overdid it. The day before, after my father struggled to mount the motor onto the boat, I gripped and revved the handle, sending us into a tailspin, nearly toppling my father into the lake.

Poor Dad spent the first day wrestling with that old borrowed motor. He even fell off the dock on his initial attempt to attach it—his "second moment of intimacy with Lake Canada," he joked.

His first came earlier, when he returned from the store to find my mother and me screaming on the shore. Our dog, Max, had swum too far and had become tangled in a mooring. Dad ran in, freed him, and hauled him back—a familiar tableau: my father the hero, my mother the spectator.

When Dad finally managed to secure the motor, he realized my uncle had forgotten the ignition key. "Typical Majkiewicz luck!" He refused to let that stop him. He jerry-rigged a makeshift switch and pumped furiously to start it. Nothing happened—"ex-

cept going from a B cup to a C cup,” he quipped. A local boat shop replaced a broken valve, and at last, we set out.

“When everything finally came together,” he later reminisced, “it was just so pretty. It kind of made it all worth it.” Even when, the next day, the shearing pin gave out and sent him back to the store.

Our cabin on Lake Canada had a tin roof—an instant problem for my mother, who hated noise. When the rain inevitably arrived, the roof’s incessant tap-tap-tap became like Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart.” The more she tried not to notice, the louder it grew.

The drive from Brooklyn had been a spectacle: two kids, a dog, food, the motor that wouldn’t fit in the trunk, and a small television—my mother’s idea of “roughing it.” The cabin itself was “extremely rustic,” as my father charitably put it. My mother had other words. One tiny heater, a faulty stove, a bat for a housemate, and a toilet that barely flushed. Cold at night, cold in the morning. And—unforgivable to her—a complete absence of sugar.

By Labor Day weekend, when an accident knocked out electricity around the lake and no one knew when it might return, my mother declared the trip over. That was all she needed to send us packing.

We rarely vacationed, and this one didn’t help. I didn’t know then how symbolic it was. Plans unravel. Motors break. You fix one thing and break another. You can’t shake the cold from your bones. You open the fridge to find you’re out of half-and-half. You finally go on vacation, and everyone gets sick. Life is always life, even when you try to escape it.

Years later, Anne and I sat huddled in my father’s home office after he died suddenly of a heart attack at 56. We sifted

through papers, stunned and sniffing. His desk overflowed with Post-It notes listing songs, books, recipes, and quotes. I flipped through old issues of *Bon Appétit*, wondering if I'd ever feel satiated again. During the funeral days, while others grew silent and lost their appetites, I ate and ate. I had a vacancy inside me—a whole warehouse I tried to fill with the love of food we once shared.

Our sadness rippled through that room like the buckled scarlet carpet that always threatened to trip you. The office had once been Anne's bedroom, where we blasted Queen and got stoned on a couple of occasions. The pink rose wallpaper, yellowed with age, held the residue of abandoned dreams—dreams my father surely contemplated at that desk while my mother smoked downstairs. Anne and I were grown by then, out in the world.

Dad loved food, music, and stories, and he shared all of them with me. I could bring him any discovery—a recipe, a quirky storyteller at an old mill, a Sargent exhibit, reggae at a rasta bar—and he'd be game. With him, life always had flavor, rhythm, and a narrative thread.

Without him, everything felt flat.

In his office, I found a file holding all my writing. A sixth-grade poem about a tree. My dry technology-magazine articles from my twenties that I thought no one could possibly care about—painful stuff for someone dreaming of being a real writer. He kept them anyway. He knew I was sensitive. “Don't be so super sensitive, Janey,” he'd say gently. He worried about how rejection wilted me.

He suggested a few times, tentatively, “Maybe think of writing as a hobby?” He wanted to protect me, even from my own hope.

Then I found his own essay—the one I’d typed for him in junior high. Dad hated his sales jobs, daydreaming of more, taking classes when he could. My parents had married at 20 with Anne on the way. He went from trade school to become an electrician to selling medical paper. He took night classes to earn his degree. He was a first-gen before the term existed.

His essay was about our Adirondack trip. On the title page, his professor wrote, “A: A heroic attempt.”

He began: “She was really pissed.”

“God damn it, I can’t take it anymore. We’re leaving.’ About an hour later the old Chevy was packed to the rafters and ready to roll. A real traveling gypsy show.”

I loved his version. The same story I had told, but with details only he could give.

“She resigned herself to the fact that she was trapped for the week . . . until the electric stove started smoking like twenty cigars. From then on it was all downhill for Ellen. ‘Ed, the water pressure is down. Ed, there is no hot water. Ed, it is so cold—put the heater on high. Ed, the john won’t flush.’ . . . Even Ellen had enjoyed the soft rain on a tin roof, but four days later of steady downpour and we all felt like participants in the Normandy invasion. Ellen’s nerves were like lightning.”

The next morning the electricity was out. “‘Yes, dear, only to places where we will be served, I promise.’ Ellen and the kids and the dog and the outboard motor and I were gone by 9:30 a.m.”

I thought about the promises we make, the ones we keep, the ones we can't, even with the people we love most. We want vacations to offer escape, but real life always rides along.

We never returned to upstate New York; in fact my family never took many vacations. When I moved to Vermont in my late twenties, I stood at Lake Champlain's edge, looking toward the Adirondacks.

It wasn't really a bad vacation, I realized. I could see something in those mountains as clear as my family's love—the jagged edges reaching upward, solid and steady.

