



Syrup

EMILY POLLOCK

Contents

5	Out of Eden
15	Just Enough
25	Viking Funeral
37	Freeing the Queen of Bull
49	The Fountain Pen
61	Just Desserts
74	Chutes and Splatters
82	Vintage
91	The Sentence
97	The Deed and the Damned
99	The End of Touch



SYRUP GRADE: NOT VERY SWEET, BUT IT'S HIGH QUALITY

Out of Eden

I hear his footsteps before his silhouette darkens my doorway. He seems smaller somehow. “Goodnight, my Eve. Tomorrow we dance in Eden.” He sounds tired. For the first time, I hear doubt in this nightly benediction.

“Tomorrow in Eden.” My voice betrays nothing.

In the beginning, when I was his only Eve, this little ritual was ours alone. I found it sweet. Now, like everything we created together, it has putrefied.

I listen to make certain he’s left the building. I hear my window slide open.

“If you’re going, the time is now.”

I move silently from my bed, fully dressed, grab my bag and pass it out the window. We’ve practiced this, planned for months. Now we have six minutes to reach the river.

I was always the brains of the operation, though. I didn’t realize it until much later. In the early days I’d been so grateful for his attention. I hadn’t realized he needed me. I couldn’t believe he’d chosen me. This beautiful, brilliant man who could charm the pants off anyone, and frequently did, had chosen me as the girl worth wooing.

He went all out, long romantic dates. We talked philosophy and culture. Shared our fears about the planet and made grand sweeping plans to create a better world. He wooed me with big ideas and promised that I would be his Eve, mother to a new creation.

I had been his student. I was a bookish, chubby plant lover studying botany and microbiology. He taught permaculture design and frequently moved class outdoors where he pointed out all the ways our campus was carcinogenic. He smelled like cedar and lavender and seemed lit from within by molten sensuality. I was his from the first time I met him.

We had been married for six months when he announced that he'd bought us a farm. One thousand acres to build Eden.

"You're not focused," Eveleven's raspy voice snaps me back to reality.

"I'm sorry. You're right. Do you think we can turn the flashlights on yet? I really don't want to break my ankle." Too much is riding on this to make a mistake. I'm panicking. Stop panicking.

"We've practiced this. You'll be fine. Now, move your ass, momma."

I am not her mother. I'm not anyone's mother. Perhaps if my womb had cooperated none of this would have happened. Perhaps I would have fought back harder when, on our fifth anniversary, he brought home Willow. Willow would become Second Eve. I was the mother of Eden. She would be the mother of our children. Now, there is an army of Eves, 392, in 17 countries, all lovingly trained by me. Number one jackass.

I place my hand on Eveleven's shoulder as we make our way down the embankment. She's still solid and strong, unlike the rest of us who are wasting away. She's always been the strong one. She came to us first as a vet and animal wrangler, but quickly became my

best friend and confidant. Her birthname was already Eve, so he let her be mine. The first of my little army. His eleventh.

“I still think I should come with you.”

“No, I am the only one whose whereabouts will be known to all. I need him to follow me and me alone.” If there is doubt in my voice, she doesn’t seem to hear it.

“What if we never see you again?”

I let the silence grow between us, as we reach the shore of the river. The boat is mine, a gift from my father, and the only thing I truly own. I hug Eveleven with all the strength I have. I tap the wooden locket around her neck, a gift I made for her when she joined us. I’ve made thousands since, one for each Eve and one for every child.

“Everything I am is right here. I love you. Now scoot!”

She scurries up the hill as I cast off, engines off, relying on the current for now. Adrift, I floated on memories.

World domination is easier than you might imagine. You wouldn’t think so, but it’s true. All you need is an idea that makes people feel good and a sales force that truly believes. At first we sold an idea, then we sold the seeds.

The world needed greening, food systems were fucked and our brand of permaculture was the antidote. We sold the idea of verdant, green, life-giving food forests. Then we made it easy. The Eves were our initial sales force. Beautiful, wise, humble social media influencers, each with their own brand identity all filled with our seeds.

Kendall, Eve 42, designed fanciful pots for urban gardens. Ella, Eve 19, specialized in raised bed kits made from reclaimed wood. The beauty of our sales force served double duty as men slid into their inboxes, their beds, and our corporate outreach roles. Handsome, lanky, young men sold our seeds to farmers, and buyers for big box stores and seed catalogues. Our family designed hundreds of logos and websites. Our non-profit arm donated thousands of pounds of produce, hundreds of hours of training, and millions of seeds to the poorest corners of the world. Our seed dominated, but no one knew they were ours.

The world was falling back in love with the art of growing food. I was overjoyed. I travelled and taught. I felt like we had created utopia. Then he got greedy. He wanted more. More profit. More power. More women. More fame. More control.

He started tinkering with the seeds, adding pesticides, fungicides, herbicides. He wanted to kill everything he hadn't made. He burned down the heritage seed stores I'd spent 10 years building.

Then our seeds started to fail. The soil was dying, microbiomes collapsing. Famines started to take hold. People started dying. Lots and lots of people. 3 million in a year. The following year famine and disease wiped out half of the world's population.

I hear a splash to the port side of my boat. I'm still too close to engage the engines. I turn on my flashlight. A beaver slaps his tail at me. Cheeky bugger.

I pass what used to be a lighthouse, now just another thing that "used to be" something. It's my sign that I've made it 115 miles downriver. I turn the engines on and try to remember how to pray.

Of course I saw the signs of his turning. I could smell the rot from the day I met Willow. I made her locket as a gift. A heart shaped wooden locket with a swinging door that closed with a silver clasp. I made hers as a welcome. With every locket I made after hers, I sowed the seeds of my redemption.

In the darkness I see the giant frenchwoman who used to welcome people to America. I turn north, into the Long Island Sound. I remember when I used to sail the sound. How much light there used to be, but now I steer my boat through the inky blackness of a world without electricity.

After the famines and disease, the social fabric tore apart. Wars raged over resources that no longer had value. Neighbors killed for stockpiles. Without stability, all the petrochemicals stayed underground. Electrical grids crashed and there was no one to fix them and so few to fix them for.

On the Eden compounds, we ate what we could. We were luckier than most as we had many survival experts amongst our family, but even we began to splinter. Some Eves turned against each other and in the compound in Greece there were reports of Eves murdering children to save food for their own.

The radio crackles and breaks the silence. “What have you done? Are you giving up on this, Eve? Are you abandoning everything I built for you?” In his fury he sounds like the man he once was, passionate, determined.

I try to ignore him, but I know he needs to follow or none of this matters. “We failed. My name isn’t Eve. I’m going home.”

He knows about my father’s farm. Now he’ll send the troops. They still have to find me, and while they’re searching, my daughters will be making their way to new homes in small groups. Each assigned to a region. Some will fail. Some will fall apart, but each carries my final gift.

I see the beacon, flashlights guiding me to the dock. I bring the boat in and hug Rebecca and Jacob, the eldest of the next generation, leaders of the Children of Eves, our only hope for the future. Together we walk in silence, though there is so much to say. The ground under our feet is soft and lush. I never let our seeds touch this soil. I have thousands of sites I quietly purchased under my real name and left wild. This is my estate.

It started innocently. In each locket I’d place a single heritage seed as a reminder of what bound us together. By the 25th locket, as his insanity grew, each was built with a hidden compartment with enough seed to plant a family garden. Each woman and child in the family carried enough to save humanity. When he burned my seed stores, he only burned his own seed.

I can hear the dogs. I kiss the children and give them the keys to the boat. I tell them my final secret and send them on their way. I walk to an empty field where I played in the corn as a child. I open my locket and pray to the gods of brassicas and umbellifers, of fabaceae and cucurbitaceae, I pray for your forgiveness as I scatter the seeds around me.

There are flashlights in the distance and I know surrender is not an option. Rebirth requires a blood sacrifice. I pray it will be enough.

I whisper, to no one in particular, “My name was Charlotte. I am so sorry.”

The dogs are closer now. I hear the voices of men. I’m standing naked in a field praying for redemption. I hear the crack of gunfire.

EMILY POLLOCK



SYRUP GRADE: SWEET AND SALTY

Just Enough

Kate had always been a dutiful granddaughter, but there was no way she could sit down at her Nana's funeral. She paced at the back of the church to keep herself from exploding broken hearted rage. Just before she lost control, she snuck outside for a smoke. She just couldn't listen to them lie anymore.

One after another, friends, townspeople, and family took turns blathering on about her Nana and her contribution to Ketchum's Mills, but not a single one was standing up for her legacy. Kate seethed as she drew deeply on her cigarette and wished it would all burn down.

