

SHORT STORY NIGHT



Lori Ostlund is the author of the short story collection “The Bigness of the World,” which won the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction and the Edmund White Debut Fiction Award. This story is from her brand new collection, “Are You Happy?”

Virtual Interview!!!

Lori Ostlund

“Clear as Cake”

Read this story and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion’s Tail Brewing Monday, November 10th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises.
21 and older.

Literary Hub » “Clear as Cake”

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Marvin Helgarson smoked a pipe. When he listened to us, he nipped at the pipe—*pah, pah, pah*—the way that people who smoke pipes do, and when he told us things about our writing, he

jabbed the pipe in the air for emphasis. I liked Marvin Helgarson. He was tall, not just everyday tall but tall even by Minnesota standards, though that’s not why I liked him. I’m just trying to give details, what Marvin Helgarson called “salient features.”

The class met Tuesday evenings in the Humanities Building library, sixteen of us wedged in around two long wooden tables that came together in a T with Marvin Helgarson at the head. It felt like Thanksgiving the first night, all of us too close together and filled with dread, though later, after Marvin Helgarson explained about perspective, I could see that maybe that was just my perspective.

“Liars and thieves,” said Marvin Helgarson to get things going. “That’s what you get with a room full of writers.” He rose and swept out his arms like Jesus to include us all.

He meant it as an icebreaker, and most of us chuckled, but the woman across from me said, “Oh dear. I didn’t know anything about that”—meaning, I guess, that she had a different idea about writers and writing, a different idea about what she had signed up for. Her name was Wanda, and she had large warts on her chin and cheeks, 78 Lori Ostlund and later these warts would appear on the characters in her stories. We were always nervous about discussing them, worrying, I suppose, that we might read something into the warts that Wanda had not intended and that she would know then what it was that people saw when they looked at her.

“Wanda,” said Marvin Helgarson, “I don’t mean writers are really thieves.” He paused, picked up his pipe, and sucked on it. “It’s more like when someone lends you a pen to use, and then you just don’t give it back.” About lying, he said nothing.

“You’re going to be working together intimately,” Marvin Helgarson said, “so you need to know who you’re dealing with.” He asked for a volunteer to begin the introductions, and Fred Erickson, who was wearing a tie with a treble clef on it, jumped right in, describing his family and hobbies and years as the director of a choir in Idaho, a position from which he was now retired. Idaho seemed far away to me, and I wondered how he had ended up in Moorhead, Minnesota, but I didn’t ask because I was intimidated by my classmates, most of whom came to campus once a week for this class but were adults with jobs and families the rest of the time.

I took a lot of notes that semester, tips that Marvin Helgarson shared to help us with our writing, like when he told us that sometimes the things that seemed most compelling to write about should not really be written about at all. They were just anecdotes, he said, odd things that had happened to us that were interesting to discuss in a bar but were not literary, by which he meant that they could not “transcend the page.” He explained this the first night of class, jabbing the air with his pipe so that we understood it was important, and then he said it again several months later when we discussed the nutty lady’s story about a woman who cleaned rest stops along I-94. In the story, the woman and her cleaning partner were finishing the rest area near Fergus Falls when they discovered a body inside one of the trash cans. The story, which was just two pages long, mainly a lot of boring details about cleaning that established authenticity, ended like this: “The woman was dead and she was also naked. We were shocked and scared, and after the police came, we finished the bathrooms and went home.”

When Marvin explained to the nutty lady that it wasn’t really a short story, that it was more of an anecdote, she stood up. “Anecdote?” she said. “This really happened, you know. It happened to *me*, right after my asswipe husband left and I had to be at that job every morning at six.” She snorted. “Anecdote.” Then, she walked out. It was late, nearly nine o’clock, and we could hear her footsteps echoing, not only because the building was empty but because she was wearing ski boots.

We didn’t see the crazy lady again, but at the beginning of the next class Marvin showed us what she had left in his mailbox: a manila envelope with our stories for the week, chopped into strips with a paper cutter. You see, she really was crazy. But also, she’d had enough of us I think, enough of us telling her stuff about her writing. Three weeks earlier, she’d submitted a story about a woman whose vagina hurt all the time, except when she was having sex. As a result, her husband, who was a farmer, got very tired of having sex all the time and told her that she needed to go to the doctor to have her vagina checked. “I’m putting my foot down” is what he said, which made me laugh, though I didn’t say so because I didn’t think the story was supposed to be funny.