I could see my mother's disappointment, my father's persistence, my sister's protection, and my own introspection. I could see how I needed to rev the motor of my own life, the way I had once spun that boat in circles. I could see Max tangled in the mooring, and how my family again and again answered the call to rescue one another.



**Ellen Scolnic**

*Phila, Pennsylvania, United States*

## THE ELEPHANT PARADE IN BOTSWANA

Even on paper it sounded risky. The itinerary read “. . . travel to the border of South Africa and traverse the Limpopo River in a cable car.” Safe at home I naively asked, “Why isn’t there a bridge across the river?”

I asked it again, out loud, weeks later as I watched my precious children climb into a wire cage hanging from a thin cable that would carry them across the river into Botswana. “Cable car” was a generous description for the primitive conveyance. As is common in the rest of the world, no one said anything about weight limits, safety belts or liability. But the man turning the gear to move the cable, did split our family into two groups to make the crossing. Our two teens went first, alongside a local Botswana man who was simply commuting to work across the

border. After the kids safely reached the far bank and sent the cage back, it was our turn. “Don’t be worried,” the operator told me. “When the river is high you must drag through the water. The river is low now.”

Going on safari with our two teens, (ages 20 and 15) was a once in a lifetime adventure and crossing a river in a cage was just the beginning. As we drove across the dusty landscape of Southern Botswana, our guide reminded us that although it was August, it was early spring in Southern Africa. The thorn bushes and grass were sparse and bare. The animals were thin and hungry. They had survived winter and were hanging on until warmer weather to come.

We got into the open Land Rover with Dan, our ranger and Commando, the tracker, and started the drive across the vast 75,000 acre Mashatu Game Reserve. We weren’t expecting to see animals. We were just getting a ride into the camp. But we were soon awestruck when we intercepted a parade of elephants walking down a dry riverbed. The ranger stopped the jeep and we simply sat and stared as nearly 50 elephants—baby elephants sticking close to their moms, teenage elephants herding the younger ones and elderly female elephants who are slow and deliberate in their step—all walked past us in a long line.

We learned that elephants burn vast calories walking great distances—up to 90 miles a day—and they must eat almost continuously. They use their trunks to break off branches from the small trees and peel off the tasty tree bark. They leave a wide trail of broken bushes, battered brush and stripped branches in their wake. Our son was impressed when we saw a young tree that had been completely uprooted, knocked over by elephants. “Oh, they think the roots are so tasty,” ranger Dan explained. “The elephant

just puts her head on the trunk, pushes, and the tree falls over. Then they eat the roots.” Andy is 6’4” tall, but he couldn’t get over being able to push over a tree when you were hungry.

For the next few days, we drove for three hours each morning and afternoon with Dan and Commando looking for animals. A guide at Mashatu for over two decades, Dan was expert at predicting the elephants’ movements. His expertise helped us to intercept their path many times. To help spot animals, Commando taught us to recognize various animal footprints in the dusty road as well as the different kinds of poop that was all over. In zoos, poop clean-up is a constant job. In the wild no one cleans it up. Piles of small black pellets from impala, chalky white balls from hyenas and big, round straw-filled balls of poop from elephants are ubiquitous signposts of who walked where about how long ago.

Elephants are intelligent and friendly and our rangers taught us how to safely encounter them in the wild. Stay seated in the jeep and always approach an elephant from the front. Never come between a mother and her child. That’s what my son and I kept telling ourselves, the day an elephant broke away from the group and ambled towards our open vehicle. Andy and I were sitting in the last row of seats and the elephant headed towards the back of the jeep, trunk extended. We sat perfectly still as she came closer and closer and closer. We were frozen. When she was about a foot away from us, she lifted her trunk, sniffed my hair, touched my shoulder and continued on her way.

After the elephant parade we would have been happy to end the day there. We had seen a few zebra and impala as we drove and we thought our day was complete. Yet we soon learned what would be our daily mantra: you can never predict what an-

imals you will see and just when you think you have seen it all—something else will happen.

We drove on but then came to a sudden stop because there was a giraffe lying in the road. He was on his side, legs flailing, unable to stand. Dan stopped the jeep so we could watch and he could radio, to tell the other rangers about our discovery. It was upsetting, especially to our daughter who began to cry, to watch the huge giraffe kick his legs and breathe heavily, struggling but unable to stand up. Dan pointed out two giraffes a distance away, he told us that he suspected the wounded one had just lost a fight over a female.

We learned that game reserves do not intervene in animal confrontations unless it is because of something humans have done. Every day, lions kill buffalo, leopards hunt impala and apparently, giraffes battle it out over mating rights and the rangers do not interfere. But, for example, Dan told us, when a wandering elephant showed up with his leg wrapped in wire fencing from a local farm, the rangers freed the elephant's leg.

Sunset was coming and we had not yet made it to camp, so we left the dying giraffe. Naïvely, I hoped that we would return the next day, he would be gone and we could imagine a happy ending in our minds. But it was not to be. The giraffe died that night and became a food source for the next week. In a macabre circle of life, we drove by each day to see who was eating the dead giraffe. First came the hyenas, who eat so much that their bellies distend and they literally keel over from stuffing themselves silly. Then came jackals, who look like small coyotes with pointy ears. Finally vultures, the ugly hook-necked scavenger birds, swooped in for the last remains.