“I knew I’d find you here.” Her friend Duncan smiled at her sheepishly and waved away invisible smoke.

“I can’t be in there. I might slap the shit out of someone and Nana would haunt me forever.”

“It’s nearly over, I could drive you to the reception.”

She thought she might crumple to the ground and disappear. “Whose brilliant idea was it to have it at the farm? I mean, after they took everything...”

“I guess they wanted to honor...”

“They wanted to be seen as the good guys before they erased everything she did. Well fuck them.” Her eyes narrowed as she assessed his guild, “and fuck you, Duncan. Fuck you.” She turned in her heels and walked away as fast as she could, hoping to make it around the corner before the deluge of tears flowed.

For 71 of her 94 years, Bess Holland had been the matriarch of Ketchum’s Mills. She had arrived two days before her 23rd birthday with her husband, Rev. Jeremiah Holland who was taking over the small Presbyterian Church in town. On the day she arrived, she invited all the members of the church to the

Manse for a spaghetti supper. She fed 113 people, six hours after getting off a train, and her hospitality continued until the day she fell.

Kate kept walking, past the firehouse, past the pavilion where Nana had painted faces at Fall Fest, past the school where Nana taught a yearly class on the indigenous people of the Valley and shared stories of her childhood in the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Kate started running at the intersection that led to the Old Manse, the house where the new pastor lived. Kate ran and cried for a mile and a half until she reached the farm.

In 1952, the Holland family had expanded to nine and the little Manse in town was on the verge of imploding under the weight of babies, toddlers and diapers. One morning, after one of the children knocked something off the too-small table, Bess had had enough.

For the next year, she took in laundry, made jelly, pickled anything she could get her hands on, and answered phones at the local undertaker's. At the end of the year she handed Jeremiah a cigar box stuffed with bills and said, "Babe, it's time to get some land."

The farm was small but sufficient. Six acres with a little house and a big stone barn that had seen better days. Bess wanted to call it

New Amsterdam Farms (since they were the Hollands), but Jeremiah carved her a wooden sign that read ‘Just Enough Farm.’ Bess loved it.



Kate arrived at the farm before the crowd of mourners. She snuck into the barn and climbed the ladder to the loft. It was still a jumble of stuff collected throughout the years. She slid past the ancient Christmas decorations to her little corner hideaway.

Blocked from view behind her Gramps’ army trunks, Kate laid down on an old horsehair mattress lifted off the floor on plywood and

cinderblocks. This was her secret spot. She had never shared it with anyone, not even Duncan, though she suspected Nana knew, because the sheets always smelled clean.

She'd hidden there when her cousins got too annoying during her summers on the farm. She'd hidden there from God when she'd given in too easily to Tommy Jenkins at a party and was sure she was pregnant-- or damned-- or both. When her parents died during her freshman year at college, she'd crawled up there, defeated, begging God for a reason. This was her place, her sanctuary, and when she was ready to come down and talk, Nana Bess was always waiting.

Bess was the quintessential preacher's wife. She was the heart of the church community, a mother or grandmother to all. Kate remembered being asked to go play whenever someone needed to talk to Bess. Bess was a dispensary of solace with a side of pie. While Jeremiah preached in sweeping soliloquies, Bess listened quietly to folks' problems and gave little doses of love. No one ever left Bess' kitchen feeling broken, except Kate.

Their last conversation had been a fight.

Long before Jeremiah died, he'd helped the family down the road take care of matters after

their own father died. They had squabbled over every floor board, every blade of grass. Their vitriol and violence had convinced him to make it so that his own children would never have a reason to fight over his estate. Upon their deaths, ‘Just Enough Farm’ would be sold and the proceeds split, no ifs, ands, or buts.

He didn’t live long enough to see the family down the road reconcile and come together around their farm. Three generations, working, playing and sharing. But Bess did. She saw their success but wouldn’t budge from Jeremiah’s wishes.

“Nana! I know it’s your house, your farm, but it’s the only home I’ve ever known. It’s your legacy!”

“It is my home. Mine and Gramps’. We made the decision and that’s final!”

“But you’re throwing away everything you’ve built. You could be with us, with me in this place.” Kate’s rage mixed with tears.

“It’s just a thing. I’ll be in heaven. I won’t be here, honey.”

“I never had roots! You gave them to me here. Helped me grow them, here! Now I’m

supposed to lose you and the farm at the same time?”

“You have no idea what losing is. You’re being a spoiled brat. When I’m gone, the farm’s sold. End of story.” Kate had never seen her so angry.

Kate heard mourners start to fill up the barn down below. She could hear their hushed tones and quiet laughter. She hated them.

After her Nana’s fall, none of them offered to help. After seven decades of listening to their troubles, holding their hands, feeding their bellies, she meant nothing to them. On the day the doctors put Nana into a medically induced coma, Duncan’s dad showed up at the hospital. He wanted to buy the farm, effective immediately, “to help defray the costs of care.” Kate generously told him where to find the nearest short pier.

Now they were circling below her like sharks. She couldn’t even accuse them of sizing the place up because that would be too kind. They wanted to tear it down. The town council had already started proceedings with the development company owned by the very family whose dysfunction had convinced Gramps that selling was the only option. Her

neighbors, her friends, were going to raze the house and barn, burn the fields, cut down the orchard, and turn ‘Just Enough Farms’ into ‘Prestige Unlimited Golf Club.’

Well, not if she had anything to do with it. She would rather see it burn. There was nothing left to fight for. No one left living for for, just a town full of ungrateful pricks who weren’t worth her tears.

“I thought I might find you here.” Duncan stood by the pile of Gramps’ trunks.

“How?”

“Your Nana told me this was your secret spot.” He sat on the corner of the mattress.

“It used to be. Tomorrow it’ll be the fairway, so fuck off, Duncan.”

He looked genuinely hurt. “Bess gave me my first job, remember? Back when your parents were still alive and you were off finding yourself. I picked in the orchard. It pissed my dad off like you would not believe.”

“You used to write to me. You sent me a copy of *The Cider House Rules*.”

“I wrote those letters here, on this terrible, terrible mattress. That’s when Bess told me about how she saved all that money from

odd jobs to buy this place, for two thousand dollars.”

“She always got what she wanted.”

“Not always. She suffered. Her father...”

“Yeah.” Kate knew all the stories of the father who personified the trope of the drunken native who made Nana ashamed to call herself Cherokee for so long.

“She wanted to give the farm to the tribe, but your Gramps’ will was pretty specific.” He took her hand. “Her hands were tied, more than you know. She had to sell.”

Kate couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. She collapsed on to Duncan’s chest. “I still hate you,” she whimpered.

“That’s too bad, because you’re stuck with me,” he smirked a little.

Kate sat up and stared him down. “Why?”

“She had to sell. There were no stipulations as to whom or at what price. So about six months before her fall, she sold it to me, on two conditions.”

“Shut up. No. Wait. Tell me the conditions.” Kate’s stomach churned.

“One, I had to turn the barn into the Bess Holland Memorial Native Culture Center, and two, I had to let you live here in perpetuity.”

“What about your Dad? Didn’t he pay for her care?”

“Nope, I’d bought her long term care insurance with my earnings in the orchard. Oh, she did mention one more conditional stipulation.” He blushed.

Kate looked at her best friend and started to laugh. “Okay. Continue.”

“I have to tell you how I feel. That I’ve always loved you, and that I’m an idiot for not telling you sooner. Her words, on that last bit.”

Kate kissed his forehead. “I love you, too, idiot. I told you she always got her way.”



SYRUP GRADE: PRETTY SWEET

Viking Funeral

When Simon first made the request, Kate chalked it up to morphine, or whatever cocktail of drugs weren't working that week.

"I want a Viking funeral, with all the fixins: boat, arrow, fire, the whole shebang." Then he began coughing so hard that Kate's own lungs cried out for release. Throughout their marriage they'd been accused of sharing a brain. As he slowly, painfully died, she found they shared nerve endings. She could literally feel his pain.

He fell asleep after the coughing fit and Kate forgot all about it until a week later. He was having a particularly good day and the nurses

allowed Kate to take him out for a stroll. He leaned on her as he walked, and Kate realized just how thin he had become. The falling leaves seemed sturdy in comparison.

“I checked into it, and it’s illegal to set a body on fire.”

“Sorry, what?” Kate stopped still, and he wobbled a bit, seemingly held up by certainty alone.

“You can’t give me the full Viking but, it’s okay to set cremains on fire in a vessel smaller than two feet long as long as it’s at least 30 feet from shore! Oh, but you need a permit, which is extra cool, because then I can pick the date!” He looked pleased with himself.

“You’re not getting a Viking funeral, because you’re not allowed to die. Ever. Because I won’t allow it.” She tried not to let the tears drop.