When the woman and her husband spoke, it seemed like they were from Ireland, but when they drove into town to see the doctor, they drove to Bemidji, which is in Minnesota. I raised my hand and said they sounded Irish, pointing to things like “lassie” and “thar” because Marvin had told us to back up our comments with examples from the text, but the crazy lady looked pleased when I said they sounded Irish. “Yes,” she said. “They’re from Ireland. They moved to Minnesota when they were young in order to have an adventure and be farmers and also because something tragic happened to them in Ireland and they needed a fresh start.”

“I guess I missed that,” I said and began shuffling back through the story.

“No,” she said. “It doesn’t say it. It’s just something I know. I was creating a life for my characters off the page, the way that Marvin said we should.”

“That’s a lot to have off the page,” pointed out Thomas in what I thought was a very nice voice. Thomas was also one of the older students in the class. The first salient feature about Thomas was that his parents met at a nudist colony, where they were not nudists because they worked in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and frying meat. The other salient feature about Thomas was that he was a minister. I knew these things because he sometimes wrote his sermons at Ralph’s, the bar that I hung out at, and one night we drank a pitcher of beer together and talked, but when we saw each other in class the next week, we both felt awkward.

“But the story isn’t about them leaving Ireland,” said the crazy lady triumphantly. “It’s about”—she paused because I guess even a crazy lady feels strange saying “vagina” to a minister—“the pain in her female parts.”

None of us knew what to say, so we looked down at the story, at the scene in which the woman and her husband, who was tired from having sex all the time, visited the doctor. When she was in the doctor’s office, lying on the table with her feet in the stirrups, the doctor, who was an elderly man, positioned himself between her legs and called out, “Three fingers going.”

This was supposed to be a minor detail I think, but Tabatha, who was a feminist, got mad. “That’s ridiculous,” she yelled at the crazy lady. “What kind of a doctor would say, ‘Three fingers going’?”

“Doctors are just regular people,” the crazy lady yelled back. “They get tired of saying the same things over and over, day after day. This doctor is like that. He’s old, and he’s tired. I am showing that he’s a regular person who is exhausted and wants to retire. I am developing his character.”

“That’s not development,” Tabatha said. “Then the story becomes about him, about how he’s a misogynist and is going to get sued one of these days for saying things like ‘three fingers going’ to women when they’re in a vulnerable position.”

Tabatha was not someone I wanted to be friends with, but I liked having her in class because she never disappointed me. Her first story, called “Cardboard Jesus,” was about this guy Bart who spends all day watching television, and then one day a cardboard man jumps out of the TV and starts going on and on about how Bart needs to change his life, so Bart names the little man Cardboard Jesus. Finally, Bart gets tired of Cardboard Jesus making him feel bad about his life, so he puts Cardboard Jesus in the garbage disposal. The story ends with Cardboard Jesus getting chewed up, and the last line is him calling out from inside the disposal, “Why hast thou forsaken me?”

Most of us did not really care for “Cardboard Jesus.” I pointed out that it seemed unlikely, and Marvin said, “Are we talking character believability?” and I said that I couldn’t really put my finger on it but that there wasn’t a character worth rooting for in the whole piece. Tabatha snorted and said, “It’s not a football game,” even though we weren’t supposed to talk when our story was being discussed.

“Maybe it’s the dialogue,” I said finally.

Just the week before, Marvin had explained about dialogue, how it’s supposed to sound like a normal conversation except less boring. Our dialogues, it turned out, had too much verisimilitude. “Look,” Marvin had said. “Imagine a guy goes into McDonald’s and says, ‘I’d like a Big Mac and fries,’ and then the cashier says, ‘Okay, that’ll be four dollars and five cents,’ and the guy pays and walks out with his burger and fries.” He paused. “Typical conversation, right?” And we nodded. “So what’s wrong with putting that conversation in a story?” he asked.