The abundant wildlife we saw at Mashatu was astonishing: Elephants, zebra, impala, baboons, giraffes—including a week-old baby giraffe just learning to frolic, who made us feel a little better about the one who had died, and warthogs. We saw a variety of antelope including kudu, eland, springboks, bushboks and waterboks. We saw baby leopard cubs wrestling on a tree branch and three cheetah brothers who stick together and hunt as a team. We were four feet away from a pride of female lions, watching them sleep and relax, when the dominant mother decided to roar her location as a signal to the nearby male. We sat scared yet transfixed, unable to leave, listening in awe, as the male lion roared back across the dry riverbed. As my daughter Jessica described it, “You think you’ve heard a lion roar, on TV or at the zoo but when you are right next to them you feel the air vibrate. You feel the roar in your chest.”

Mashatu camp has limited electricity, so when night falls it’s dark—like power-outage dark. There is no glow from streetlights or nearby houses. Guests are given flashlights to help navigate the path to dinner, served around a campfire. We fell asleep listening to the absolute silence of the African night. No nearby traffic, no airplanes overhead, no television talking in the background. It was silent except for the cackling of the hyenas and the cracking of branches as impala walked through the woods outside our tent flap.

#### If You Go:

You may not realize how vast Africa is until you try to arrange

transportation across parts of the continent. Our flight on South African Airways ([flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)) from Dulles, Washington,

D.C. to Joberg made a refueling stop in Dakar, Senegal to change crew but passengers from the U.S. were not allowed to get off the plane. It was a 19 hour flight. Most flights within South Africa go through Joberg. We flew from Cape Town to Joberg, then Joberg to Polokwane. At the Polokwane airport, a van picked us up to drive 3 hours to the Botswana border.

Mashatu Game Camp:

Mailing address :

PO Box 55514, Northlands, Johannesburg, 2116 South Africa.

Phone: +27 11 442 2267

website: mashatu.com

The “main camp” is hotel-style, air-conditioned rooms. We stayed in the

wooded “tent camp,” eight canvas-walled “tents” that have real beds, an electric bedside light, and private toilet, sink and shower open to the stars. All meals are included and each night we ate buffet dinner with our ranger and other guests served outdoors around a campfire.

*Not to be included with story.*

Cover Letter—Tell us about you

Ellen Scolnic is an award-winning Philadelphia writer and mom of three now adults. . Her work appears in local and national publications including *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Parents* magazine and *The Christian Science Monitor*. With her friend, Joyce Eisenberg, she writes as The Word Mavens. They are the authors of three books, the *Dictionary of Jewish Words*, *The Whole Spiel*: Funny essays about digital nudniks, seder selfies and chicken soup memories and *Stuff Every Grandmother Should Know* from Quirk/Random House..

Connect with them at [TheWordMavens.com](http://TheWordMavens.com)

**A J Navab**

*Dubai, United Arab Emirates*

## MONKEYING AROUND

*“Play with the vines long enough and you’ll swing into trouble.”*

Not that I was swinging on vines at all. It was the monkeys. We were pleasantly sitting in our car. And as they say, “quit monkeying around!” Only that my grandma (may her soul rest in peace) didn’t listen and soon we found ourselves in the middle of the forest road, surrounded by several dozen wild monkeys ready to attack. It was for sure a Tarzan moment except none of us could talk to monkeys and all of us were in trouble. It made a story to tell and one that I’ll never forget.

This happened years ago, probably around mid-2011 or 2012. I was a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old teenager, a bright-eyed high schooler preparing for my college years of journalism ahead,

photography discovery and an open-eyed curiosity of the world around me. Neither of those things have died down as I got older. Today, I've become a bright-eyed, curiosity-driven journalist with a camera and love for travel.

That love for travel is something that I received from my parents who are crazy adventure travellers themselves. Forests, mountains, rivers and futuristic cities all the way from the jungles of Kerala to the cities in Tokyo—you name it—we'll be in those corners. In their early days of marriage, they went on a bike ride inside a snake infested forest. Need I say more?

And so, the love for travel has always been in my blood sprinkled with a bit of attraction to movie-ish adventures. It is a shared love that, once in a blue moon, gets us in the knick-knacks of mild trouble that become great stories later. That said, we are very careful travellers with a respect for the wild and an even respect for history and our planet. But to err is human and we find ourselves in situations we did not plan for. This is one such tale.

Now back to the main story, somewhere in the mid 2012s, during my short visit to Kerala, India (I am a Dubai child and lived my whole life in the Arabian nights), my dad planned a family trip with us and his parents to Valaparai, a beautiful scenic hill with tea plantations that borders Tamil Nadu with Kerala. We do this quite often when we travel back to our native land in Ernakulam, Kerala. My parents love to go on road trips everywhere. and I love going with them. Sometimes its just the three of us. Sometimes there are others. This time, it was my grandparents.

To get to Valaparai, you need to cross protected rainforests areas. Coming back is no different.

Hence, on our way back crossing the dense jungle known for elephants, tigers and wild animals, we stopped to refill our

water bottle with fresh water from a nearby waterfall. And as we got back in the car and began to move, my grandmother (dad's mom) spotted a monkey sitting at the edge of the road.

Now, it is basic knowledge and caution to *not throw food at wild animals!* Of course dad knew this and warned her against it. As a mid-teen who was seeing forest adventures for only the third or fourth time (ones I can remember at least), I didn't know any better and just sat in the backseat of the car with my grandmother and grandfather on either side of me, a camera in my hand and a puzzled expression across my face.