“It’s not up to us. It’s inevitable. We can’t control it, just like we couldn’t control falling in love, even though we had both sworn it off forever.”

She remembered how hard she’d fought not to love him, everything about it was complicated and inconvenient. She had felt powerless, for the first time. This time she felt powerless and there was no upside.

“You could shoot the arrow!”

She looked at him; he was so happy. He couldn't control life, but he was going to control the goodbye. She hated it, but she agreed to his ridiculous plan, because the planning brought him joy.



He loved planning, whether it was surprise parties or backyard irrigation systems, he spent weeks researching, drawing diagrams, comparison shopping, and making lists. The final product was merely proof that he had successfully planned their wedding, after an over-the-top engagement.

“I want you to do it at the lake.” Simon said sheepishly.

“Our lake? Where we got engaged?!?”

“Don’t get mad. It’s my favorite place in the whole world. It’s where you said ‘yes.’ It’s my happy place. I want to be in a happy place, after all this.”

She couldn’t argue with his logic. Even if she could, she wouldn’t have tried.



He spent his last weeks planning. His college roommate agreed to build the boat. His sisters would sing a Viking funeral song. His cousin knew a costumer from a Viking show. He even hired a cultural anthropologist/folklorist to help him plan. Simon was in his element, joyous as he wasted away.

Kate found herself oscillating between cheering him on and wanting to call it all off. How dare he enjoy this so much? How could he revel in the unending pain that would be her life without him in it? Every night in their bedroom, alone, she would rage, feel guilty, weep, and repeat the cycle until she fell asleep.

They should be reminiscing, holding hands and feeling awful, together. In his hospital room were drawings, charts, lists, and reference photos. There wasn't room for grief, so Kate stayed just a little angry.

Simon had decided to have his funeral on Husband's day or Þorrablót, because, he told her, "being a husband has been the greatest honor of my life, and a celebration of my life would be wrong without celebrating that."

The trouble was, husband's day took place on the first day of Þorri, the frozen month, and Kate feared a frozen lake would make things even more complicated.

“You’ll think of something, you always do,” Simon had replied when she told him her concerns. “You’re the great improviser.”

She had proven this time and again. On their perfectly planned wedding day, she had gotten a call that the catering truck had a flat tire and would be three hours late. In full hair and makeup and flannel pajamas, she made 200 mini quiches, pigs-in-blankets, and cut up crudité and still managed to make it to the altar on time.



“How are your archery skills, babe?” Simon was getting to the end of his lists. “I know you’re a pretty good shot, but can you handle a flaming arrow?”

“Can’t I just throw myself on the pyre like a good wife?”

He sat up straight in bed, “Never! You have to live and live fully, or all of this will mean nothing.”

“It already means nothing. You’ll be gone and I’ll have nothing, and no amount of silly pageantry is going to change that!”

She could feel her rage slipping away, but the damage was already done. For the first time, she cried openly in front of him.

He fell back against his pillow, defeated.

They sat in silence for a long time, longer than either could remember being silent together.

“I needed one last plan. I’d tried to plan my way out of dying, but that was impossible, so I figured I’d leave you with a plan and a great story. I can stay alive, as long as you tell this story.”

“What if the plan isn’t enough?” She started quietly crying again and crawled into the bed beside him.

“Then you’ll improvise.” he kissed her forehead and she fell asleep in his arms one final time. He slipped into a coma the following morning and never woke up. He died four days later.



Just as she had predicted, the morning of the funeral she awoke to snow and new that the lake was well and truly frozen. She began calling everyone on the lists to try and cancel. From the first call, she knew she was going to have to improvise.

“He said this might happen, and he told me to tell you he was planning on haunting us all forever if we didn’t follow through. He said you’d figure it out.”

She hung up, furious and slightly amused. He was such a pain-in-the-ass, her pain-in-the-ass.

On her way to the lake she stopped at the hardware store with a list of her own, one that had a 90% chance of getting her an FBI file.

When she arrived, she was whisked into a wardrobe trailer and fitted with a cloak and corset number that she was fairly certain wasn't historically accurate, and made her feel like an itchy sex goddess.

Her hair was braided and twisted into an ornate coiffure she would spend a week trying to unravel. She felt ridiculous, but looked stunning.

While the others prepared, she took her tools out on the ice. There was so much to do to pull this off. Her fingers were frozen, but she couldn't stop until everything was just right. When she was done, she sat back on her heels to admire her work. It was perfect. It had to be.

She looked toward the tents full of friends and relatives getting geared up and was surprised when she began to laugh. It was all so ridiculous. Fifty people dressed



up like Norse seafarers, ready to send Simon off to Odin. He was a Baptist from Maine! It was hilarious. She laughed because he had planned for it. He wanted her first laugh after he was gone to be an inside joke. She laid on the frozen lake and laughed and laughed.

When she came back to shore, some folks expressed concerns over the frozen tears on her cheeks, only she knew they were tears of joy and release.

As the sun began to set, the folklorist said a few words and the sisters sang their songs. As the final rays of light passed below the horizon, Kate lit the bonfire and pulled out her bow.

The first arrow hit the other shore with a line attached. With the pulley in place, Kate pulled the boat with her beloved, pain-in-the-ass planner husband's cremains inside across the frozen lake. When it was halfway across, she moved to the fire and set her arrow alight.

As the arrow hit the boat, for a moment, Kate worried that she had miscalculated and then BOOM! The fertilizer she had packed around the cremains caught fire with a bang. Then the alcohol caught.



She'd used an auger to dig twelve holes, stopping just before the water came through, and filled them with several large bottles of cheap vodka, then carved a trench connecting them all. As the alcohol burned, the ice melted and the boat carrying Simon dropped out of view. Some of the crowd began to cry, but Kate smiled. Her plan had worked and so had Simon's.

That night the people who loved him most sat around a fire beside the frozen lake and told stories about Simon. Kate listened and hoped somewhere Simon could hear them too.



SYRUP GRADE: WICKED SWEET

Freeing the Queen of Bull

“But I gave up lion taming when I ran away from the circus. I still miss those beautiful cats.” Allie sighed.

Bobby, behind the bar, rolled his eyes.

The mark was impressed. “Wow, that’s quite a story! Can I buy you another?” He was so eager. Poor bastard.

“Sure, but I really have to go after this one. John, was it?” She knew it wasn’t.

“James, actually, but it’s fine. Your life is truly fascinating.”

It wasn't. Allie had lived in this tourist town by the ocean for all of her 27 years. But she could tell a story, and as long as she told stories, she drank for free. Since there was nothing else to do after the beaches closed, she told her stories. Every night brought new suckers, desperate for attention and willing to fill her glass.

James excused himself and Bobby sidled over. "One of these days someone's gonna call you on your bullshit." She knew he worried about her. He had briefly been her stepfather before her mom ran off, now he was her roommate.

"I'm kind of looking forward to it, honestly, but they never do. People want to believe tall tales from pretty girls. It gives them hope that they might have their own adventures someday."

"Well, just make sure they don't get any ideas about adventures with you. Don't want you getting into trouble you can't imagine yourself out of." He pinched her cheek, gently, like a dad.

"I always leave them with a sad story. No one wants that. I should head out. Tell John I got an emergency call?"

She grabbed her purse and headed out through the kitchen. Once outside, she unlocked her bike and pointed it toward the ocean. This was her nightly routine. Ride down the back roads to the beach at the end of the peninsula, sit in the sand, count the stars, make up stories.

She had never meant to get stuck in this town, but it had a gravitational pull, more like centripetal force pulling tourists in and pushing them back out, but holding her tight. She had tried to leave after high school, but her mom had just left her with nothing but the house and bills. Allie figured college could wait and took a job at the retirement home. Now, she worried she might end up there herself having never actually done anything.

The next morning, Allie's favorite resident, Ernie, was waiting for her in the lobby. He was in a seersucker suit and bowtie.

"Allie! It's my birthday. Do you remember you said that if I made it to 90, you'd take me to the Dockside for lunch?" He looked like an excited kid. A wobbly kid. She walked him to a chair.

"I do remember that, Ernie. In fact, I made us reservations for 11:45."

“Oh, good.” He thought for a moment, “Oh. I invited my grandson along. Can we make space?”

“Sure, I’ll call Terri and ask her to add a chair.” She was grateful for the extra help. “Will he meet us there?”

“No, I told him to pick us up at 11:15!” He looked pleased with himself. “You’re not the only one with surprises, kid!” He hoisted himself up from the chair and sauntered to the day room.

At 11:11, the operator paged her. “There is a very large man here to see you and Mr. Franklin.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, “Girl, he is cute. I wanna hear all the stories about this.”