Tabatha’s hand went up. “Why is everything always about McDonald’s?” she said. “I would never have that conversation because I would never go to McDonald’s.” She looked around the table. “Or Burger King,” she added, preempting the possibility of a setting change.

Marvin Helgarson sighed. “Fine,” he said. “But my point is that this conversation is only interesting if one of them says something we don’t expect, if the cashier says, ‘No, sir, you may not have a Big Mac and fries.’ Then you have a story.”

Tabatha had started to speak, probably planning to point out that the cashier was doing the man a favor, but Marvin held up his hand at her. “Dialogue,” he explained, “is all about power shifting back and forth.” His pipe had volleyed illustratively through the air.

“What’s wrong with my dialogue?” Tabatha asked, looking at me and making her eyes small.

“I don’t know,” I said. Her dialogue was the opposite of what Marvin had cautioned us about. It didn’t have any verisimilitude. “I guess it just feels sort of biblical.”

The crazy lady raised her hand and said that there was nothing biblical about the story. She said the story was libelous, and Marvin said, “I think you mean blasphemous,” and she said that she knew what she meant and so did God. Thomas said nothing, even though he was a minister, and then Tabatha announced that everyone had missed the point, which was that “Cardboard Jesus” was a “modern-day crucifixion story.”

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Each Sunday after church, my parents called my dorm room, my mother dialing because the telephone made my father nervous. Though only a week had passed since the last conversation, my mother always had plenty to say because my mother was the sort of

person who conversed in details. She began with who had been in church that morning, and who had not and why, and moved on to what types of bars and cookies were served during the coffee hour afterward, and from there, to what she planned to serve with the ham that was baking in the oven at that very minute. Then, she broadened out to cover the specifics of the preceding week: what they had eaten for supper each night, what illnesses had beset the town. During these conversations, I often became abrupt with my mother, though she seemed not to notice, for I do not think that it occurred to her, ever, that I was not interested in these details, all of them adding up to a life I did not want.

Of course, there was more to it than that. I had stopped believing in God. I didn't even know when it had happened, just that one day I understood that I did not, the way that you look out the window and realize the leaves are gone yet you can't remember seeing a single one fall. I had told no one about this, certainly not my parents, who would have said, "Well, what do you expect?" and then prayed for me, which I did not want.

"There are no saints or sinners," Marvin Helgarson had taken to saying when he criticized a character for being what he had, at the start of the semester, called "cardboard" but switched to calling "two-dimensional" after Cardboard Jesus. "None of us is all bad—or all good."

Unlike Marvin Helgarson, my parents did believe that people could be all good; in fact, they believed not only that people could be all good but that they should be. My parents did not think that people's weaknesses were interesting or literary. They just thought that weakness led to sin.

Eventually, my father would demand the receiver. "Not much to report," he would say, and I would reply, "Me neither," and then he would ask something general about my classes and something specific about my bank balance, and as he prepared to hand the phone back to my mother, he would add, "Remember, Renee, communism is Satan at work," the way that other parents, I imagined, might admonish their children to study hard.

These were the Reagan years, so many people in the town where I grew up referred to communism in daily conversation, right alongside talk of droughts and price ceilings and all the other evils of the world over which they had no control. Still, even within the narrow parameters of our small town, my parents' fears felt different. They saw communism lurking everywhere, behind everything that was new to them or unfamiliar, behind everything that I had gone off to college and found myself drawn to: philosophy, feminism, poetry, my professors, even the Peace Corps, as I had discovered when I mentioned that I was thinking about applying, a revelation that made my mother cry. In the sixth grade, when four of my classmates showed up at our door on Halloween with UNICEF boxes, requesting contributions to help poor children, my mother told them, "You can have candy or nothing," explaining, "We don't support communists in this house." She held out a Baby Ruth bar, gauging whether they were beyond salvation. They were.