I watched as my grandma plucked a piece of bread and threw it at the monkey followed by my dad's strong "Hey! Don't throw food at them!"

This is where caution clocked out and danger walked in.

My grandma's response? "Don't worry, it's just hungry."

And my dad's, "This is not going to end well." Truer words have never been spoken.

As he predicted, it almost didn't. The monkey grabbed the piece of bread, followed by a couple more and before we knew it, in a lightning speed that betrayed our eyes, one of its companions managed to climb into the trunk of our car through the backseat window.

I immediately whipped around to face the monkey. My mom, sitting in the front seat of the car, covered her ears out of fright and reflex. My grandmother opened her umbrella inside the car. Her reason? So that the monkey doesn't attack her from behind—all the while I sat staring at the monkey with the camera in my hand.

I watched as it expertly opened the zipper of one of our bags and took the bath towels, followed by our clothes one by one. It was looking for food.

My dad watched from the driver seat as the wild monkeys started to swing and plop on the nearby branches of the trees around us. We were surrounded by their troops. Some of them dropped down to the road and surrounded our car, and their absence in the trees were filled by their companions. They hissed, snarled and bared their teeth as they moved in close to our vehicle. We were trapped.

“Drive us out of here!” My mom whispered.

“I can’t! If I drive too fast the monkey inside will start attacking us all. We need to remain calm.” Dad replied back. “We need to get it out of the car before the rest of them start attacking.”

“I have an idea,” grandfather replied. I watched with wide eyes as he slowly got out of the car while the monkeys glared at him, ready to pounce any minute. He opened the trunk and made a sound startling the monkey inside. It swung out of the window in time as the rest of the troops jumped forward to attacks us in hoards simultaneously, screeching in what sounded like war cries.

My grandfather dived into the trunk and shut the door. “Go! Go!” He yelled and my dad floored the accelerator with my grandfather still in the trunk, driving us out of there like our lives depended on it.

I watched as the monkeys chased us for a few seconds before giving up on the hunt. It almost resembled the scene from Jurassic Park (1993) when Dr. Malcolm and Ellie Sattler drove off in the car as the T-rex chased them.

I let out a sigh of relief and I'm sure the others did too. We stopped in the clearing on a safe zone so my grandfather could get out of the trunk and come back in. We all laughed with relief and dad, albeit with gentleness, gave an earful to my grandmother for breaking the rules of the wild.

And this was all just hours before me, my mom and dad were cornered by wild dogs in a tribal forest village and narrowly escaped with our legs intact. What the hell happened, you ask? *That* is a story for another time.

And this, my friends, is why you should always listen to the rules of the wild. It's a different world of its own.

If you monkey around, you *will* find out.





**CHAPTER III**

Writings of  
Kings

**Alexandra Grant**

*Wichita, Kansas, United States*

## JANUARY 20, 1793

It is for posterity's sake, that I your king do write, these last words and a caring warning, for tomorrow, I go to the gallows. As your sovereign and god on earth, I do not claim to understand the hostility and dissension among you. I have been an exemplary ruler and have graced you, my subjects with every kind of respect.

Our economic woes were untenable, I am in agreement, but to over through your beloved king? Your queen is an eccentric, tis true, however, she has lived with expectations of her own and I, as her spouse and beloved, lord, could not deny her.

Which man of you, would deny their wife?

I now accept my fate. I seemingly have no other recourse or solution for the actions your compatriots have taken or will

take. I will graciously give up my live and spirit to my people, my country, and my god.

I do however, disagree with your manner in attaining your goal of independence and freedom from rule.

You will always be ruled by another and another. There is no substitute for the rule of law. Be it through election or sovereignty, you will be governed by someone or some entity, and while they be to your approval, they will most certainly be at odds with you at some juncture of their rule, however long it is deemed acceptable.

Oppression will never leave you, nor poverty, as there will always be a giver of benefits and a taker, the industrious and the indolent, the wealthy eager to maintain their wealth and power, and the poor always seeking such. You nay believe this not to be the case, but soon henceforth you will come to see the veracity of my claim.

While you as a whole have elected to rebel against your king, I absolve you of your heinous crime. I do not however, give forbearance to the agitators that have become your provocateurs of your contention. They will, in some manner, be held to account, albeit, will not be your current sovereign.

I go to my fate fully believing that I have done not only what was required of me as king, but above requirement as your benevolent monarch.

You viewed my life and lifestyle as excessive, but I do not believe this so. I live as I have always lived. Would you wish less for the crown, for yourselves? No I do not fathom such a thing.

I pray that the future will look favorably on my reign and the legacy I will leave France. I will not be here to care either way,

but I hope for it. That too, along with my death will be at your behest.

I will regard you, my people, from where I will take up eternity, with fondness and with hope in the future of France.

I do not pretend nor will I venture to posture my pleasure at your mutiny, for I am indeed exasperated with the acts of the masses. I will not deny such. While I do not call for consequences to be incurred by everyone involved, I do call for an accounting to be given to your maker and for justice. May your insolence and the outcomes of such, be solely upon your heads and souls.

I go to my benevolent Lord, in peace. I go to be with him in glory.