Allie met the man herself a few moments later. She wasn’t sure ‘cute’ was the right word to describe the imposing figure hugging Ernie. He was at least 6’5” and broad.

“This must be the young lady who has swept Pops off his feet! I’m Steve Franklin.” He reached out his giant hand. She took it, or rather let her arm be enveloped in it.

“I think he’s done all the sweeping. I’m Allie.” She found herself at a loss for words, which pissed her off considerably.

At lunch, Steve was charming and charismatic. Allie was pretty sure she hated him for it. She felt herself shrinking in his presence, and decided to ignore him and focus on Ernie.

“Have you told Steve about your real girlfriend?”

“Which one? Alice or Edna? They’re fighting over me at the moment. I haven’t had the heart to tell them I’m wooing that day nurse, Karen. They’d kill us both!”

“Now, Pops, you promised to keep the wooing to one at a time!” Steve feigned finger wagging.

“Wooing, sure, but you didn’t set limits on friends with benefits.”

Allie snorted and nearly choked on a clam strip. Steve looked genuinely concerned, but she waved him off before he tried the Heimlich. She coughed and sipped her water.

“Hazards of the trade with him around.” She patted Ernie’s hand.

After lunch, Steve dropped them back at the home. As he drove away, Allie felt a pang of remorse. She hadn’t asked a single question about him. Another hazard of the tourist town

trade. She'd forgotten how to listen to new people.

At the bar that night, she was on a hot streak. She'd struck up a conversation with a couple from Quebec who had kept her glass full for hours, but she was losing steam, and it was still early.

"I had to leave the cattle train after Montana. I'd seen enough sky and eaten enough beans to last a lifetime."

The Canadians clapped politely and the husband motioned for another round.

"What a load of crap." She recognized Steve's voice instantly. He slid onto the barstool beside her. "Why, Miss Allie, that might just be the tallest tale I've ever heard." Allie watched as her Canadian drink tickets scurried away.

"What the hell did you do that for? Didn't anyone ever tell you to mind your own business?"

Steve looked at her with a sheepish grin.

"Well, Miss Allie, I do apologize for chasing off your friends there, but I think I know a little bit about the subject of cattle driving, and I definitely know bullshit when I see it. That, my dear, was a steaming pile." His smile had grown substantially. "Want proof?"

Allie sized him up. Still huge. “What do you mean, ‘proof?’”

“Come with me and I’ll show you.”

Allie sneered, “Yeah, no, absolutely not. I just met you.”

Steve opened his wallet and called Bobby over.

“Barkeep, would you do me a favor and hold on to my license for a couple hours? It has my picture, so if I don’t bring her back before last call, you know who she’s with. I’ll also leave my cell number.”

“I could, but if she doesn’t want to go, mister, I think you should leave her alone, with your documents.” Bobby feigned sternness.

“It’s okay, Bobby. I think I want to see what Mr. Bigshot thinks will vindicate his rudeness.” Allie was genuinely intrigued. “When we get back, before last call, you owe me a beer, big boy, ok?”

They shook hands and set off. They climbed into his truck and Allie started to wonder if she’d made a horrible mistake.

“Where exactly are we going?” She tried to sound tough.

“I want to introduce you to some friends, and see if I can get to know the real you, whoever she is.” He managed not to sound cocky when he said it.

They drove away from the ocean, inland toward the boonies. After twenty minutes, Steve pulled onto a long gravel road. Allie was sure she was going to end up as a corpse in a ravine. Her imagination was getting very dark, very fast.

She started to see lights and realized they were making their way to the fairgrounds. A huge sign announced that the rodeo was starting tomorrow.

Steve pulled up alongside a bank of trailers. He hopped out and came around to open her door. “Come on, lemme show you around.”

She climbed down, taking his hand for stability. He held it as they walked.

“Welcome to the travelling home of the Colorado Rough Rider Rodeo Show. I figured, you being an ole cowpoke from way back, you might want to give me some pointers.” He grinned in a way that made her feel safe, if embarrassed.

“Oh, well, that was ages ago, I’m probably rusty.” Why was she still lying? She knew he

knew. She knew he didn't care, but she didn't want to give him an inch.

They walked silently past the trailers, towards the stables.

"It was Pops who taught me to ride. He'd been a rodeo clown back in the day. He took me along when he could, showed me the ropes, so to speak."

"Odd, he never mentioned it. So, you're a bull rider?" Allie couldn't imagine.

"Now I know you're no cowgirl. I'm about eight inches too tall and fifty pounds too heavy to ride bulls in competition. I'm the vet. I do my best to keep the animals healthy."

At that moment, a bull stuck his muzzle out of the bull pen. Steve placed his giant hand on the equally giant nose and patted it.

"Oscar, this is Miss Allie. She wants to be a cowpoke."

"Oscar, I'm sure you're lovely, but you're massive and you kind of stink," Allie said with a bit of a curtsy.

Oscar snorted non-committally at her and pulled his head back into the pen.

"I guess I'm not much of a cowgirl," Allie said guiltily.

“That’s alright. You’re one hell of a storyteller. You could be a writer.” He smiled encouragingly.

“Ugh. Then how would I pay for beer?”

He studied her long and hard. His tone had changed when he finally spoke.

“You’re too good to dwell in stories you haven’t lived. You deserve some real adventures, a few near disasters, maybe a heartbreak, something real. You need dust on your boots.”

His little speech knocked the wind out of both of them. She recovered first.

“And I suppose you’re the man for the job, to show me the world, break my heart?” She felt hurt even as she said it.

“Probably not. I mostly see life through the windshield, never staying anywhere long enough to get bored, but I’m always bored, ‘cause only the scenery changes. You’re the first truly different thing I’ve seen in months. But in a week, I’ll be gone and I don’t want to be a regret.”

She wanted him to tell her what to do. She wanted someone to break the glass on her life and set her free.

“I could come with you, be your assistant. You could show me the ropes!”

He shook his head. “I can’t tie you to me because you need to discover what you want to tether yourself to. You need to use that imagination for you.”

“It’s too hard. The real world takes real money.”

They walked in silence back to the truck, both feeling trapped and slightly awkward.

On the drive back towards the ocean, Allie turned the radio on, Janis Joplin was singing about freedom being nothing left to lose. Both Allie and Steve thought that was dumb.

Then Steve piped up. “In the spirit of freedom, I propose a deal. The rodeo pays for my trailer and meals, so what if I bought your stories?”

“What are you talking about? You said I had to go experience things before I could tell stories.”

“You do. What if I pay you in advance for ten stories? You take six months to go see the world and send me your stories. If I’m wrong and you end up back here what have you lost?”

“Okay. But you have to break it to Ernie!

EMILY POLLOCK



SYRUP GRADE: NOT QUITE SICKENINGLY SWEET

The Fountain Pen

On the morning of her 12th birthday, Lillia O'Leary woke up to three of her five brothers jumping on her bed.

"Wake up! It's your stupid birthday!" Her oldest brother Mickey yelled, as he began poking her in the ribs.

Connor, the youngest of the bunch, fell on top of her. He gave his best pout, "Mom's making pancakes, but says we can't have none 'til you get up."

"Get off me and give me two minutes," Lillia spoke quietly, she'd learned it had a calming effect. "I'll be right down."

A collective shout went up and they scurried away.

Lillia got up and shut the door behind them. Then she closed her eyes and made a birthday wish for some peace and quiet. She adored her loud, rambunctious family, but often dreamed of a quiet place to write, draw, and be alone.

Her mother called to her from the bottom of the stairs, “Where’s my birthday baby?”

Lillia felt a sudden burst of excitement. She threw on her birthday dress and ran downstairs.

“Happy Birthday!” The whole family hollered as Lillia appeared at the door. They had all waited to start eating. It was a birthday miracle!

Her dad pulled out a chair at the head of the table, “Birthday girl, your throne awaits!”

As soon as she was in place, the boys dove into their pancakes. Her mom kissed her on the head and set a plate of pancakes in front of her. “I saved the best for the birthday girl.”

Lillia took her time preparing her pancakes, making sure each layer had the proper ratio of butter to syrup. Usually she ate fast to keep up with her brothers. Today she was special.

She wished she could remember being an only child. She had been three when Michael Jr. AKA Mickey was born. After that, mom had a baby every 2 years like a brother-making machine. Bobby, Connor, and finally the twins, A.J. and J.J.. Lillia wasn't sure they had full names; if they did, she didn't know them. She did know mom was done with making brothers.

The doorbell rang and the three brothers who weren't strapped into high chairs all scrambled for the door.

"I'll get it!" their father announced, shooting them all a 'get in your seats and be quiet' look.