That year, we had been presented with a new teacher, Mrs. Keller, who was not from our town, which meant that she was an outsider, and this meant that I paid a good deal of attention to everything she said and did. Early in the year, on a rainy afternoon when we were all feeling restless, Mrs. Keller had tried to teach us levitation, which we enjoyed so much that some of us went home and reported about our fun to our parents. I did not, for though I was just eleven, I sensed that levitation was one more thing that would be regarded with suspicion by my parents. Nonetheless, word came quickly back to the principal that we had been practicing levitation, which—it was acknowledged by nearly all of the parents—was a form of witchcraft and thus satanic. We knew that Mrs. Keller had been spoken to, and for days we sat quietly in our seats, too ashamed to lift our eyes, but gently she wooed us back. Then, several weeks later, she played a scratchy recording of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which terrified us, and which we loved and begged to hear again, but which, it turned out, was also satanic, and again she was reprimanded. We watched as the joy that she took in teaching us diminished, her spontaneity replaced with uncertainty, which spread to us so that we began to believe that we must say nothing of the excitement we felt in her classroom, as though excitement itself were suspect.

The day after Halloween, I sat at my desk and watched the four girls who had come to our door turn in their UNICEF boxes to Mrs. Keller and report, shyly, what my mother had said, how she had begged them to accept candy bars and called them communists. Mrs. Keller started to say something but caught herself, her initial response giving way to a few bland comments about the good deed that the girls had done. Then, at the end of the school year, Mrs. Keller packed up her carefully decorated room—the maps of the world, the recordings of jazz and poetry, the picture of her daughter, of whom we were all just a little jealous—and moved on.

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When Marvin Helgarson asked us to introduce ourselves that first night, I said only that I was a humanities major, one semester away from graduation. The humanities department had recently declared a slogan—*Confronting the Ultimate Reality*—to explain what it was that we did in the humanities, for apparently there was some confusion. I had found that we spent a lot of time reading and talking about concepts that required capitalization—Beauty and Love, Suffering and Death, Guilt and Art. We also wrote papers about them, and often my professors wrote “interesting” or “hmm” next to my points, but they never wrote “correct.” This was starting to feel stressful. It was like playing Find the Button, with people calling out, “You’re getting warm!” every once in a while, but no matter how long you played, you never actually found the button.

Because there wasn’t really a button. I got that. I understood that the Ultimate Reality was nebulous. Still, I was one semester away from graduation, and I knew that the Ultimate Reality was not something that you talked about at job interviews, to employers who wanted to know what relevant skills you had acquired over the last four years. Moreover, when I

looked around at other students, they were learning how to generate spreadsheets and teach children to read, concrete, practical knowledge of the sort that you imagined people going to work and using, while I was becoming less equipped for the world with each passing day.

To make matters worse, when I visited my parents, which I did infrequently even though they lived just an hour and fifteen minutes away, they always asked about my job prospects, sometimes while I was still getting out of the car. “What you want is to look for a company that’ll keep you until you’re ready to retire,” my father said the last time I visited, and I said, “Why not just kill me now?” This was the sort of comment that made no sense to my parents, that made them think I had gone off to college and gotten myself hooked up with communists. Most nights, I lay in bed awake, imagining myself jobless and forced to move back into my parents’ house, where we would sit at the dinner table eating overcooked pork chops and potatoes from my father’s garden while they pointed out again and again that they were not surprised by my inability to find a job because nobody they knew had ever heard of such a thing as humanities.

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Tabatha and the crazy lady argued about “three fingers going” until Marvin said that it was a good time for a break. Usually, I stayed in the room during breaks, reviewing the next story up for discussion, but that night I went into the hallway and stood around with the others. I had trouble getting my structure straight before I started writing, and Marvin said that the problem might be that I did not figure out the *emotional thrust* of my stories early enough, which was probably true because, overall, I found *emotional thrust* an elusive concept, but I can see now that before I explain why I went out in the hallway, I need to explain about Clem.

The easiest way to begin is to say that Clem and I were friends, though, in retrospect, this seems dishonest because Clem annoyed me much more than he amused me, which is not to say that he couldn’t be funny, but this story will mainly deal with annoyance because annoyance was the salient feature of our friendship. Our friendship began because Clem was crippled—“crippled” was his word, the one he insisted on—though not actually *because* he was crippled but because he blamed everything, including the fact that he had no friends, on being crippled. I befriended him primarily to prove him wrong about people, though it’s clear now that Clem knew all along that that’s what I was doing, which just proves that he was a very lonely person. I’ve always been intrigued by people like that, people who are mean and hate everyone and do everything they can to repel others—and then feel lonely about it.