Your Sovereign,

King of France and Navarre Louis XIV de Bourbon

## **Night Shade**

*Marshville, North Carolina, United States*

# **KING LEROYS MISSING LETTER**

Dear Anthony duke of chicory

I am writing to you now not as King seeking consol, but as your brother. For indeed, how heavy this crown I bare. As eldest it was my role, but in my heart and soul I do not know anymore. The night has grown long and the daylight is almost upon us. Not long after finishing my laminates shall the light peak over the mountains and into my chambers. My heart is too heavy to allow sleep to take me, my mind is too loud for peace. It is just in this moment within the confines of these words that I allow these doubts to manifest, for it has not been long since new of father death in the battle. I find myself in a curious position. Time pass- es as I write and once the sun is high an entourage of the whos whos of next county over shall arrive within a day. i could care

not if they shall arrive, these dukes spewing words of peace when we have no answers yet to how father died. He died on their land! Yet they claim his body has not yet been requited. I offered words of peace if he was to be returned yet they have no mention of fathers body arriving with them or to what has been done. There is not even time to mourn, I doubt even now if he is being carried and cared for with the respect he deserves.

Question everything, Anthony, and most importantly, everyone. To survive, to live, to give our country a possibility of surviving this war let alone the up-and-coming winter. It tires me so. Does it show bad on me? That i do not wish to converge and speak of peace?! When just a fortnight ago when the scuffles as these heathens claimed to call it ended with over 20 of my men dead! It seems they do not care that innocent blood was spilt on our borders. It seems that they do not mind if it is a means to an end. Til what end do they seek? Every time a messenger arrives from the borderlands a fear settles in my loins, one foreseeing only death as the men folk will not return, their fields left to wither, and their families will not starve off winter. Already I pulled from the farmers, the able and now even the young ones talk about joining the fight. One which I prayed for never needed to start. Till what end shall we go? To what end brother?

There is no end to this tyrants blood lust that I see. We shall talk, we shall meet. He shall see I am not to be messed with. Even though I may question this crown I shall not falter in fathers footsteps. I shall not back down. Peace will be sought yet but i fear i have already paid the cost inviting them here and that father will never be laid to rest in crypts of our legacy.

Fear not I shall push and persevere. I ask instead that if you have any able men send them this way. If our coming togeth-

er brings about the peace we all want, then we will need help to rebuild. If they come with war on the mind i ask that you are only a days journey away. I offer you a place of refuge for the winter. To you and yours, come aid me, rebuilding for you are next in line after me. If these dukes and men come instead not for peace but for my head, well I shall leave it to you into your hands to do what you seem fit. Do Seek retribution for father, for me, for our country and for our men.

The winter shall be enough dismal news, and we shall need to open our emergency funds to feed the people. My men shall post proclamations out into the land. We must come together if we shall all prosper. So come and stay in the winter; it shall be good to lay eyes on you and the children as well. It indeed has been too many seasons since we last seen each other and pray this finds you well. Come quickly though as it is only a day or two's journey before this envoy arrives. I pray this letter makes it in time.

Sincerely,  
Your Brother  
Leroy

**Margaret Morris**

*Gresham, Oregon, United States*

# OUT OF THE SHADOWS KING DRAENAK THE TEMPEST KING

Out of the Shadows, King Draenak, The Tempest King  
Diary,

Will the words I write solve all the problems that plague me? I am King Draenak Shadowstone, the Tempest King of Shadowmere, a tiny kingdom surrounded by wolves that wish to devour me. I keep my subjects alive, yet they want more. This minute, a horde of those miserable peasants is at my castle door, screaming they want food, clothes, and huts to keep out the rain. Screaming to be rid of the queen, Queen Shyra Shadowstone, the Tumultuous Queen of Shadowmere. I should not have to deal with them. I am their king. Because of me, the wolfen kingdoms

scrabbling outside my kingdom walls will someday be defeated. The shrieking awakens me nightly. My guards drive them away, but they return screaming that I should behead the Queen; screeching that she is evil. She is the Tumultuous Queen of Shadowmere, and it is not up to me to make her change. Whatever she wants to do with her servants is her decision to make and hers alone. I am busy. It is the fate they suffer if they cannot please her. I must go now and be the King.

Diary,

Look at Her Highness now. She is a bitter, wizened old woman, an impossible being, no longer the free spirit I chose for my queen. Matters of the heart must not concern a king; It is the queen's choice, and she cares not a whit for her king. It should be enough that I, King Draenak, chose her, Shyra Shadowshard, from a classless kingdom to be my queen. And what has she become? Nothing but a bloodthirsty evil witch.

I find myself whispering thoughts I cannot control. Talking to myself that the queen has had dozens of handmaidens, perfectly fine ones too, and what has happened before too long? She gets angered at some slight and, without a thought, lops off their heads. She can do that; she is the queen. Why do my guards whisper evil things about her? I know they do, I can see them whispering. I am a great king; should I lop off their heads?

Diary, "I must go now and leave my thoughts with you. It is time for King Draenak Shadowstone to go to my throne room and hold court, for all the peasants to see."

I closed my diary tenderly, laid it down, and smiled sweetly at the thought of how comforting it was to write in it. My diary does not plague me with silly questions. As I enter the throne room and take my rightful place as king, I swell into a stout, giant

of a man with my crown on top of my flowing red locks. My face is grim, as an important king's should be. I must not show a trace of emotion as I sit on my throne, the ruler of my kingdom.

“Godric, you are early. What do you want?”

“Sire, pardon me for disturbing you, but I come to report that your Queen wishes to be with you today. She and her two handmaidens are outside the doors. Might they come into this room and be in your presence, sire?”