He came back into the dining room carrying a mysterious brown parcel. "Funny, there was no one there." He set it down on a clean counter. "It's for you, birthday girl, you can check it out when you're done with breakfast."

"Boys! You're going to the park in 15 minutes. Go wash your faces and get ready to go!" Mom winked at her, "You can check out that package while I clean up breakfast. k, my birthday baby?"

The next few moments were a blur of socks, sneakers, t-shirts, and a short lived tantrum from J.J. When the door closed, Lillia helped

bring all the dishes to the sink then walked over to the package.

It was a simple, but pretty package. It was about the size of a book, but slightly lumpy, wrapped with brown paper, tied with string. Her name was written in fancy lettering in bright blue ink.

“It just says ‘Lillia,’ no stamp or anything.”

Her mom looked up from the dishes. “It’s probably from your aunt. She’s got a flair for the dramatic.”

“Can I take it to my room to open it?”

Her mom smiled, “only if you promise to tell me about it over our girls day lunch.” They were having a special day together while dad kept the boys occupied.

“Deal!” Lillia grabbed the package and ran up to her room. She sat the package on the desk and relished the feeling of not-knowing for as long as she could stand it. Then she untied the string. Inside were three things: a notebook, a glass inkwell full of blue ink, and a fountain pen. On the inside of the brown paper was a note.

“A few of my favorite things for one of my favorite people. Here are all the tools you need

to make your dreams come true. I'll be by for cake and to show you how to fill the pen.

I love you always,
Happy Birthday!
Aunt Janie”

Lillia held the pen gently. It was cool and smooth and heavier than the pens she was used to. She felt like a grown up. She unscrewed the cap and admired the gold nib. It was like a beautiful piece of jewelry. Carefully, she placed the items back in the wrapping. She stashed it inside a blue hoodie and placed it in the top drawer.

After a full day of manicures and shopping, Lillia and her mom arrived back home just as the pizza was delivered. As the feeding frenzy was winding down, the doorbell rang.

“I'll get it!” their mother yelled as their father handed out napkins. “No one hugs Aunt Janie with pizza fingers!”

Janie had barely gotten through the door before six (not greasy) children attacked her with adoration. She pulled Lillia close and kept her arm around her as they all walked

toward the dining room. Mickey turned off the lights and mom carried out a cake full of candles. They all sang “Happy Birthday” with Bobby adding “cha-cha-cha” to every line.

As Lillia blew out the candles, she wished for a few things, but especially for this to be the best year yet.

After the cake was devoured, mom and dad took the boys to bed and Lillia brought down her present. Aunt Janie showed Lillia how to dip the nib into the inkwell and fill the pen. Then she showed her how to hold the pen to get the ink to flow. Lillia could hardly wait to start drawing and writing.

“A good pen can take you just about anywhere you want to go. So don’t write angry. Be careful with your thoughts, be careful with your words.” Her aunt kissed her forehead and said it was time for her to go.

After she left, Lillia went to her room and sat with the pen in her hand for a long time, just trying to think of where to start. Then, she opened the notebook and wrote, “A Place Where it’s Quiet.”

She began to draw, slowly at first, before she knew it, a large house had emerged, nestled between the mountains and the sea.

For just a second, she could smell the briny decay of salt air.

“Are you still up, birthday girl?” Her dad poked his head in the door. “I didn’t get a chance to say goodnight. Give your old man a hug and get to bed.”

The next morning, things were back to normal: utter chaos.

She woke to the sound of the smoke alarm which had gone off because a pop tart got left in the toaster too long after Connor stuck a lego up his nose and distracted mom. The twins were both loose and naked because dad took them out of the bath to help mom with the smoke alarm. Bobby was crying because he hated loud sounds, though he seemed to be wailing louder than the alarm.

Lillia pulled the covers over her head. She laid there for a few seconds before the pull of big-sister responsibility drew her out. She found the twins and corralled them back to the bathroom where she started mopping up puddles she hoped were just bathwater. Her dad reappeared, having successfully turned off the alarm.

“Hey, wow, you’re the best, kiddo. Mom was wondering if you could watch Mickey and Billy because we’ve got to take Connor to the ER.” He looked exhausted.

“Yup. No problem.”

It turned out to be a huge problem because the stress of the morning had left the boys out of control.

By the time her parents returned, the boys had broken a lamp, put baby powder in the fish tank and knocked over the very full kitchen garbage. After his ordeal with Connor’s nose, Dad’s patience was non-existent. He sent everyone to their rooms, indefinitely.

Back in the relative safety of punishment, Lillia opened her notebook and went back to her special place. She drew herself on the beach, alone at last. She drew a pirate ship, sailing away on the horizon. On the next page, she drew her family locked in the ship’s hold, awaiting the pirates’ punishment.

She drew herself, the notebook, and the pen.

Then she heard a seagull.

She looked around and the room had gone. Surely she’d just fallen asleep. She ran to the

water's edge, splashed some water on her face, trying to wake up. It tasted salty and she knew this couldn't be a dream.

She pinched herself. Nothing happened. "Wake up. Wake up." She closed her eyes and tried to wake up, but she was still on the beach, still in her drawing.

She ran over to her notebook and picked up the pen. She drew her room. She drew herself in her room. She drew the notebook. Finally she drew the pen.

Immediately she was back, standing safe and sound in her room.

"It was a dream, a super strange dream," she said aloud to herself. That was when she noticed the silence. Even when they were in time-out, there was never silence. Also, there was sand between her toes.

She poked her head out of the door to her room. Nothing. No TV, no yelling, no chaos, no response. Panic rose in her throat. "DAD?!?"

She ran to the notebook and found the page with the pirate ship. She drew herself and the notebook in a pirate ship of her own, and finally, she drew the pen.

On the deck of her pirate ship, she realized the ink in her pen was dangerously low. She steered her ship to the pirate ‘ port side, her big cannons looking very intimidating. She cupped her hands to make sure she could be heard. She tried to sound like a pirate.

“Avast, ye scurvy dogs! Give me the land lubbers you’ve got locked up in your hold, or I’ll blast your pathetic ship to smithereens!”

All she heard was the sound of the ocean.

“Mom?!? Dad?!? Are you there?”

“I think you forgot to draw the pirates, hon.” Her mother’s calm was too much for her to bear.

“Mom! I didn’t...”

“Could you just draw us home, please? You’ve already got a drawing of your room, yeah?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Just circle us all and draw a big arrow, ok?”

Lillia did as she was told and soon everything was back where it belonged. After her mom put the boys down for naps, she came into Lillia’s room and sat down beside her on the bed.

“Well, that was exciting. Usually it takes a few months to work up to a whole family revenge fantasy. I always knew you were advanced.” She chuckled.

“Am I like a witch or something?”

“Or something. This is just a thing the women in our family can do. It takes practice to get good, but Aunt Janie and I thought you’d be a quick study and could handle it.”

“I can. I swear I can.” She looked pleadingly at her mom, who rolled her eyes.

“You will, but for now, the pen stays with me until I’ve taught you the important bits, ok?”

Lillia was disappointed, but knew how close she’d come to losing them all.

“Ok, mom. I’m really sorry.”

“You should be. Next time, give me my own cell, with soundproofing! First lesson, how to draw a birthday cake we don’t have to share with your brothers.

EMILY POLLOCK



SYRUP GRADE: IT'S GOT A BIT OF A BITE

Just Desserts

It's a funny thing about people. While most are good enough and just trying to do the best they can, a tiny sliver of the population are awful irritating pustules who delight in making everyone around them suffer. Kurt and Connie Carrbunkle were exactly those kind of people.

The Carrbunkles weren't simply unpleasant. They were cruel, vindictive, noxious bullies who left a toxic slime behind them as they moved through the world. They could spread unpleasantness like a virus.

Each morning, Connie Carrbunkle woke up, kicked the cat, and began berating her sleeping husband.

“Look at this lazy, wretched lump! If I had known I would wake up beside such a disgusting spectacle, I would have tried harder to die in my sleep!”

Kurt rolled over, his greasy hair leaving a slick spot on his pillow. “Funny, I dreamed I was driving in a long black car, laughing my ass off.”

Connie chuckled, a sound reminiscent of a seal choking on a feral cat, “The guy in the trunk doesn’t get to laugh, you insufferable ignoramus!”

The two could have continued their bickering all day, but they were interrupted by the ringing telephone.

“What?!?” Kurt shouted into the phone. “That’s today? Ugh. How awful. Well, I guess you’ll just have to keep them busy until we get there!”

He slammed down the telephone. “Apparently, today the factory will be overrun by the disgusting offspring of this backwater town. It’s take your mistakes to work day.”