Clem was mainly crippled on the left side; when he walked, he held his right arm aloft like the Statue of Liberty and pulled the rest of his body toward it. He told me that before the accident he was athletic but shy, that he gravitated toward solitary sports like golf and running. He

was jogging when the accident happened, the morning after his high school graduation, and he lay on the side of the road for over twenty minutes until a truck driver spotted him because the car that hit him had just kept going. He found out months later, after he came out of his coma, that the car had contained four of his classmates, all of whom had been too drunk to even realize what had happened.

The accident turned Clem into a completely different person. He told me this one night as we looked through his senior yearbook, and I wondered—though did not ask—whether he remembered being that other person. I assumed that he did not, for it seemed to me that if he did remember, he would still *be* him.

“Do you think I’m good-looking?” he would ask after a few beers, a question that I refused to answer because I knew that it was a trap, knew that either answer would confirm what he already felt about people, which was that we were cruel, insincere, and stupid. The accident had left him disfigured, though—except for some scarring on his face, which he partially concealed with a black beard and sideburns—disfigured in a way that was not so much ugly as startling. His tongue appeared too big for his mouth and often lolled outside. The truth was that he looked like someone parents would instinctively move their children away from.

His brain had been damaged in a way that caused him to perceive everything as upside-down and backward, so that what he saw as a 6 was really a 9. Over the years he adjusted by learning to write so that the words appeared upside-down and backward to him, a process that was slow and messy. The college provided some assistance in the form of students who typed for him, but most tired of him quickly because he mainly dictated things that were pornographic, like the first story he wrote for class, about a cow named Bessie who had large udders but also a penis. He called the story “Bessie the Hermaphrodite Cow, No Bull,” and nothing really happened in the story except that Bessie had sex nonstop with both bulls and cows. When it came time to critique the story, nobody said anything, not even the crazy lady, and finally Marvin did a line-by-line critique of the punctuation, which he said was “creative but at odds with the story.”

In the year that Clem and I hung out together, I took him to doctor appointments, shopped for his groceries, and listened to him rage. I drew the line at doing his homework, which he never did himself and which meant that he failed all of his classes and had been doing so, to the best of my knowledge, since he enrolled in college three years earlier. His parents called me when they wanted to know how much money he had left or whether he was “keeping his spirits up” because they were afraid of him. I met them only once, on his birthday, when the four of us went to Mexican Village and he made his mother cry by announcing that she smelled like “crotch rot.”

Clem never missed an opportunity to suggest that he and I have sex, posing the question—always—in the most vulgar of terms. Thus, while Tabatha and the crazy lady argued that night about the gynecologist, he was hard at work on a picture of the two of us as naked

stick figures, which he labeled “Three Fingers Going.” He slid it across the table toward me, and it took me a moment to understand the drawing, not only because it was poorly sketched but because it made no sense to me—there in a library, surrounded by books and people talking about words. As I ripped it up, Clem said, “Just so you know, before the accident, I wasn’t into fat, ugly chicks.” For the record, I wasn’t really fat or ugly, but I wasn’t exactly out of the woods when it came to fat and ugly either. Still, I knew that the sudden anger I felt had less to do with the words themselves than with the realization that I was sick and tired of Clem.

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Out in the hallway, several of my classmates were standing around smoking and eating chocolate Easter eggs. Marvin once told us that we should use specific nouns, that instead of writing “candy,” we should say exactly what kind of candy—chocolate Easter eggs, for example—but he also told us to use details to establish time and setting, so I realize now that people are going to think that this happened at Easter, but it was actually several weeks after Easter and Melinda brought the eggs because she was tired of seeing them in her freezer.

Nobody acted surprised that I was joining them in the hallway that night. Melinda offered me an egg, just as she did everyone else, and I stood next to her, unwrapping it and thinking about what to say. “I liked your story about the drummer whose drum set falls out of the back of her truck,” I told her.

She narrowed her eyes, not because of what I had said but because she was taking a drag from her cigarette. “Thanks,” she said, blowing out smoke.

Sometimes Melinda wore leather to class, so I asked her whether she had actually been in a band.