I sat up sharply and said, “In here? Now?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, they are outside these doors now.”

Sagging, taking a deep breath, and looking out the window, I muttered. “Yes, they can join me.”

Godric shuddered as he turned and marched to the door. He had premonitions, and today his premonition was that someone would lose their head. It was not far-fetched to think that it might be him.

“The King is pleased that you and your handmaidens will be joining him, My Queen,” he smiled, bowed deeply, held his breath, awaiting her cry, to find out if he was to die today.

Today, in this moment, Godric would live.

Imagine being a little girl, playing outside, then suddenly being swept up by the Queen's horsemen and whisked away to the castle, being told you were going to learn to be the Queen's handmaiden? That's what happened to this slip of a girl-child, who was meekly following the haughty Queen and her nearly as arrogant handmaiden.

“Good Morning, Draenak,” the Queen purred as she sat to his right. Little Eriane crouched behind Calandra, her personal handmaiden, who knelt off to the side.

I was only half listening to the Queen's rant about her trials of the morning when the Queen shrieked, "OFF WITH HER HEAD." Then, POOF ... Calandra was gone, and that little slip of a girl-child, Eriane, became the Queen's next personal handmaiden.

That night, alone in my chambers, I sat at my desk, and for a brief moment held my diary close to my heart. I thought, I am ready, ready to cleanse my soul of the day. And I wrote furiously, lest the thoughts escape me. I wrote.

Diary,

How can I forget today? The day the Queen's handmaiden, Calandra, Queen Shyra's personal handmaiden of four years, accompanied her, carefree, into my presence, and then, in an instant, was no more. I must write of the horror that swept over my soul.

The Queen laughed, a hideous squealing cackle that seared my ears. My guards flooded the room, at the ready to kill the men they thought were attacking. But their faces, as one, turned a ghastly white at the carnage surrounding the queen. Horror roared. All but the Queen were frozen, unwilling slaves, witnesses to evil incarnate, Queen Shyra.

The Queen screamed at Eriane, "Girl, come, help your Queen out of these bloodied clothes, keep up, don't dawdle, my sword is always at the ready."...

"Good morning, Godric."

Godric came forward and knelt at the foot of my throne. He said, "Sire, there is a problem; I am at fault. I did not think I needed to set guards at their rooms. During the night, all of the extra handmaidens fled. We have nobody to replace Eriane. The Queen should not be left with no replacements, sire."

I couldn't believe I was being plagued again with such nonsense.

"GET SOME. I don't want to hear the Queen whine that she has nobody. GET SOME. NOW. Send out the horsemen. GO."

"Yes, my lord, my all-powerful King." And off Godric ran to give my horsemen directions.

I ambled back to my sitting room, smiled at the sight of my diary. Sitting down, I gathered my thoughts and wrote.

Diary,

Why am I bothered to solve things that are so trivial? Why do I have a bloodthirsty Queen on my hands? I can't get the sight of blood spurting over her out of my mind. I wonder if she relishes the taste of warm blood on her tongue as she licks it off her hands.

I cannot waste my men in gathering up peasants she will needlessly kill; I need them at the borders fighting off the hordes who are plundering and slaughtering my subjects...

"Godric, what is it now?"

"I've lost count of how many servants have met their fate in Her Majesty's court, My Lord. I fear for the day, I hear "OFF WITH HIS HEAD," the instant before I die. Dread has eaten away at me. Fear has sucked the life out of me," Godric was sobbing, then knelt deeply to continue, "Please hold your temper, Your Majesty, as I tell you that her viciousness must have done the same to you. Today, I am going to change. I am no longer going to be a slave to fate, but I am going to control my destiny. I will no longer accept the evil ways of my queen. A violent death shouldn't be anyone's fate. The fate of your subjects is in my hands."

“Be gone, Godric, I want to hear no more. Leave me out of it.”

“Good morning, Eriane,” The Queen hissed, “you look different. Am I going to have a problem with you today that I will need to deal with?”

“No, my good Queen. I am just pleased that I saw a beautiful sunrise when I got up to prepare myself for helping you. That’s all, the sight of a beautiful sunrise this morning put a smile on my face.”

The Queen scowled at this snip of a girl who was standing by her bed, smiling at seeing a sunrise.

“Wipe it off your face. Help me dress in my finest, since I have serious matters to take care of, and I will not have a smile.”

“Yes, my Queen.” And Eriane hid her smile; glad the Queen had noticed something that she might not have seen but only heard of – a smile.

Diary,

I cannot believe it. The queen has changed. She has lost her wizened look. Her body is lithe and her face bright. Her voice is soft and smooth. I don’t know how, but the nymph of the woman I married has returned. I must find out how.

“Godric,” I asked, “Do you know what has changed her majesty, Queen Shrya?”

“I do, sire.”

“Will it be permanent?”

“It easily can be, with a bit of change in you, too, my Lord.”

“Tell me,” I said, “What is the secret. How much do I pay?”

“You pay nothing.” Godric looked straight at the king and smiled, “All Eriane has done is smile and say please and thank you to the Queen, sire.”

“Hmmm, I was wondering why the Queen asked me what a smile was. I had to search my memory to explain.” I said, “Is that all it takes, a smile and those three simple words, please and thank you?”

“Only if you truly mean it, sire,” Godric replied.







**CHAPTER IV**

Penning's of  
Single Parents

**John Dennis**

*Malmö, Sweden*

## CINNAROLLS

He took off the glasses so he could see.