“Oh! How disgustingly unprofitable. Sticky little fingers touching and grabbing.” The thought made Connie’s stomach turn. She despised all people, but the small ones were particularly irksome to her. “Why did my pathetic father have to leave me a candy factory?”



The Curious Confectionarium Company had been Connie’s father’s dream. Before he was Connie’s father, he was just a boy called Owen the Orphan who lived in the attic of an orphanage, unloved even amongst the unloveable. He found solace in books. He would read and dream and dream and read,

imagining places where everyone was happy and kind and children's dreams always came true.

At twelve years old he left the orphanage as a confectioner's apprentice. By the time he was 16, he had garnered a reputation for his truffles, which he infused with flavors from around the world. He was chosen to represent his country at the world confection championship. He loved meeting all the warm, kind, friendly confectioners and he knew he'd found his calling. When they handed him an embarrassingly gargantuan check (both in size and in value), he swore to surround himself with sweetness until the end of his days.

Back home, he began to build his confectionary coliseum. Before a plan was drawn or a stone was laid, Owen began making phone calls. He recruited every delightful confectioner he had met at the championship and every single one came to share his dream.

On the day of the ribbon cutting, one particularly congenial confectioner was so overwhelmed with her zeal that she kissed him right on the mouth. Two weeks later, they were wed, and Owen the Orphan became Mr. Buttermaker, husband and candy king.

Once Connie came along, everything seemed just right, and all was well in Owen's world. A town of pleasant, friendly candy families sprung up around the factory. The children of the town were the happiest in the state, with one exception.

Owen wanted Connie, his little confection, to be the happiest of happy children, to have every delight that he was denied. He never made her eat a vegetable, never turned her nightlight off, and never, ever said "no." From the day she was born, Connie was spoiled.

The older she got, the more spoiled she got, until eventually, like her teeth, Connie started to rot. She pushed people and always cut to the front of the line. She screamed and snarled whenever anyone said "no." In her teen years she was a bully. In her twenties, she delighted in stealing cars, boyfriends, the occasional yacht. By the time she was thirty, everyone hid when they saw her coming. Everyone except Kurt Carrbunkle.

Kurt was a door-to-door salesman, specializing in poisons. He wore a satin jacket with "Better Off Dead" embroidered on the back. He had sprays for weeds, powders for bugs, and pellets for nuisances of all shapes and sizes. There were rumors that he came

from a town where all the pets mysteriously died, but no charges were ever filed.

Kurt rode into town on a black motorcycle that spewed smoke that made babies cry. As soon as Connie saw him, she decided she wanted him.

“You look ridiculous on that hog, you pig!” She batted her eyelashes at him.

“I rarely take the opinions of blind, harebrained halfwits seriously, ma’am. I’m just here to see what needs killing and I’ll be on my way.”

“This whole town could use a purge, if you ask me,” Connie said. “Why don’t you come back to my place and you can show me what you’ve got.”

From their disgusting first meeting the two were rarely seen apart. They were two parasites locked in a sickening symbiosis. Within six months they were married, and soon after, Connie mysteriously became an orphan herself.

The town mourned the loss of the Buttermakers while steeling themselves against the pain of what was to come. Luckily, Owen, while inept as a father, was a thoughtful business owner and had created a company

even the Carrbunkles couldn't destroy. The candymakers all had lifetime contracts and Connie's role was purely that of a disgusting figurehead who was allotted 10% of the profits.

Since she was legally obligated to show up at the factory quarterly, she made it her mission to make everyone else feel as miserable as she did. She especially relished torturing them on take your kids to work day.

Even with twenty wide-eyed children about, the factory was a model of cleanliness and efficiency. The surfaces gleamed, the motors whirred quietly, the people moved like swans on water. Joyful choreography went into every truffle and each tasted like a hug.

But Connie delighted in throwing a wrench in the works. She careened like a bumper car from hell, knocking over canisters, kicking bags of sugar, sticking chewing gum into gears. She spit into a vat of chocolate ganache because it was too fancy.

The mechanical elements had a better time than the staff of candymakers, salespeople, drivers and accountants. She would line them up and pick them apart.

“First, I’d like to remind you that you’re all disgusting, pathetic peons who are slowly poisoning the people of this once great nation.” She loved that part.

“Roy, these truffles look like turkey turds and smell even worse!” She put one in her mouth, swirled it around her despicable maw and spat it on poor Roy’s apron. “Vile! Too velvety!

“Pat, it’s clear that you take pride in your work, yes?” Poor Pat stared at the floor and nodded. Connie put her finger under Pat’s chin and made the woman look at her. “That’s because you are cretin who would take pride in a fecal fingerpainting, aren’t you, Patty?” Pat’s eyes flooded with tears.

“You leave my mother alone!” Pat’s nine year old daughter, Nina, marched up to Connie and put her tiny body between the odious Connie and her sweet mother. They stared each other down and sized each other up.

For once in his damnable life, Kurt broke the tension. “That’s just enough of that! Let’s move along to the reception, so your parents can get back to work.”

While you might be thinking “how nice of him!” you would be thinking quite

wrongheadedly. Kurt, of course, was up to no good.

You see Kurt was tired of being stuck in a sweet town where nothing bad ever happened. He was looking for a ticket out of town and needed an insurance payment to fund his re-entry into the world.

He had been planning Connie's demise since he discovered that his in-laws will was iron-clad.

Kurt was giddy as he led everyone to the cafeteria. He should have been nervous, but he was so enamored with his scheming that he failed to notice that his wife, too, was in an almost pleasant mood.

"Come along, sticky people! We don't have all day!" Connie's voice couldn't manage syrupy, but it was trying.

Everyone filed into the cafeteria. The tables were set for a party. The staff felt uneasy but were too good to run.

There was a large curtain at the front of the room. Kurt clapped his hands. "Ladies and gentlemen. Ten unfathomably long years ago, I moved into this town. I thought it was, well, utterly preposterous, and whil that hasn't changed, I decided to celebrate those ten

years.” He pulled back the curtain revealing an enormous chocolate cake, eight layers high and two feet across. “For you. The little people. Line up, line up!”

The line was the stroke of genius. He knew she couldn’t resist.

“I get the first piece! The one with the flower!” Connie pushed her way to the front, smugly sticking her tongue at a kindergartener.

Kurt looked on, gleefully planning his upcoming trip to an island where morals are forbidden. He glanced at his putrid stinkbug of a wife. Was she smiling?

Connie was indeed smiling, not only had she snagged the best piece of cake, but back at home, she knew the federal agents she had tipped off were probably uncovering the mountains of evidence she had planted. He was going down for crimes he hadn’t even dreamed of committing yet, along with all the ones he most certainly had. Soon, she would be rid of him. She pictured herself on a beach full of people, paid to do as she commanded. She would toast to him then, but now she would enjoy this chocolate cake with just a hint of—was that almond?

A poisoner knows that to get away with being a poisoner, it’s best to keep the body count

low and the reasonable doubt very high. 61 employees and 20 of their children each had a slice of cake and all of them lived to tell the tale. Connie was not so lucky. Only the flower was dangerous.

Just as she spied the federal agents streaming through the doors, she felt a tightness in her throat . In the ensuing chaos, no one noticed as she faceplanted into the remains of that very delicious cake. Nina noticed and tugged at her mother's sleeve, but by the time the ambulances arrived, Connie Carrbunkle was long gone.

Kurt Carrbunkle was not so lucky. Justice was swift, and, for once, fairly just. He lived the remainder of his short life in a prison where toxicity was not appreciated by the higher ups and he walked into billy clubs and fell down some stairs.

No one was sad to see the Carrbunkles go, but soon after their sad endings, the really-too-nice people of the town erected a statue to remind themselves not to spoil their children outside the Curious Confectionarium factory there now stands a very large bronze cake with only one flower.

EMILY POLLOCK

SYRUP

Syrupy Screenplays

EMILY POLLOCK

SYRUP

CHUTES AND SPLATTERS

Off-the-cuff pontification lands a
small town mayor in cold water

EMILY POLLOCK

FADE IN:

EXT. WATER PARK - DAY

Entrance to "Chutes & Splatters" Water World, decked out for the grand opening celebration: bunting, balloons, a large red ribbon across the entrance and a podium.

JACK MURPHY, the Mayor, stands behind the podium, a casual mayor, he wears a button down shirt and a flight jacket with "Mayor Murphy" embroidered on the chest. His salt-and-pepper hair is windswept.

Behind the mayor, a group of 8 town council people stand holding a 6 foot long pair of golden scissors.

A large crowd of press, families, squirming children in bathing suits, and sullen teenagers gather around the podium.