“Sure,” she said, as though I should have known the story was about her.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked.

“You read the story,” she said.

“Couldn’t you have bought new drums?”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “But that’s not really the point.”

I nodded, though I didn’t really know what the point was. Finally, I said, “I’m sorry, but what is the point?”

She smoked for a moment, and I felt better because it seemed then that maybe she was not sure of the point either. This was one of the advantages of smoking. It gave you the chance to think about what to say next without making it obvious that that's what you were doing. "I guess the point is that sometimes you reach a place in your life where you just want things to add up at the end of the day." She took another drag. "Do you know what I do now?" she asked.

"No," I said, worried that she had mentioned this during introductions the first night.

"I keep the books for the beet plant. Every night before I go home, I close out the books for the day, and I make sure that everything adds up. If something doesn't add up, I stay until it does. It's very gratifying—to go home each day knowing that everything has added up."

I nodded because I could see how this would be gratifying. In high school, I had been enamored of math, and it shocked everyone—friends and teachers and family—when I declared my intention to major in something else entirely, something that involved "reading and the world," an inexact phrasing that reflected how little I understood of what I was after. Math came easily to me, too easily, and in my romanticized view of the world, this had struck me as a problem.

Around this time, the results of a battery of aptitude tests to which I had submitted began rolling in, all bearing the same news: that I was destined to become an engineer or a statistician or an accountant, careers in which things were meant to add up. I soon stopped showing these results to my parents, who were already bewildered by my earlier announcement and could not imagine reading as an end in itself or what sort of living this would provide, but eventually, the results, each new one mirroring the others, had begun to worry me also, for I thought highly of tests, believing them almost infallible. Finally, one of them dealt a wild card, concluding that I was uniquely suited to be a forest ranger, no doubt because I had responded agreeably to questions about solitude and working alone. Still, this came as a great relief because there were few things that interested me less than nature, which meant that the tests had no more insight into me—or my future—than I did.

Of course, I did not say any of this to Melinda that night outside the Humanities Building library as she spoke of things adding up. I simply nodded, she finished her cigarette, and we went back to class. But the truth was that I had found myself missing math terribly: the logic and asymmetrical beauty of the equations, the straightforwardness of the signs and symbols, unequivocally urging me to add or subtract or divide.

In fact, I missed it so much that I had enrolled in a calculus class. Nobody knew, not my parents, who would have felt vindicated, or my humanities friends, who would have seen it as a betrayal. The professor, Dr. Dillard, was a thin man in his forties with a habit of thrusting the chalk into his ear and twirling it nervously, only to become flustered when it no longer worked on the board. He regarded students as his natural enemies, and when we asked

questions, which we did often since his explanations lacked clarity, he prefaced his equally hazy clarifications with the words: “Am I teaching complete and utter imbeciles?” We dealt with this the way that students generally deal with such things. We hated him.

Thus, when he arrived one morning several weeks into the term with his zipper open, nobody said a thing. We let him stand up there at the board, writing out equations and delivering his incomprehensible explanations with his fly not just undone but gaping like a hungry mouth. We did not laugh, but probably most of us took some pleasure in the situation, until finally an older man from Togo raised his hand and said in a kind, almost apologetic voice, “Excuse me, Doctor, but your zipper is not closed.” He had a French accent and a low, buttery voice, which made even the word “zipper” sound appealing. Dr. Dillard asked the man to repeat what he had said because he had trouble understanding the man’s accent. Actually, what he said was “I can’t understand a damn word you’re saying,” and the man from Togo repeated it, enunciating and speaking more slowly but sounding just as kind and sensuous as the first time.

It was clear that Dr. Dillard did understand then, for he turned quickly around and stared at the equation that he had been working out for us on the board, stared at it while we stared at him. He did not speak or reach down to fix his fly or attempt in any way to move the situation along, and finally, after ten minutes of terrible silence, we understood that class was over, and though we all hated him, I believe that in that moment we felt sorry for him, sorry for how small and hunched he seemed, for the way that he stood with his back to us, staring at an equation that had lost its meaning.