“I never learn,” he mumbled.

The street was a river like glassy black surface. Squinting out over the afternoon hustle and bustle he thought, wet weather divides people. Drivers sprayed street-water on whatever got in the way and pedestrians avoided eye contact.

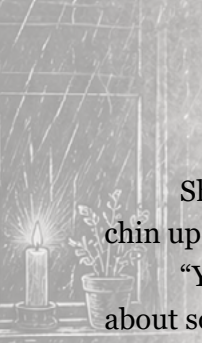
The rain sounded like sizzling bacon despite the winter chill. That, and the steady stream of traffic, made it difficult to hear the voice coming from the left and three feet below.

Not really listening, he heard, “. . . It . . . cool . . . too.”

Then, “Pappa!?”

Looking down, he said, “Sorry, Pumpkin. What?”

“Cursivey. It’s curvy. I learned to write my name . . . all curvy. Today.”



She held out a paper with writing on it and then tilted her chin up while opening her mouth to catch raindrops.

“Your name is Curvy? Show me at home. Let’s hurry. I’m about soaked.”

“To the bone?”

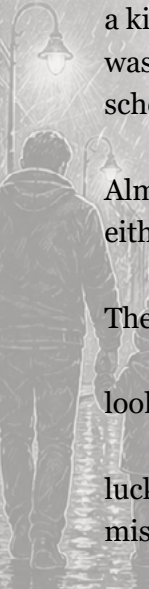
Grabbing her damp, mittened hand, he said, “Wet as a noodle. Inside and out. I never learn. I keep my coat on while you get yours on and I start to sweat. Everytime. Come on, Curvy!”

They dashed the sidewalk as quickly as her six-year-old legs allowed.

The rain didn’t bother her. It never did. More than once, she and her BFF had taken street-showers in summer rain with shampoo.

He thought about the ready-to-bake cinnamon-rolls in the oven. Her favorite. The apartment should already smell like a bakery.

Home: a first floor (bars on windows), one bedroom (hers), a kitchenette/living room with a bed sofa. It wasn’t much. But, it was theirs. It *was* home. And, it was in the city plus close to her school.



He drew a sigh of relief as they turned onto their street. Almost there. It felt a bit like an alley with only four buildings on either side. A dead end.

He had left a lit candle in the window that faced the street. The Cinna-Signal.

He said, “Look up at the kitchen, Jules.” She stopped, looked across the street and shouted, “Cinnarolls!”

She was a happy kid. He didn’t know why he’d gotten so lucky. He didn’t even like kids. He loved her. He had stopped missing her mother. She would never have let him leave a candle



lit in the window like that or leave the oven on. He heard an echo of a memory of her voice, "Will you never learn? Grow up! Think. Think! Think of the consequences."

He then felt a hand launch towards the street. He held the empty mitten and then came a giggily, "Last one to the stoop is a rotten egg!"

It happened so fast. She had been right there beside him. Then she was running across the street.

There was a dull thud. The thud of a six-year-old's body bouncing off the grill of a pick-up. He saw her turn mid-air towards the asphalt. Her red and white, polka dot beanie flew off her dirty blonde curls. She made no sound when she landed face up. The back of her head bounced off the concrete, twice. He ran to her, slipped and fell, then scrambled to her side. The truck rolled a little closer, then stopped.

Scared to move her, he desperately tried to find a pulse or breath. Anything. His own breathing was so heavy it formed a white cloud above her body. Then he saw a dark shadow spreading from under her head and heard wailing. It was loud and seemed distant. It wasn't.

In disbelief, he looked up at the grill of the car. Its lights blinded him. From his knees, he stared towards the dark windshield but could see no driver. He did see a rusty hood and water being thrown from the passenger side wiper into the darkness.

He cried, "Help! Help me!"

The engine revved.

Then he bent over and used his body to shield hers. The car lurched forward once, twice. Then stopped. He could have kissed the bumper.

In frustration he urged his daughter, “Julia, honey, it’s OK. Julia, honey, wake up.”

The headlights, like spotlights at the theater, bathed the two bodies creating long shadows. He didn’t see but felt the truck jerk back. He glanced up quickly, license plate, he thought, and before being blinded, his eyes fastened on a worn bumper sticker.

”We Aim to Please”

Then, the light began to dissipate as the truck backed slowly away from the scene. Its speed increased. The faster it moved, the more it swerved. It scraped and tore at the sides of the parked cars in its way. Rolling back and into the T-shaped intersection and miraculously missed hitting any of the rush hour traffic. Fortunately, for an elderly woman with a toy poodle, the pick-up missed the pair when it rolled up onto the sidewalk. The tiny woman frowned and then comforted her frightened dog. All traffic stopped briefly. Then, the pick-up signaled right and disappeared into the oncoming night.

He sat there, drenched in the street, rocking her small frame as if movement might undo something. Anything. A siren sounded faintly in the distance, not louder than his thoughts but softer than her silence.

A man’s voice shouted, “Don’t move her! I called 911! I saw the whole thing”.

But he didn’t hear the man, he heard the echo, screaming now, “You never learn! You never learn! You never learn!”

“I . . . never . . . learn,” he whispered and pressed his forehead to hers. Time stood still.

The street filled with lights, the siren stopped, boots splashed. A paramedic knelt, gentle hands replacing his. When

they lifted her, the paper she was holding slipped from her one mittened hand and landed in a puddle. Her name, written with careful loops, began to blur and run.