JACK

(into microphone)

Welcome, my friends and fellow citizens of East Isle! What a glorious day to usher in a new era. Twenty-three long years ago, hurricane Noreen took our beloved boardwalk. Today we mark the final step in our rebuilding as we open this beautiful attraction: Chutes and Splatters Water World!

Cheers and applause ripple through the crowd.

JACK

It is my honor--

A scream goes up from the crowd as a seagull swoops down and snatches a pretzel from a toddler. Chaos ensues.

JACK (CONT'D)

Now, now, let's everyone calm down. Our gull friends don't mean any harm. You know, I sometimes think the seagull should be our town bird. They may not be as majestic as the swan or egret, but they are our constant companions... welcoming our fishing fleets, patrolling our beaches, and yes, stealing our snacks.

His "joke" falls flat, but quiets the crowd.

SYRUP

JACK (CONT'D)

But you didn't come here to here me
squawk about birds. Let's cut this
ribbon!

The council carries the scissors, which JACK attempts to pick up, but finds too heavy to lift. JACK grimaces and tears the ribbon with his hands.

JACK (CONT'D)

I officially declare Chutes and
Splatters open!

Cameras click, the crowd of families with children rushes through the entrance. The remaining folks shake hands and mill about.

Council Member and Director of the bird sanctuary, GLADYS DANFORTH, patrician and officious, huffs her way towards JACK.

GLADYS

Would you mind telling me just what
the hell you're doing, Jack?

JACK

I believe I was conducting a
celebratory ceremony, Gladys. Would
you mind telling me why the damned
scissors weighed half a ton?

GLADYS

I commissioned them from the
foundry, supporting local business,
unlike some people, Mr. Mayor. You
just undermined our town bird,
which, as you well know, is the
Yellow-rumped Warbler. My father,
God rest his soul, was the first to
photograph our warbler back in 1947.
The preserve was founded in his
honor long before you arrived here.
Seagulls? You're undermining
everything my family stands for!

JACK

Now just a moment, Gladys. Calm
down. It's just a bird--

GLADYS

Just a bird?! We have the Yellow-
rumped Warbler Festival to celebrate
their migration!

EMILY POLLOCK

JACK

Oh, right. Our town bird isn't even a local. They're tourists! Bloody Canadian tourists, at that! Maybe it's time to celebrate our own birds! All hail the damned seagull! They might steal, but at least they're locals!

CUT TO:

EXT. WATER PARK CAFE - DAY

Chutes and Platters, the water park's cafe: outdoor tables, kitchy, diner-meets-tiki vibe.

JACK sits alone at a high table, under a thatched umbrella. A large, blue cocktail and a plate of pigs-in-blankets sit in front of him.

Deputy Mayor, MAGGIE COOPER, late forties, blunt bob haircut, smart sheath dress, slides into the seat next to JACK.

MAGGIE

I thought I'd find you here. So many options for drowning your sorrows. Jesus. What are you eating?

JACK

Happy-hour special. They call them pigs in life-vests. That is a blue... something...

MAGGIE

It's 2:30, Jack. And don't you dare tell me it's five o'clock somewhere. Here and now, we have a town to run. I've been fielding calls all day. This thing has taken on a life of its own, and Twitter--

JACK

All the little birdies go tweet, tweet, tweet.

MAGGIE

How many of those drinks have you had? Don't answer that. So far today I've heard from the Audubon Society, the ACLU, the Rotary, Justin Trudeau's office, oh, and the Proud Boys want to know if they should "stand by."

SYRUP

JACK

Remind me never to speak in public again. This town is being torn apart. I saw an "All Birds Matter" sign at the cafe.

MAGGIE

Who knew seagulls would cause such a shitstorm? But opinions are like assholes and twitter is a laxative.

JACK

They're calling me a nativist, nationalist, anti-immigrant bigot. They've even accused me of hating children.

MAGGIE

You do freak out about those sticky little fingers.

JACK

This is entrapment. Are you wearing a wire? Is Glad-Ass listening in?

MAGGIE

She's not. Though I did reach out to her. You're welcome. The truth is, the internet will forget about us as soon as the President tweets. We need to focus on our town. That starts with Gladys.

JACK

I never meant... but it's a fucking bird!

MAGGIE

A bird she's built her life around. You basically insulted her dead dad. She wanted you tarred and feathered. Luckily for you, I'm a fucking empath wizard. She's willing to deal.

JACK

I'm going to hate this, yes?

MAGGIE

Oh, absolutely.

CUT TO:

EMILY POLLOCK

JACK

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CUT TO:

SYRUP

EXT. WATER PARK (TOP OF SLIDE) - DAY

Crowd of reporters, GLADYS, MAGGIE

JACK comes up the stairs, sweating in a bird costume, with the costume bird head under his arm. He extends a wing to the gathered crowd while he catches his breath.

JACK

Good afternoon, folks. The past few weeks have taught me a great deal-- certainty loves company, that birds of a feather can cause a ruckus, and sometimes you have to eat a little crow... sorry PETA!

Jack takes a deep breath.

JACK (CONT'D)

Look, the truth is, I want to blame a whole lot of people who aren't me, but on my climb up all those steps I realized, I didn't listen, I let myself down and the people who matter most to me, the people of this town... and I'm sorry. But I am willing to work to make things better. In order to celebrate coming together and moving forward, I've asked our friend, Councilwoman Danforth to help me re-christen this slide. Ms. D?

GLADYS

I hereby rename the Super Water Whiz the Yellow-rumped Warbler Whiz!

Gladys pulls a rope and a banner unfurls: "Yellow-rumped Warbler Whiz."

The crowd cheers, chuckles. JACK dons the head of the warbler costume and climbs onto an inner tube, waving as GLADYS pushes him down the slide.

THE END

EMILY POLLOCK

Vintage

VINTAGE

They promised never to grow apart,
but maybe that's a part of growing up.

EXT. VINEYARD AND WINERY - DAY

Stone and wood buildings. A few posh couples meand-

INT. HANNAH'S CAR - DAY

Winery parking lot. Car is messy, but not filthy.

HANNAH BAKER, pretty, plump, early 30's dark hair/
stringing and intelligent. She's smoking, anxious.

A silver Audi pulls up beside her, honking loudly.
ELLISON, 30's, blonde, petite, pretty and put-together.
roll down windows.

WHITNEY

Banana! When are you gonna cut that
smoking shit out?

HANNAH

When homicide becomes legal. They're
the only thing standing between me
and prison. They help me with that
"take a deep breath" nonsense.

WHITNEY

Okay, fine. Let's go drink wine.
That was a rhyme. I'm on a roll.

HANNAH

(smirking)

I'm only here because you promised
free cheese.

HANNAH and WHITNEY stick out their tongues and roll
windows.⁸⁴

SYRUP

WHITNEY

Apparently the tour is non-negotiable.

HANNAH

(mimicking DRIVER)

Blah, blah, blah, monoculture. Blah, blah, draining the aquifers. Blah, blah, taaaanins...

Whitney pouts, feelings hurt.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

Sorry. When did you get into wine?

WHITNEY

I'm not "into it." I just like wine. I came here before and it was kinda fun. I thought...

HANNAH

I'm having fun, I just have an unhealthy relationship with sarcasm... Sorry, I'll behave.

WHITNEY

Don't behave. Be you. I've missed you.

HANNAH

Me too.

CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH - SUNSET

SUPER: Ten Years Earlier

A full parking lot and souvenir shop. Tourists stand solemnly around a flagpole as a scratchy recording of "God Bless America" plays. The flag is lowered as the sun sets. The crowd claps quietly then quickly disperses. A procession of cars leaves the parking lot as HANNAH (slightly younger) pulls up on a beach cruiser with a six pack in the basket. WHITNEY (also younger) emerges from the store in a long "hippy" dress and flip flops.

WHITNEY

Now that the loonies have gone home,
"the man" has set me free.

HANNAH

EMILY POLLOCK

Hey, now. Did you know my grandfather was the one who came up with that? I am descended from loonies.

WHITNEY
I'll drink to that. Ride on, Queen Loonie.

They ride away.

CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

A solitary beach, dunes, darkness except for the moon on the waves. HANNAH and WHITNEY sit on a blanket drinking beer and smoking cigarettes.

HANNAH
I'm not sure I believe in heaven and hell any more, but if there is a heaven, I don't think it works the way people think.

WHITNEY
What about ghosts?

HANNAH
They always speak English, so I have my doubts.

WHITNEY
Did I tell you about my friend's mom who came to me in a dream? And the next day I found out she was dead?!

HANNAH
Yeah. Weird.

HANNAH and WHITNEY sip, silently pondering.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
I promise if I die, I'll play Guns n Roses on repeat so you know I'm still an asshole.

WHITNEY
Don't you dare... Don't you dare die before me.