Dr. Dillard arrived for the next class with his zipper up. He stood at the front of the room and announced that we would begin with a quiz, which we all failed because the quiz was over material that we were supposed to have covered during the last class. When he handed the quizzes back to us after the break, he did so in a frenetic, almost jaunty way, running up and down the aisles and announcing our grades—“Zero, zero, zero”—loudly before tossing the quizzes down in front of us, and I realized then that even in math, things didn’t always add up. Sometimes, there was just one side trying to be greater than the other.

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After class that night, Clem acted as though I were going to drive him home as usual and then sit around watching him get drunk while listening to him explain that the world was made up of assholes, but when he started lurching after me, I turned and yelled, “Find your own way home,” and then I walked away fast while he shouted after me that I hated cripples. He knew that I hated that kind of thing: screaming and public arguments and having strangers look at me, look at me and think that it must be true that I hated cripples because there I was, running away from one. Instead of going home, I went to Ralph’s, which I had been avoiding because of something that had happened there a couple of weeks earlier, and though it was probably just an anecdote, it was an anecdote that nearly broke my heart. It

had to do with this old man who spent every night at Ralph's, doing the splits for anyone who would buy him a drink, which, it turned out, was a lot of people. After I watched him do the splits seven times in two hours—and drink seven drinks in those same two hours—I'd gone over and asked him how old he was.

"I'm seventy-six," he said, holding his hand up and wiggling the thumb and index finger, as though seventy-six were an age that could still be conveyed with fingers.

"Wow," I said unconvincingly. "You must be in very good health." I did not really know how to talk to old people.

"Yes," he said proudly. "I'm in perfect health." He proceeded to tell me a long story about how he had been diagnosed with a bad liver just six months earlier. He imitated his doctor telling him, "You've got to give up the booze," and then he told me, with a wheezy chuckle that made his nose squirt, that he had not given up *the booze* because he liked *the booze*. Instead, he had prayed about his liver before he went to bed one night, and during the night God came and performed surgery on him, actually fixed his liver while he was asleep.

"But how did you know that God operated on you?" I asked because how would you know such a thing?

"I'll tell you," he said triumphantly. "I knew it clear as cake cause when I woke up there was blood in my long johns, and I'll tell you what else—I got right out of bed and did ten push-ups. I had the energy of a horse." He neighed, which made his nose squirt some more.

Honestly, I did not want to hear about the blood in his long johns because hearing about it made me picture it and picturing it made me queasy, especially on top of his squirting nose, but I thought about how lonely he must be to tell such a thing to a stranger. I bought two pickled eggs because that was the only food available at Ralph's at that time of night, and we sat at the bar to eat them, his teeth clacking as he chewed. I wanted to ask him about the expression he had used, "clear as cake," which I had never heard before, but I didn't ask because I suspected that "clear as cake" was something left over from an earlier life.

Two boys came over then with a shot of vodka, and he nearly fell off his stool following them. I did not want to watch him do the splits again, especially now when all I would be thinking about was the blood in his long johns, so I left, but from outside, I could still hear the laughter and clapping that meant he had made it down to the floor again.

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When I got to Ralph's, I sat at the bar and the bartender who had dished up the pickled eggs that night came down to where I was sitting. I ordered a beer and tried not to feel bad about running away from Clem, and when the bartender set my beer in front of me, he said, "Did you hear about Elmer? Died last night in his sleep."

“Who’s Elmer?” I asked.

“Old guy that does the splits,” he said. “Elmer.”

“Oh,” I said. “I know Elmer.”

Some humanities friends waved from a booth for me to join them. “Elmer died,” I said as I sat down, and they said, “Who’s Elmer?” just the way I had a few minutes earlier. “He’s that old man who always did the splits,” I said just the way the bartender had because when it came down to it, that’s how everyone knew Elmer. For most people, doing the splits was Elmer’s salient feature.

“Well, he was old,” said one of my friends and the others nodded.

I don’t know why this made me angry. It wasn’t that I didn’t think Elmer was old. He was old. I guess I just felt that what they were saying was that dying didn’t mean anything when you were old. I wanted to tell them about how Elmer believed that God had operated on him in his sleep, about the blood in his long johns and how he said “clear as cake” because he’d once had a family, people who all sat around saying “clear as cake” without ever having to explain themselves because “clear as cake” meant something to them. I wanted them to understand that he wasn’t just some old guy who did the splits for college students.