**Tyler Efford**

*Saskatchewan, Canada*

## DIARY OF THE SINGLE JOB

**April 17**

There is a specific loneliness that arrives after bedtime.

The apartment gets too quiet. No cartoons humming. No tiny footsteps racing down the hall. Just the refrigerator clicking on and off like it's keeping time with my thoughts.

I folded laundry tonight and found one of Lucas's socks tucked inside my hoodie pocket. I must have scooped it up this morning in the rush. I pressed it to my face and laughed, which turned into tears before I could stop them.

Sometimes I grieve the life I thought I'd have—the shared glances across a dinner table, someone to say, "I've got bedtime tonight." Sometimes I'm so tired I feel hollow.

But then, just as I turned off the light, Ava padded out of her room.

“Mommy,” she whispered, climbing into my lap like she used to when she was smaller. “When I grow up, I’m going to take care of you the way you take care of us.”

I held her tighter than I meant to.

She doesn’t know that she already does.

### **July 25th**

Sorry I haven’t written in a while a lot has changed,

I have been dreading today all week.

The tickets have been taped to the fridge since March. “Frozen on Ice!!!” written in pink marker with three exclamation points because Ava insisted three makes it official. Every morning Lucas has asked, “Is it today yet?” like time might change its mind if he checks enough.

And today was supposed to be the day.

Instead, my phone rang at 6 p.m.

Just as I got home.

Two housekeepers called out sick. A wedding party checking in. Corporate doing surprise audits tomorrow. And me—the manager—the one who doesn’t get to say no.

I stared at the schedule, at the blinking cursor next to my name, and felt my heart sink right into my stomach.

I practiced the words in the mirror before I said them out loud.

They were already dressed in their Elsa and Olaf shirts when I called them into the living room.

Ava knew. I could tell by the way her smile dropped before I even spoke.

“Mommy has to work tonight,” I said, kneeling so I could look them in the eyes. “I tried to fix it, I really did. But if I don’t go in, a lot of people don’t get to do their jobs either.”

Lucas frowned first. Ava blinked fast, the way she does when she’s trying not to cry.

“But we waited forever,” she whispered.

And that—that was the knife.

“I know,” I said. “And I am so, so sorry.”

There is a specific kind of heartbreak that comes from disappointing your children when it isn’t your fault . . . but it is your responsibility.

Lucas climbed into my lap anyway. “Are you gonna miss it too?” he asked.

“More than you know.”

Ava was quiet for a long minute. Then she said, very softly, “Can we come with you?”

And that is when something shifted.

By seven, we were walking through the hotel lobby. The chandelier glittered overhead like it was part of some grand show of its own. Ava held my hand at the front desk like she worked there. Lucas spun slowly in the revolving door until I had to gently stop him before he made himself dizzy.

There were empty rooms tonight—clean, crisp beds tucked tight with white sheets.

After I handled check-ins and fixed a reservation mistake and answered twelve phone calls, I brought them upstairs to one of the vacant suites.

The room smelled like fresh laundry and lemon cleaner.

“Welcome to the Royal Ice Palace,” I announced.

Lucas gasped like it was real magic. Ava laughed for the first time all day.

We raided the vending machine downstairs—gummy bears, microwave popcorn, two sodas I pretended not to see as I swiped my card. They thought pushing the buttons was the best part.

We built a nest of pillows on the king-sized bed. I pulled the curtains closed tight and propped my laptop up on the dresser.

If we couldn't go to the ice show, we would bring the story to us.

They sang every song at the top of their lungs. Ava dramatically flipped her hair during "Let It Go." Lucas attempted a spin and fell into the pile of pillows instead, laughing so hard he hiccupped.

At one point, they both leaned against me—one on each side—warm and sticky with sugar and happiness.

Ava looked up and said, "This is kind of better, Mom."

I don't know if she meant it. But she saw the relief in my face and squeezed my hand.

Later, after they fell asleep tangled in hotel blankets, I stood by the window overlooking the parking lot glowing under soft lights.

I missed the arena lights. The costumes. The spectacle I promised them.

But tonight I saw something else.

I saw how flexible their hearts are. How they trust me even when I break plans. How they can turn disappointment into adventure just because we're together.

Being a single parent means sometimes you are the bad news.

But it also means you get to be the surprise, too.

And as I carried them, one sleepy body at a time, through the quiet hallway toward my office, I realized—

We didn't miss the magic.

We made our own.

### **August 15**

Money is tight this month.

I skipped buying new shoes so Lucas could join the field trip. He tried to give me his crumpled allowance from the jar on his dresser. "You can have it, Mom. I don't need to buy anything."

I told him the greatest gift he could give me was to have fun.

Sometimes being a single parent feels like standing in the ocean during a storm—wave after wave, never quite catching your breath. You learn to brace yourself. You learn which bills can wait and which tears cannot.

But you also learn the sound of your children's laughter like it's your favorite song. You learn the weight of their heads on your shoulder. You learn that love can stretch further than exhaustion, further than fear.



Credits

John Dennis

Traci Musick-Shaffer

Night Shade

Nanci Rainey

Jane Majkiewicz


Ellen Scolnic

Jon Shorr

The book consists of stories in the  
form of diary entries that describe

Writings of kings  
Pennings of single parents  
Well kept records of vacations  
Tidings heard about Banks



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