HANNAH
(solemnly)

SYRUP

I promise. Promise me something?

WHITNEY

Of course.

HANNAH

Don't die before me either, but also, don't ever let us grow apart. If I lost you, I'd definitely die... and then we're both toast.

They clink bottles and drink.

CUT TO:

INT. WINERY - DAY

A tasting bar with all the accoutrements (including cheese!).

WHITNEY

This cab sav has notes of black cherry, vanilla, and tobacco.

WHITNEY swirls her glass and looks expectantly at HANNAH.

HANNAH

(in fake French accent)
Mais non, mon cheri. You're smelling moi.

HANNAH swirls her glass, sips, scowls a bit.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

I'm just not sure I get it. It all kind of tastes like wine.

WHITNEY

You're not even trying.

HANNAH

I'm swirling. I'm sniffing. I'm sipping. I get... wine.

WHITNEY

I'm not talking about wine. You're trying to have a shitty time. You're trying to be miserable. I get that you'd rather be singing karaoke somewhere where someone famous overdosed in the bathroom, but just once, could we be fucking grownups?

HANNAH

EMILY POLLOCK

(peevish)

Well that escalated quickly. Jesus.
I'm fucking trying. I am a fucking
grownup. I have the debt to prove it
and 200 homeless families rely on me
to make sure they eat at
Thanksgiving and have somewhere safe
to go after school. I'm sorry that
this isn't me. I wasn't picked for
Team Capitalist Shill.

WHITNEY

I like my job, okay? I like not
having to worry all the time about
where money is going to come from. I
like fucking wine for chrissakes,
that doesn't make me a sellout.

HANNAH

(softening)

It makes you a grownup, though?

WHITNEY

I don't know. Maybe.

HANNAH

I don't know either. Maybe that's
the point.

HANNAH gets up, crosses to PIANO PLAYER. PIANO PLAYER begins playing "November Rain." HANNAH taps WHITNEY on the shoulder.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

I'm still here. Always. Wanna dance?

HANNAH and WHITNEY dance, at first awkward, then silly, then boldly silly as piano music transitions to Guns n Roses original.

FADE OUT.

THE END

SYRUP

Seriously Short Microfiction

EMILY POLLOCK

silver
trash
with a few

SYRUP GRADE: GIN SOAKED

The Sentence

My mother has said the same sentence to me, twice, familiar words in the exact same order, almost 17 years apart. Twice.

The first time she said the sentence, it came after several hours of tearful monologuing. I watched as she paced back and forth, trying to paint the picture for me, all her words falling short, splattering on the carpet. She froze occasionally, staring into my eyes, desperately seeking my understanding. Her silence would agitate her, like an itch, and the pacing and the words would begin again.

The back and forth pattern she wore into the carpet became a painting of her life--the

dreams of a life dancing on the stages of the world, the tiny rupture of a ligament that brought all the dreams crashing down around her, but also brought a kind med student to her bedside and into the picture. She rebuilt her dreams around him, like a castle, or a cage.

The painting in the carpet swirled as her dreams became his, and his became ours. She flitted between memories, always moving. She cried recalling how he used to laugh.

One memory stopped her in her tracks: how they'd danced when she told him I was coming.

She caressed my hair as a tear with my name on it rolled down her cheek. I reached up to comfort her, my fingers collecting the tear. I wanted to put it on my tongue, to taste the salt of memory, but I was afraid of disturbing her momentary stillness. But she couldn't help herself, the painting had barely begun.

Back and forth, she journeyed 14 years that night. Probably more, if you count the dreams.

She was searching, I know, because she kept asking, "How the hell did we get here?"

I wanted to help. I tried to remember. "Here" was the family room of the only home I'd ever known. We had moved here when Dad became

a doctor--the day before I turned two. They threw me a party that I don't remember so I would know where I belonged.

During the party, his pager went off and he had to run back to the hospital. He was always running to the hospital. Always the hero. Always saving someone else's family, while his own languished. When he was gone, she and I would push the overstuffed leather chairs to the walls. And we would dance, as if the magic of our dance would bring him home.

The night she first spoke the words, her pacing was graceless, an unfamiliar dance. The painting in the carpet was messier than the beautiful life I knew. As she paced and painted, my memories began to be colored with her pain. I began to forget, to wonder myself how the hell we had gotten here. Fear crept in. For the first time that night, I, too, began to cry.

I'm not sure which stopped first, my tears or her dance. All I know is there was silence. We looked at each other. She sighed. Her gaze then moved to the floor, sweeping over the masterwork at her feet. Her whole life splattered on the carpet.

When she finally moved again, she joined me on the couch. Like the dancer she could

have been, she gracefully wrapped herself around me and told me a new story. It began with “baby, I tried so hard,” and ended with the sentence.

The sentence rattled around in my head for months. As I helped my father pack his many books, I imagined the sentence printed over and over and sandwiched between the leather covers. As I watched him drive away, I waved furiously, hoping he’d look back. The sentence seemed to rise from the condensation as I pressed my nose against the window.

Life moved on. My mother, ever the ballerina, danced around difficult subjects, trying to keep me entertained so I’d never see her cry again.

For my part, I made certain she always knew what I was thinking. I had seen her tear apart her past searching for her mistakes, so I always let her know when she fucked up the choreography. “This,” I would scream at her, “this right here is how you ruin everything!” I was wrong, of course. Eventually we always ended up on the couch clinging to each other, struggling to breathe as torrents of pain tried to drown us.

The sun always came back, though from the day he left, dad never did. I think we both thought eventually he would. He was the hero

of our stories, so I think we assumed he'd do his hero journey thing and come home.

We believed until this morning. For sixteen years, ten months and three days we believed he would come back to a hero's welcome, but this morning, my mother called and put familiar words into a familiar order. The order of endings. There were other words, I'm sure, the particulars, but I only heard the sentence. "We tried everything, but your father was unresponsive."

EMILY POLLOCK



SYRUP GRADE: THRILLING

The Deed and the Damned

One night to save everything. One new moon between the last frost and the weekend the caretaker arrived. One night, one shot, one girl silently swimming to the middle of Tohantun Lake.

Every body of water has a flavor. There are obvious things: salinity, iron concentrations, but a true swimmer can taste the story of the water. Tohantun Lake tasted like heartbreak.

Zoe's grandfather had taught her to swim before she had mastered walking. He taught

her to taste the water. He taught her everything she needed to know.

Their family lived for generations in the valley before the government built the dam. Promises were made. Families filled out their relocation application forms in triplicate.

Gramps refused to sign. His dog was poisoned. Gramps stood firm. The barn burned. Gramps sued and won, guaranteed 30 acres. Then he disappeared.

The valley became the lake.

She swam above State Street. The water tasted salty above the intersection where she'd lost her parents, just past the Friendly Savings and Loan. Not so friendly now. They claimed Gramps' deed had been lost, that progress was inevitable.

The bankers had moved into the hills. She knew they kept watch out their big windows. That they had become ruthless. She tried not to make ripples.

The stars were her guide. Beneath Vega she dove. Straight down, twenty feet. Her fingers touched the steeple. She cut free the bag Gramps had left, containing the deed and a gun. She surfaced, checked for flashlights, and kept swimming.

SYRUP GRADE: NOT VERY SWEET, BUT IT'S HIGH QUALITY

The End of Touch

Zulee put down her guitar. Two videos per day yielded 2000 credits, enough to cover coffee, chocolate and bubble bath. She would have done it for free. The vibration of the guitar and the sound of her voice bouncing around the room made her feel.

She had learned the guitar in the lab school. After touch was banned, children were born in labs and raised by people in biohazard suits who taught them to enjoy being alone. At eight, they were assigned housing and sent on their way.

The end of touch came after the third great pandemic brought about by a worldwide

refugee crisis in the wake of rising seas. A council of scientists declared a solution. Touch was banned worldwide.

Those who acquiesced to the touch ban were rewarded with free housing, food delivered daily by drone, and unlimited WiFi. Those who fought it disappeared.

People connected virtually, but desired true feeling. Analog pastimes, cooking, knitting, music made a resurgence among people desperate for something real.

The doorbell rang. It had never done that; food and packages were brought to the backdoor. Zulee didn't know how to respond. Initially, she struggled to identify the sound. Then came a knock. "We need to talk about your songs."

The door swung open. A little girl walked toward her.

"I'm your biggest fan, but love, touch, they weren't the problem. People forgot how to be satisfied with enough."

Zulee shivered as the girl touched her hand.

A word from the author:

All of these were written from prompts from Vocal.media and the NYC Midnight Microfiction challenge, so feel free to tweet me a prompt on twitter and we'll see where it goes!

<https://twitter.com/floatingdevice>

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