Instead, I went home and wrote my final story for Marvin Helgarson’s class. In the story, an old man named Elmer does the splits—which I tried, unsuccessfully, to change to chin-ups and then cartwheels—in an unnamed bar popular with college students who buy him drinks. Agatha, the main character, is majoring in math, and she saves Elmer by realizing that he has amnesia. She finds his family, who, it turns out, has been looking for him for three years, and when she calls them, she knows she has the right family because when Elmer’s son describes the day that his father disappeared, he says, “I remember that day as clear as cake.” In the final scene, Agatha drives Elmer to his family’s house, even though he doesn’t really want to go. This takes most of the day, and when she gets back to campus for her math class, the professor gives a pop quiz, which she aces even though she did not have time to study because of driving Elmer home. The story ended like this: “Agatha felt the knowledge taking shape inside of her, becoming a part of her, and then spilling onto the page, everything adding up.”

When we discussed the story on the last night of class, Tabatha immediately raised her hand. “First of all,” she said, “amnesia’s such a cop-out.” She looked at me as though I had offended her in some very personal way.

“Okay,” Marvin said. “Can you explain what you mean by ‘cop-out’?”

I did not really want her to explain, but she said, “It’s such a cliché. Plus, Elmer’s just some old guy who’s going to be dead any day, so it really has to be Agatha’s story.”

“And you don’t think it’s her story now?” Marvin asked.

“It is, I guess. I just don’t like her.” She turned to me and said, “Maybe your life is like this, but nobody wants to read a story about some Goody Two-shoes who always knows what to do. I think the story would be better if Agatha drinks too much because *she* doesn’t know how to help Elmer, and the next morning *she* wakes up, and *she* doesn’t remember anything.”

“So she should just sit there having a good time while Elmer does the splits until he dies?” I said, even though we were not supposed to talk while our story was being discussed.

“Okay,” Marvin said. “What else?”

“I like the sex stuff,” said Clem. We had not spoken since I ran away from him the week before.

“What sex stuff?” I said.

“When she’s thinking about the blood in his long johns,” Clem said.

Marvin jumped in then, asking what the story was about, and someone said, “It’s about aging, I guess,” and Marvin said, “Is it?,” the way that teachers do to keep the discussion going. Someone else said that it was about age versus youth, or maybe hope, or knowledge, and when Marvin asked me what I thought it was about, I said, “I don’t know. Compassion, I guess,” and Tabatha looked at me as though I’d said it was about chewing gum.

“There’s no compassion,” she said. “She just pities him. They’re not the same thing.”

“Go on,” said Marvin, but she shrugged as though there was nothing more to say.

“She just wants to feel good about herself,” Clem said, surprising everyone, I think, because he generally restricted himself to making lewd comments. I knew that by “she” he meant me and that Marvin Helgarson maybe knew this also because he did not ask Clem to explain. Instead, Marvin said that class was over.

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That was the last time I saw Clem, though I think about him from time to time. I picture him sitting in Marvin’s class semester after semester, another student, always a woman, shuttling him home afterward, watching him drink and failing him in the same way that I did because I understand now that the kindest thing I could have done was to tell Clem what he already knew: that I would not have sex with him because he repulsed me, that I didn’t even like him.

I got a B- in Marvin Helgarson’s class, which didn’t surprise me because I knew by then that I had no business being a writer. In his final comments, Marvin Helgarson said that my main problem was that I was actually *too good* a student, that I had followed every one of the rules

and, in the process, I had “suffocated” my story, which was the way it worked in writing. I ended my stories as though it were the reader’s birthday and I had tied everything up in a bow and handed it to the reader like a present. Readers, he said, liked to figure things out for themselves, but it seemed to me that if someone had read the whole story, they would want to know how things turned out: that I did not move in with my parents or join the Peace Corps, that I moved instead to New Mexico, where my plan was to forget about the Ultimate Reality and go back to studying math, that I somehow imagined this would be easy and everything would start adding up. But it was like Marvin Helgarson said: sometimes, you thought you knew what your character wanted and then you got to the end of your story and realized that you didn’t understand this character you had created at all.